Philosophical Issues Surrounding Death

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Abstract. Today, we'll be thinking through some philosophical puzzles concerning death. In particular, we'll be thinking hard about questions such as the following:

1. What does it mean to die? How we can define death?
2. In what sense, if at all, is dying bad for me?
3. Would immortality (of whatever sort) actually be a good thing?

We'll be surveying a variety of philosophical views, both ancient and modern, with an ultimate goal of understanding what's tough and interesting about these questions, and why they resist easy solutions.

1 WHAT IS DEATH?

> *"Our primary purpose is to define irreversible coma [with no discernable central nervous system activity] as a new criterion for death. There are two reasons why there is a need for a definition: (1) improvements in resuscitative and supportive measures have led to increased efforts to save those who are desperately injured. Sometimes these efforts have only partial success so that the result is an individual whose heart continues to beat but whose brain is irreversibly damaged. The burden is great on patients who suffer permanent loss of intellect, on their families, on the hospitals and on those in need to hospital beds already occupied by these comatose patients. (2) Obsolete criteria for the definition of death can lead to controversy in obtaining organs for transplantation." ("A Definition of Irreversible Coma: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Brain Death" 1968)*

Philosophers are famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask) for taking seemingly straightforward ideas or concepts and showing how they are actually much more complex than they appear. So, let's consider the case of **death**. It's something humans have been thinking about (and writing about) for a long, long time. Moreover, it's a topic that most individual *humans* devote considerable time thinking about and preparing for. We have definite feelings about death (we generally don't like it!). In fact, its tough to think about anything (other than perhaps sex or politics) that people think about more. Despite all of this time and effort, when it comes right down to it, its not always clear what we *mean* when we say things like "Death is a bad thing." *Death* here might mean one of any number of things:

1. Death might mean the *state* of being dead (or, "not alive").
2. Death might mean the *process* of our lives ending, through age, disease, injury, etc.
3. Death might mean the *instantaneous threshold* between living and not-living (i.e., "the moment of death").

To make things more complex, being "alive" (the opposite of "being dead") itself admits of various meanings. When I say of someone "that they are still alive", am I making the **"animalist"** claim about their biological body's continued physiological functioning (so, counterintuitively, a "brain-dead" person is still alive, since their heart might still be working) or is instead a "**personist"** claim about their still being the "same person" psychologically speaking (here, counterintuitively, severe dementia might "kill" me even while my body continues to live). Or is it some combination of these things?

Before 1950 or so, these questions were almost exclusively of philosophical (and religious) interest, since a person who was "dead" according to one definition would pretty quickly be dead according to the other, as well. However, as our medical technology has improved, these disagreements have increasingly had practical ramifications. So, for example, most modern medical **whole-brain** definitions of "death" equate it with the irreversible loss of all brain activity (see above quote). However, this doesn't fit neatly with either animalist definition of life (according to which "**somatic"** death should be defined in terms of cardiac activity or something similar) or the personist definition (according to which I would have died when my **higher-brain** activity ceased, which might have been quite some time ago)[i].

Questions for Discussion:

1. **When you talk about (or think about) "death", what do you "mean" by this? A state? A process? The moment separating life from death?**
2. **Why do you think the "whole brain" definition of death has been adopted in medicine and law? What would be the problem with adopting "somatic" or "higher-brain" definitions of death?**

2 THE EPICUREAN ARGUMENTS: FEARING DEATH IS IRRATIONAL

> *Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. For life has no terror; for those who thoroughly apprehend that there are no terrors for them in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer. –Epicurus (Hicks 1910)*

OK, so enough about what death means. On to more important questions: Why are most humans so frightened of death? And should we be? This brings us to some famous arguments given by the Greek philosopher **Epicurus** (c. 340 to 270 BCE) and his later disciple, the Roman philosopher/poet **Lucretius** (c. 99 to 55 BCE)**.** These philosophers purported to show that it was *irrational* to fear death, even on the assumption that there was no afterlife (as both Lucretius and Epicurus felt the truth of their "atomic" philosophy entailed). Along with engendering philosophical discussion, Epicureanism was, for hundreds of years, a philosophical idea with considerable popular appeal, and it competed with Stoicism and Christianity throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods as an overarching account of how people ought to live their lives, and how they could deal with the inevitability of their own deaths.

