

# The Badness of Death

**1. Death is Bad For the One Who Dies:** Murder is wrong. Isn't it? But, why? The answer seems to have something to do with what it does to the victim. Namely, the murderer does something very BAD to their victim, by making them cease to exist. Consider:

**Timmy's Untimely Death:** 10-year-old Timmy was hit by a car yesterday, and he instantly died. What a tragedy. An awful thing has happened to Timmy. Hasn't it?

In short, it really seems like death is (at least sometimes) very bad for the one who dies.

**2. Death Is Not Bad (The No-Subject Problem):** But, if death is bad for the one who dies, then WHEN is it bad for them?

- Death is bad at times AFTER death? (i.e., *being dead* is bad?)

No. The dead no longer exist! How can something be bad for a subject that does not exist??? There is an asymmetry here: BEING alive is good. But BEING dead is not. \*

\* We're considering cases where the subject ceases to exist at death. For those who believe that there is life after death, ask instead: Is it bad to be annihilated?

- Death is bad at times BEFORE death?

No. BEFORE death, the subject is still alive, and death hasn't happened yet! How can something be bad for someone if it hasn't happened yet? \*

\* Obviously, the process of **dy-ing** can be bad for the subject—e.g., if it involves pain, degeneration, stress, fear, etc. But, we're asking about death itself. If it helps, imagine someone asleep who is killed unexpectedly in an instant, without pain or awareness.

This problem was originally noticed by Epicurus, who writes:

"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.

Epicurus tells us that we should not fear death. It should not concern us. For fear is only rational if it is fear OF something. Fear is only appropriate if there is an OBJECT of our fear—a THING to be feared. But, death is nothingness, which is not terrible at all. Perhaps the process of dy-ING should concern us. For instance, we should hope that it won't be slow and painful. But, we should not fear death itself, or BEING dead.

For every other bad thing that can happen to you, it is always bad for you AT some time. For instance, if you get a nasty burn, it is bad for you at those times during which you are in pain. But, death doesn't seem to be bad for the subject at *any* time. Therefore, we can only conclude that death is NEVER bad for the one who dies. In argument form:

### **The No Subject Argument**

1. Death is not bad for you at times when you are dead.  
*(because something cannot be bad for a subject who does not exist)*
2. Death is not bad for you at times when you are alive.  
*(because a thing that hasn't happened to you yet can't be bad for you)*
3. Therefore, death is never bad for the one who dies.

Objection to P2: Perhaps, on something like a desire satisfaction view of well-being, death IS bad for you at times before your death. For, your later death frustrates your earlier desires to continue living.

Reply: This has some absurd implications. For then, lots of things would be bad for you at times before they happen. For instance, if I presently form a desire to never break a leg, and I break my leg in 10 years, this will have been (at least in part) bad for me 10 years before it happens??

**3. Death Is Not Bad (The Symmetry Argument):** There's a further argument for the conclusion that dying sooner rather than later is not bad for you. Consider all of the **time before your birth** when you didn't exist—all of those billions of years of non-existence. Was it bad for you not to exist for all of those years? Do you mourn those billions of years of non-existence? Or fear them? No, of course not.

But, then, why should we feel any differently about the times AFTER your death? How are they any different? They're simply a mirror image of the times BEFORE your birth. There were billions of years of your non-existence *before* your life. And there will be billions of years of your non-existence *after* your life. And if the former wasn't bad for you, then the latter won't be bad for you either. Lucretius puts it like this:

“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.

In argument form:

### **The Symmetry Argument**

1. It is not bad for you not to have been born earlier than when you actually were.
2. But, there are no relevant differences between not existing at times *before* one's life and not existing at times *after* one's life.
3. Therefore, it is not bad for you to die sooner rather than later.

**4. The Deprivation Account:** Crap! Is death not bad? Were we just mistaken about this??? Let's try to restore our confidence in death's badness. Compare two individuals:

- Peggy – A 1-year-old baby with the cognitive capacity of a typical human infant.
- Sue – A 30-year-old woman who suffers brain damage in a car accident, and now has the cognitive capacities of a typical one year old human infant.

Do you feel sorry for Peggy? Is it BAD for her that she is incapable of rational thought? Seemingly, No. (When you see a baby, you don't say, "That's so sad...") But, do you feel sorry for Sue? Is it bad for her that she is incapable of rational thought? Seemingly, Yes.

What is the difference? It is this: Sue LOST something good that she previously had. And this seems bad for her. But notice: It seems bad for Sue even though she does not KNOW or NOTICE that she has lost something good. She is not personally sad, or suffering, over what she lost. All the same, it is still bad for her to have lost it. Similarly:

**The Deprivation Account of the Badness of Death:** The loss of something good is bad for the one who loses it. And death IS the loss of something good—namely, it is the loss of all of the good years that one would have lived, had they not died. So, death is bad for the one who dies.

(1) Answering the No Subject Problem: But WHEN is death bad for the one who dies?

