Death

"Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. ... So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more."

—Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, circa 300 B.C.

“Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be, before we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight—anything depressing, anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?”

—Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, circa 55 B.C.

Supposing there is no afterlife, death is the loss of absolutely everything we have. In that sense, death seems to be the worst possible thing that could happen to a person.

Indeed, many people fear death, and experience intense anxiety and fear at the prospect of dying. But, this fear is only rational if it is a fear OF something. For instance, I might experience intense anxiety and fear at the prospect of being set on fire, and this makes sense because BEING on fire is painful and terrible. So, what is bad about BEING dead?

We can all agree that the PROCESS of dying can sometimes be bad. Sometimes, death comes slowly, and is very painful. But, what of death itself? Or, rather, BEING dead? Epicurus and Lucretius in the passages above say that death is nothingness; it is merely like an endless sleep. And how could nothingness be BAD? Surely BEING in this state (if that even makes sense) cannot be bad.

So far, we seem to have two answers to the question: Is death bad for the one who dies?

• Yes, for death is the loss of everything one has.
• No, for death is nothingness, which cannot be bad.

So, is death bad or not? Here is one possible response:

1. The Deprivation Account (Death is the Loss of Something Good): Being alive, and doing certain things, and having certain experiences are good things. Death deprives us of this. But, it is bad to deprive someone of a good thing. So, even if BEING dead is not bad (because it doesn’t “feel” bad, or hurt, etc.), death might be bad because it is the loss of something very good. That is why death is bad.

• Not Saying Life is Intrinsically Valuable: Note that this is not the claim that life itself is good. For instance, imagine that you were given the choice to either (1) Die tomorrow, or (2) Go into a coma tomorrow, which you will be in for 20 years without re-awakening, and then die. Presumably, there is no reason to prefer the second option to the first. But, this suggests that it is not life itself that is intrinsically valuable, but rather the experiences that being alive allows us to have.
• **Not Saying Being Dead is Bad:** Also note that this is not the claim that death is bad *in and of itself*—but, rather, that it is bad only because it is the loss of something good. Presumably, we do not think non-existence is *itself* a bad thing. Consider: Do you grieve over the awful time before your birth, when you did not exist? If someone offered to freeze you at the moment of your death, promising that technology would be able to revive you in 200 years, would you hesitate for fear of the 200 years of terrible non-existence?

Compare, for instance, these two lives:

- Chad lives to a ripe old age of 90, and is generally happy the whole time.
- Chad’s life is cut short at the age of 30 in an auto accident.

Since 30 years is worse than the alternative (90 years), it is worse to live the shorter life. Broome thinks it is clear, then, that you do not lose EVERYTHING when you die. Nor do you lose NOTHING. Rather, you lose SOMETHING. When Chad’s life is cut short in the example above, for instance, he loses 60 years of a good life.

2. **Objections:** Here are some objections to the deprivation account:

   a) Granted, in life it DOES seem bad to be deprived of something good. Imagine you are a child about to eat an ice cream cone, when someone steals it. You dislike this very much. **BUT:** Notice that a very important part of the harm seems to be that you MIND having your ice cream cone taken away from you. Death is a deprivation of a different sort, however. In death, you aren’t around to MIND being deprived of life. And if you “don’t mind” being dead (or losing all of the good things of life), how does death harm you?

   **Reply:** This pre-supposes that “what you don’t know can’t hurt you.” But, only ONE of the three views regarding what makes someone’s life go well pre-supposes this: Hedonism. Desire-Satisfaction and Objective List Theories, on the other hand, do not. Those views both deny the claim that one has to experience pain or unhappiness in order for something to be bad for you. In fact, the Desire-Satisfaction account explicitly states that you can be harmed AFTER death (e.g., if your loved ones do not fulfill your dying wishes, this makes your life worse).

   b) It seems like, if something is to be considered “bad” for someone, that someone had better EXIST. For instance, we might ask, “WHEN is death bad for the one who dies?” The answer seems to be “At times after their death.”

   Now we have a problem, which Epicurus identified above: **As long as you exist, then you are not dead yet, and death is not bad for you. Once you are dead, you no longer exist, and death cannot bad for you.**
Reply: Again, this pre-supposes the hedonistic view, which says that something can be bad for you only when it FEELS bad to you (and you must still exist in order for something to FEEL bad). But, we have examined two views that allow for events that occur after death to harm the dead person that DID exist in the past. So, for instance, if we take the Desire-Fulfillment view of harm, we could imagine that we all have a desire to keep experiencing good things, and to continue to live. Death prevents us from fulfilling this desire. Therefore, death makes your (already ended) life go worse.

c) If the time after our deaths is bad because it is the deprivation of a longer life, then why isn’t the time BEFORE our births equally as bad? In other words, if it is a tragedy that we didn’t live longer in the future, it should also be a tragedy that we didn’t exist further back into the past. But, no one laments the time before their birth as lost time, or a time of deprivation.

Reply: In general, we seem to factor in the previous state of a person when assessing whether or not the present state is bad for them. For instance, if you choose not to conceive a child, we do not consider it to be bad for this unborn child to never have existed. For, those who never existed in the first place cannot be harmed. They are not deprived of something they never had. Furthermore, the never exist!

Similarly, we do not consider it bad to BE a happy infant, but we DO consider it bad for an intelligent adult to be reduced to the state of a happy infant by an automobile accident that results in brain damage. In other words, we generally assess something as bad only when it is worse than some possible alternative. It is not possible for a happy baby to be any better off, though it IS possible for the happy brain-damaged adult to be better off. Likewise, it is not possible for us to be born sooner (if you accept that different sperm-egg combination entails different person), though it IS possible for us to live longer (especially in cases of untimely, early deaths). This is why we lament the loss of post-death time, but not pre-birth time.

Something else to think about: It is true that we lament the death of someone who was only 24 more than we lament the death of someone who was 82. But, should we? Why should “natural” or “normal” be the guide to whether or not we are deprived of something? Surely, even an 82 year old—or even an 806 year old, for that matter!—is deprived by death of some future goods. Why should it matter whether this longer life is biologically possible?

(We sometimes lament blindness in humans, but not in moles or bats. But, is the suggestion here that we should lament ALL deprivations, no matter how biologically impossible? If even biologically impossible deprivations are bad, does it follow that it is bad for bats and moles that they cannot see? Or, is it bad for me that I cannot fly, or breathe fire, or shoot rainbows out of my eyes?)