Epicurus's argument quoted above (sometimes called the **"Timing Problem"**) is intended to demonstrate it is *literally impossible* for death to harm us. The argument is also supposed to be therapeutic for those who read it, as it helps to relieve a different sort of death-related harm: the one caused *worrying* about our deaths. The argument:

1. An event can *harm* me only if it harms me at some specific time or other. (For example, I am harmed by the event "Pouring boiling water on my foot" only if there was some particular time that this event actually occurred. In this, it was around my 30th birthday, and I was trying to boil some potatoes!).
2. I can't be harmed by future events, since they haven't happened yet. (So, it might well be that I'll someday be harmed by arthritis, but I'm not harmed *now* by it, since I don't have arthritis right now.).
3. Death can't harm me before I die, since that is in the future.
4. Death can't harm me after I die, because "I" won't exist to be harmed.
5. So, since death can't harm me at any specific time, it can't harm me. (So, I should stop worrying!)

Epicurus's basic idea is that there is something deeply confused about the way we think about death. In particular, it's tempting to think of death as something like the *worst* possible harm that can happen to us. So, if we made a list of "bad things I don't want to happen to me", death would definitely be on it, and somewhere near the top. So, for example, it's worse than papercuts, or getting dumped, or losing one's job, or even being sick for long time. But when we look closer at this list, Epicurus thinks we'll notice that death is NOT like the other things on these list. The other bad things are all things that might happen to ME, at some time and place, and which would cause me to feel something or other. But death isn't like this! By definition, I simply won't be around to feel what death feels like. It's true that *dying* might be unpleasant (Epicurus grants that sickness is bad!), but Epicurus suspects (reasonably) that many of us see dying as categorically different (and worse than) mere sickness.

Lucretius presents a companion argument, usually called the **Symmetry Argument.** Here's Lucretius:

> *"Life is granted to no one for permanent ownership, to all on lease. Look back now and consider how the bygones of eternity that elapsed before our birth were nothing to us. Here, then is a mirror in which nature shows us the time to come after our death. Do you see anything fearful in it? Do you perceive anything grim? Does it not appear more peaceful than the peaceful than the deepest sleep?"* Lucretius *(Lucretius [Titus Lucretius Carus] 1997)*

This argument might be spelled out as follows:

1. I am NOT "harmed" by not having been born earlier than I was. (That is, given that I was born in 1979, I don't spend much regretting the fact I wasn't born in 1969, or 1879, or 79 BCE).
2. From my point of view, the time after I die is perfectly symmetric to the time before I was born (I don't exist in either time). If I can't be harmed by one, I can't be harmed by the other, either.
3. So, I can't be harmed by the non-existence after my death.
4. So, I can't be harmed by death, and I shouldn't be worried about it.

Again, this argument is meant to get us to pay attention to some odd aspects of the way we think about death. On one level, we *know* that death is inevitable—there will come a time that we don't exist (at least according to Lucretius). But what's so bad about "not existing"? Lucretius notes that there was already a ton of time we didn't exist (the whole history of the universe before we were born). However, we seem to think this is not a big deal. Lucretius suggests we adopt the same attitude toward what happens after we die.

Questions: OK, so what do you think? Have Epicurus and Lucretius convinced you that you should stop worrying about death? Do you think they *could* convince you if you spent some time everyday rehearsing these sorts of arguments to yourself? In short: do you have what it takes to be an Epicurean?

3 THOMAS NAGEL: YES, DEATH IS BAD

> *Observed from without, human beings obviously have a natural lifespan and cannot live much longer than a hundred years. A man's sense of his own experience, on the other hand, does not embody this idea of a natural limit. His existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future, containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so tolerable in the past…Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods…If the normal lifespan were a thousand years, death at 80 would be a tragedy. As things are, it may just be a more widespread tragedy. If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all.* – Thomas Nagel

In his 1973 article "Death"(1970), the American philosopher Thomas Nagel argues that Epicurus and Lucretius got things wrong. More specifically, he argues that death DOES harm us, and it does so by depriving us of the life that we enjoy.

1. Nagel begins by noting that most of value our own lives, even when things aren't going our way. We *prefer* experiencing the world to not experiencing it (e.g., most of us would not want to be put in permanent coma).
2. So, what is it that bothers us about death? Nagel argues it can't simply be loss of consciousness (most of us don't mind temporary non-dreaming sleep) or even non-existence (he grants Lucretius's point that we don't regret the time before we were born). So, the badness of death isn't a "positive" badness in the way that pain/suffering are. Instead, it is a "negative" badness-it is bad because of what it takes away from us—the joys of being alive.
3. Now, the problem: if death IS bad for me, HOW and WHEN is it bad for me? This brings us to the Epicurean argument. Nagel argues, contra Epicurus, that things can be bad for me even if they don't directly "hurt" me (i.e., they don't cause physical or mental pain), and even if the harm doesn't occur at a particular time. He offers several examples:
    a. a person who is betrayed by his friends but never finds out,
    b. a person whose wishes are ignored after her death, and
    c. a person who receives a severe brain injury, which leaves them in an infantile (though happy!) state.