Answer: Always. Recall Timmy who died at age 10. Let us assume that, had he NOT died when he did, he would have lived another 70 good years. Because he was hit by a car, he received only 10 units of a good thing instead of 80. And 10 is worse than 80. So, it

was BAD for him to have received the smaller amount of the good thing, rather than the larger amount. And this is ALWAYS the case. It is *forever* true that Timmy's life of 10 years is worse than the life of 80 years that he COULD have had.

And Timmy doesn't need to NOTICE this, or SUFFER, etc., in order for it to be true that his death was bad for him. It just IS true, always and forever. (Note also that it is timelessly true that Sue's accident was bad for her, even though she will never notice, or miss, the good that she lost.)

Objection: This seems confused. It might be an eternal *truth*—i.e., it is TRUE at all times—that Timmy's death is bad for him. 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 Timmy's death is bad for Timmy?**', but rather, '**At what time(s) IS Timmy's death bad for Timmy?**' 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! The FACT is eternal. The pain is not.

Reply: Sure, it is eternally true that Joe's broken leg is bad for Joe AND there are specific times during which he suffers specific pains and inconveniences because of it. But death is uniquely different than other kinds of harms: It is timelessly true that death is bad for the one who dies, but there are NOT specific times during which the dead suffer specific pains or inconveniences because they are dead. Get over it!

(2) Answering the Symmetry Argument: Are there any relevant differences between the period of non-existence *before* your birth and the period *after* your death?

Answer: Yes! The period of non-existence after your death is one during which you **lost something that you previously had!** This is importantly different from pre-birth times.

Objection: But, on this Deprivation Account, my death is bad because I am deprived of all the good years that I COULD HAVE HAD, had I died later. By that logic, the pre-birth times ARE bad for me, because *they too* ALSO deprive me of all of the good years that I COULD HAVE HAD, had I been born sooner. Boom!

Reply: False. Plausibly, each individual necessarily originates from a particular sperm-egg pair. (This is a metaphysical thesis known as the [Necessity of Origin](#).) So, you could NOT have been born sooner—at least, not *much* sooner; though maybe your mom could have had a C-section earlier or something—for, those particular gametes could not have existed years earlier than they did. On the other hand, Timmy COULD HAVE lived longer, had he not been hit by a car.

Rebuttal: Imagine that two parents freeze their sperm and eggs for 10 years, and then later bring them together to form a zygote. In THAT case, the child COULD have been born a decade sooner. So, shouldn't THAT child lament not having been born sooner?

Reply #1: First, on those views of personal identity which take psychological continuity to be essential to one's identity, it is not clear that the PERSON resulting from the organism born in 2023 would be the same PERSON as the one resulting from the organism born in 2033—EVEN IF those two organisms originated from the same gametes. For, those two possible lives would have zero psychological overlap with one another. In short, many philosophers would reject the claim that the person in this case could have been born a decade sooner.

*(Brainstorm: Imagine scientists had taken your 7-day-old embryo, frozen it for a century, then thawed it out and brought it to term. Would YOU still have existed? Why or why not?)*

Reply #2: But, the issue of identity aside, there seems to be a general confusion here. It's not like this zygote being born 10 years earlier is going to bestow upon it ten extra years of LIFE! (As if it's a choice between 80 years, 2023-2103, or 70 years, 2033-2103.) On the other hand, if it IS a choice between a longer life or a shorter one—e.g., perhaps imperfections in the freezing process shaves 10 years of life off of the child—then it DOES seem appropriate for this child to regret not being born sooner. But, this is an extreme case. For those of us in this actual world, it is not true that any of us could have been born sooner, resulting in longer lives lived.

Rebuttal: If we're going to limit ourselves to *realistic* possibilities, then the Deprivation Account seems committed to the conclusion that only PREMATURE death is bad for the one who dies. But, death is not bad for a 90 year old, because they could not have lived longer.

Reply: As stated above, it isn't just PHYSICALLY impossible for us to have been born sooner, but METAPHYSICALLY impossible. But, it IS metaphysically possible for us to live longer into the future. And it might even be PHYSICALLY possible to do so in the near future—e.g., due to therapies that end the process of aging. So, perhaps the death of someone old is still bad—or at least MORE bad than them not having been born sooner—because they are deprived of many good years that they "could" have had, in some at least semi-realistic sense of the word "could".

(Admittedly, we DO seem to regret more deeply the deprivation of something that one would have "naturally" or "normally" had, though. For instance, we lament that a human child is born blind, but not a mole or a bat. Similarly, we lament when a baby bird is

born without wings, but not when a human infant is born without them. And so on. That said, it does seem more appropriate to say mourn the death of a child more deeply than the death of someone old—for the possible world in which the child lived a much longer life is much closer to the actual world than the possible world in which the old person lives a much longer life.)

*[What do you think? Have we at least explained why it is bad for Timmy to die at age 10? How about some who dies at age 90? Is that bad for them too? Why or why not?]*

For more, see [here](#) and [here](#).