

PHIL 321
Lecture 22: Epicurus on Death

11/12/2013

Epicurus' main argument

Principal Doctrine II: "Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us."

Expanded argument:

[P1] Good and bad consist in sense-experience

[P2] Death is the privation of sense-experience

[P3] Hence death—i.e. *being dead*—is not good or bad

[P4] So, if you are dead, it is not good or bad for you

[P5] It is irrational to fear the future occurrence of something which is not bad when it is present

[C] Hence it is irrational to fear death

[P1] relies on E's hedonism

E claims that "Pleasure is the starting point and goal of living blessedly" (*LM* 128)

E's hedonism, however, is not what you might think: "The removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress, nor both together" (*PD* III)

[P2] relies on E's doctrine of the soul

E is an atomist: all reality consists in atoms (i.e. indivisible, indestructible, units of matter) and void

Even the soul, according to E, is composed of atoms (i.e. the soul is a body—quite different from Plato and Aristotle), which "dissipate" upon death

If [P1] and [P2] are too controversial, maybe we can substitute less controversial variants:

[P1*] Good and bad depend on there being a subject who could experience them

[P2*] Death is the extinction of the 'self' or 'person' — i.e. of the subject capable of experience

A lot seems to depend on P1* (the rest might seem undeniable), is it true?

Three central problems Epicurus has highlighted:

[A] How can something be bad for S if S does not or *cannot* mind or care one way or the other, since S is non-existent?

[B] Who could be the possessor or subject of this bad once S is non-existent?

[C] When could the subject suffer this bad?

Responses

Nagel

[1] Death is bad because it involves the deprivation of goods—e.g. perception, thought, emotion

[2] Goods and bads for someone do not depend on that person's awareness of them (cf. *EN* 1.10)

E.g.: Suppose we all have significant others who, while we are here, get together for swinging affairs; suppose that part of our well-being stems from the (perhaps unconscious) faith in our SO's fidelity; suppose further that none of us ever find out about it and that, if anything, the only consequences we experience are in a sense beneficial (e.g. our SO's are nicer, kinder, etc. to us as a result); it still seems like this is bad *for us*

[3] The person who is deprived of goods by death is a "possible person"—i.e. the person who was alive, but so understood as to include the (unrealised) possibilities of her continued life

E.g.: An accident victim suffers head-injuries. Her IQ drops to 20, but she is "happy" or, at least, "cheerful." We tend to think that the "person" is unfortunate; but the current person is quite "happy." So we must be ascribing the misfortune to the person-she-could-have-been = a "possible person"

So, Nagel rejects both [P1] and [P1*]

Furley

[1] Death is bad because it involves the frustration of our previous plans, hopes and desires

[2] The frustration of our current plans etc. would make our present actions pointless

[3] Hence it is rational to fear death, since it is rational to fear that our current actions are pointless

E.g.: a terminally-ill person is deceived about her condition; her concern with her plans for a holiday next spring is pointless—and she would think so too if she knew about her condition

Furley rejects [P5]

Epicurus' response to Furley

PDIII

[1] Happiness requires only the satisfaction of our natural and necessary desires

[2] These desires can be satisfied by a self-sufficient life—i.e. one which does not involve long-term projects

[3] So you don't understand what happiness is if you think that it involves long-term projects, etc.

[4] Hence your fear of death is "empty"—i.e. rests on a false belief—and thus irrational