    For Epicureans (who focus on pleasure/pain as the only sources of value), it is hard to see why any of these should count as "harms" or "bad things." However, Nagel thinks we ought to agree that they are, in fact, bad. It's just that their badness is in some way "relational," and depends on something besides our internal states. (That is, you couldn't tell *just by looking at the people in examples a-c* that these things had happened. Instead, we'd need to look at the wider world, to history, etc.)

4. Once we recognize we recognize the possibility that things might be bad for me without my necessarily being causally effected by them, we can see how death can harm us. Death is a comparative/relational harm—when I die, I miss out on all the good things that *might have been* had I not died.

5. While Nagel doesn't go so far as to claim that death is *always* bad (e.g., maybe it is better than eternal torment) he does argue it is almost always bad, insofar as most of us enjoy life, even under pretty adverse circumstances. Death is bad, compared to the (good!) life we would rather be living. Nagel grants it might be *worse* to die young (on the grounds that you miss out on more of lie). However, just because someone dies at the "normal time" for humans doesn't magically make the badness of death go away.

Questions for Discussion: Much of the philosophical discussion of Nagel's article has focused around his idea that we can be "harmed" by things that don't actually affect us (and that we can be harmed by things that happen after we die!). What do you think of his examples? Do they convince you?

4 BERNARD WILLIAMS ON DYING AT THE RIGHT TIME

"Suppose, then, that categorical desire does sustain the desire to live. So long as it remains so, I shall want not to die. Yet I also know, if what has gone before is right, that an eternal life would be unliveable. In part, as EM's case originally suggested, that is because categorical desire will go away from it: in those versions, such as hers, in which I am recognisably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for dying before that happens. But equally, at times earlier than that moment, there is reason for not dying. Necessarily, it tends to be either too early or too late. EM reminds us that it can be too late, and many, as against Lucretius, need no reminding that it can be too early. If that is any sort of dilemma, it can, as things still are and if one is exceptionally lucky, be resolved, not by doing anything, but just by dying shortly before the horrors of not doing so become evident. Technical progress may, in more than one direction, make that piece of luck rarer. But as things are, it is possible to be, in contrast to EM, felix opportunitate mortis - as it can be appropriately mistranslated, lucky in having the chance to die." -Bernard Williams (1973)

Bernard Williams begins his article "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" by reflecting on the strange (fictional) life of Elina Makropulos (EM from here on out), the lead character in a play by Karl Capek. After taking an immortality potion cooked up by her father long ago, EM is 342 years old. However, after all this time, life has nothing left to offer her—she is bored, indifferent and cold toward life. She chooses not to take the potion again, and dies.

So what do Elina's life and death have to teach us? Bernard Williams argues it shows two different things:

- **Premature Death is Bad.** First, contra the Epicureans, most of our lives are not like EM's. There are things in our lives that are worth doing, and dying prematurely prevents from us from doing those. So, contra Epicurus and Lucretius, Williams argues that death can be (and often is) a bad thing. This agrees with Nagel.
- **Immortality would be Bad, Too.** Second, in contrast to Nagel, Williams argues that the Makropolus case shows that life can be *too long*. Our lives have a certain structure to them, and this structure simply can't support our living (good, meaningful lives) for indefinite periods. Williams will argue this applies not only to EM's particular brand of immorality but to all possible versions of immortality (from reincarnation to nirvana to heaven, etc.).

While William's argument is a bit more complex than those we've considered so far, the basic are as follows:

