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.

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1. Introduction: If you believe in an afterlife, ask yourself: Is it bad to be annihilated?

If you believe there is no afterlife, then death just IS annihilation, so ask: Is it bad to die?

Death: The Worst Thing? At first glance, it seems that the obvious answer is ‘Yes’. It is the loss of absolutely everything we have, worst possible thing that could happen.

Death: Not Bad At All? On the other hand, what’s so bad about death, or annihilation? In the passages above, Epicurus and Lucretius point out 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.

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.

2. Why Death Is Not Bad: First a clarification: Obviously, we can all agree that the PROCESS of dying can be very bad—for instance, if it is slow and painful. But, what of death itself? Or, rather, BEING dead?

The Object of Fear: Many people fear death, and experience intense anxiety and fear at the prospect of dying. But, is it DEATH that they fear (which is nothingness) or is it the PROCESS of dying that they fear (which could be painful)? 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 is a rational fear because BEING on fire is painful and terrible. But, what is there to fear about BEING dead, or not existing?
The Mirror of Time: Consider all of the **time before your birth** when you didn’t exist. Do you look back on those times with fear? Do you lament not being born 10 or 20 years earlier? Were those times when you didn’t exist bad for you? Clearly not. But, then, the times after your death will be just like this: Namely, you simply won’t exist. So there is no reason to fear being dead, or believe that being dead is bad for you, or lament not living another 10 or 20 years longer. Thus, there is an Argument From Symmetry:

1. It is not bad for an individual to miss out on having been born earlier.
2. But, there are no relevant differences between missing out on being born earlier and missing out on dying later.
3. Therefore, it is not bad for an individual to miss out on dying later.

When Is Death Bad? Furthermore, consider other harms. Other things that are bad for you are always bad for you AT TIMES. When you get burned, it is bad for you WHILE IT HURTS. When you get dumped, it is bad for you—again—WHILE IT HURTS.

So, **WHEN is death bad for you?** There seems to be no good answer. **For, as long as you exist, then you are not dead yet, so death cannot be bad for you.** **And once you are dead, you no longer exist, so death cannot bad for you.**

But, let us take a closer look at the various possible answers, just to be sure:

**Sue’s death is bad for her...**
- **at all times**
  
  *This seems confused. It might be an eternal truth—i.e., it is TRUE at all times that Sue’s death is bad for her. Similarly, it is TRUE at all times that the breaking of Joe’s leg is bad for Joe. But, the question is not ‘At what time(s) is it TRUE that Sue’s death is bad for Sue?’*, but rather, ‘At what time(s) is Sue’s death bad for Sue?’ While it is timelessly TRUE that Joe’s broken leg is bad for Joe, it is only bad for him while it hurts, or hinders him, etc.

- **at no times**
  
  *But, is it coherent to say that death is NEVER bad for Sue, but bad for her nonetheless?*

- **at times before her death**
  
  *But, how can something be bad for someone BEFORE IT HAPPENS?*

- **at times after her death**
  
  *But, how can something be bad for someone WHO DOESN’T EXIST?*

- **at the moment of her death**
  
  *Perhaps. But, then, death is very different from other harms. For instance, losing your keys MIGHT be bad for you at the moment you lose them (but, is it really?). But, most (or all?) of the badness of this loss is really at later times (namely, when you’re inconvenienced, locked out of your house, car, etc.).*
3. **The Deprivation Account:** Consider an infant. Do you lament the fact that it cannot think rationally? Do you feel sorry for it? Probably not. But, now consider Frank, an intelligent adult whose cognitive capacities are reduced to that of an infant in a car accident. Do you lament this? Do you feel sorry for Frank? Probably.

What explains the difference? Two things: (a) Frank LOST something that he previously had. The baby did not. (b) Plausibly, it was POSSIBLE for Frank to not lose his rational faculties. It is not possible for infants to have such faculties.

**Against the Symmetry Argument:** So, there IS a relevant difference between post-death times and pre-birth times. Namely, death is the loss of something that we previously had (namely, life). Furthermore, it IS possible to live longer (at least, in the cases of untimely, premature deaths), but it is not possible to be born earlier.

The Deprivation Account states that the loss of something good is bad for the one who loses it. Furthermore, death is the loss of something good (namely, life, and all of the goods that accompany it). Therefore, death is bad for the one who dies.

*Note: This does not entail that life itself is an intrinsic good. It might only be an instrumental good. This view also does not entail the claim that BEING dead is bad (if that even makes sense for someone who is annihilated), but rather only that the mere fact or event of death is bad for the one who dies.*

WHEN is being deprived of the goods of life bad? Perhaps at the moment of death. Perhaps timelessly. But, certainly, death makes one worse off than they otherwise would have been. 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. Chad’s premature death is not the loss of EVERYTHING (since he had 30 good years). But, nor is it the loss of NOTHING. Rather, he loses 60 years of a good life.

**Objection:** Granted, in life it DOES seem bad to be deprived of something good. You just lost your phone. Losing it is bad for you. But, doesn’t most (or all?) of the badness have to do with what it FEELS like to not have it? You MIND losing your phone. It makes you UNHAPPY.

Death, however, doesn’t “feel” ANY way. And no one minds BEING dead (since they don’t exist). So, how can being deprived of existence be bad for you?
Reply: This pre-supposes that “what you don’t know can’t hurt you.” Recall Frank, who lost his cognitive capacities. You probably didn’t question the fact that this was bad for Frank. But, he doesn’t mind. He’s not sad. He might even be quite a happy man-baby!

The fact remains that deprivation of a good is bad for the one who is deprived, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THEY NOTICE IT. For instance, we need only compare Frank’s actual life with the life he could have led: It seems that the life where he is not impaired contains more goods than the life where he is impaired (whether fulfilled desires, happiness, objective goods, etc.). Similarly, a 90 year life contains more goods than a 30 year life. Therefore, death is bad for the one who dies.

Should What Is “Normal” Matter? We’ve been talking about premature death, but what about old-age death? 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?

On the deprivation account, the death of the 24 year old is bad because he is deprived of something he HAD or COULD HAVE HAD. But, what sense of “could” is this? It is not “natural” or “normal” or “presently physically possible” for humans to live to be 806, but why should these determine whether or not one is deprived of something? Death at 82 is still bad insofar as one misses out on the additional 700+ years they would have had, had they lived to 806 death of old age is bad for the one who dies! Why should it matter whether this is not presently biologically possible?

It is certainly metaphysically possible to live to 806. In fact, it is even fairly likely that it will be ACTUALLY possible by the end of this century, given the rapid rate of technological progress.

[We clearly do place emphasis on biological “normality”. For instance, if a child is born blind, we typically lament this as bad—even though this is not a LOSS in the standard sense. At best, it is a deprivation in the sense that other normal members of the species possess sight. Yet, we do not lament a bat or a mole’s being born blind. We might lament a baby bird’s being born without wings, but not a human baby born without wings. Etc.

We presently find it unfortunate for a human to die at 30, even though this used to be the biological norm. So, was it always bad to die at 30, or has the age of the badness of death shifted over time? And, if the former, then—given that humans will one day live for at least a century or two—is it also presently bad to die at 82?]

For more, see here.