1. Our lives are given meaning by **categorical desires.** These are the sorts of things I want *even if I'm not alive to see or experience them.* So, for example, my desire that my child has a good life, or that my students come to see the value in philosophy, or that I solve Zeno's paradoxes, or that I finish some piece of art can provide a *reason* to live. By contrast, I have plenty of non-categorical desires, which are things I want only on the condition I'm still alive ("If I'm still alive in the year 2150, I'll desire to eat food and read science fiction novels."). Williams grant that's there something to the (Nagel-esque) desire to just keep having experiences, but he thinks this isn't enough to sustain most of us.
2. The case of EM shows that categorical desires have a certain "shelf-life." That is, while raising 3 or 4 (or 10 or 20) children can give meaning to a life, Williams doubts that we would continue finding it worthwhile if we raised 100,000 children (one after another). The same goes for artistic creation, political activity, research, learning, etc. At some point, these sorts of desires simply run out, and can't be replenished/replaced by new desires.
3. So what about immortality of the sort promised by various religions? Williams argues there are only two possible options, and neither one solves the problem. First, the immortality might be of EM's type, where I get to keep my existing personality and categorical desires. It might well be that I don't succumb as easy as EM does (among other things, I don't have to deal with a sexist society, and terrible men. However, in the end, Williams argues that I'll eventually meet

her fate (and find life to be not worth the living of it.). On the other hand, there are versions of immortality (such as reincarnation, nirvana, or Aristotle's idea that I become a self-thinking thought) which solve the "boredom" problem, but only by destroying *me* in the process. Finally, there are conceptions of the afterlife that are a bit more ambiguous ("heaven"). However, once we start looking closer, it seems like these present the same dilemma. So, for example, could *I* really enjoy an eternity spent contemplating the awesomeness of God? It sure seems like I (along with every human I've ever met…) would get bored pretty quick. So, if this is what immortality amounts to, it sure doesn't seem like it is *me* that is going to live forever.

Williams concludes that there are no easy options when it comes to thinking about life and death. Against the Epicureans, he argues that we really do have reasons to regret dying early. And against Nagel, he argues that life can, at some point, be too long.

We'll conclude things by considering one more complication. In response to Williams, it can be tempting to argue that "well, all this means is that we should all aim to live as long as we possibly can (e.g., through continuous advances in science). After all, if we get bored of life, we can simply choose to die, just like EM." The problem here lies in considering *who* is going to making the choice to live or die when that point comes. After all, when "I" have exhausted all of my categorical desires, I'll cease to be "me" in any meaningful sense. Instead, there will simply a being who (if it cares about anything at all) is entirely devoted to the pleasures of the moment, without concern for the larger ethical or aesthetic values behind these pleasures. What might such a being look like? One of Williams's most famous students, Martha Nussbaum (1989) once suggested that they might look a lot like the immortal gods of Greek mythology—petty, vicious, squabbling beings with little concern for how their actions affect others (and in particular, how they might affect the much more vulnerable humans). Moreover, this conception of what a too-long life might look like is mirrored in other fictional and mythic accounts of human-like immortals: for example, think of Milton's rebellious angels, Bram Stoker's Dracula, the gods of Norse mythology, etc. This all suggests that we should be very careful before accepting EM's immortality potion, in whatever form it comes in.

5 For Discussion

1. Suppose that a super-powerful being approaches you and asks which of the following you would prefer. Once made, your choice cannot be taken back. What might be some drawbacks to your choice?
    a. You will get to live out your life, die, and then cease to exist.
    b. You will be granted immortality in (more-or-less) your current form—you won't age, can't be killed, etc. If you'd like, the being will grant this same sort of immortality to your friends and loved ones (provided they agree to it).
    c. You will live out of your lives as normal, and then be reincarnated/reborn as a new human or animal of your choice, with no memories of your previous life.
    d. You will live out your lives as normal, and then go to a heaven in which there is no hunger, pain, thirst, and so on. You will spend your time contemplating God, thinking about mathematics, doing philosophy, or something else of the sort. Your psychology will be altered so that becoming bored with such things will be *unthinkable*.
2. Socrates once claimed that philosophy (the best of all human activities!) was nothing but "preparation for death," and that those who spent their time doing philosophy would find death unthreatening. Many subsequent philosophers in the Western Tradition (including the Epicureans, Stoics, Jewish-Christian-Islamic thinkers) have agreed with him, though they haven't always agreed *which* sort of philosophy is needed! After our (brief) introduction to these issues: what do you think? If you spent *more* time thinking carefully about these issues, would it really make things easier? (Or might it do the opposite?)

6 References

Part of my presentation here is based on arguments I expand on in Shea (2009) and Shea (2014). Feldman (1991) provides a detailed examination of the Epicurean view of death, and some puzzles regarding it. A good overview of philosophical questions concerning the afterlife in particular (and how it might avoid Williams' dilemma) can be found in (Hasker and Taliaferro 2019). In recent years, Nussbaum (2013) has backed off the view that immortals would necessarily be

vicious, though her revised position plausibly depends on the idea that there would be some beings that these immortals could help in meaningful ways.

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[i] The discussion and terminology here is adapted from Luper (2016).