Is Death Bad? Epicurus and Lucretius on the Fear of Death

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Most people think dying would be bad for them and so they fear it. Is that fear rational?

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE) says no. He argues that death—as the permanent extinction of consciousness—is not bad, so we should not fear it. The Roman philosopher Lucretius (94- circa 55 BCE) agrees, and he defends Epicurus.

If Epicurus and Lucretius are right, then fear of death is irrational. But are they right?

1. Epicurus’ Argument

Death, Epicurus argued, cannot touch us because “while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist.” Since death cannot touch us it cannot be bad. Fear is rational only for something bad. So Epicurus concludes that fearing death is pointless.[1]

To be clear: the issue is being dead, not dying, since while dying we still exist. Dying can be awful and so rightly feared.

2. Reaction to Epicurus

Common sense has long recoiled to Epicurus. Surely death is bad if it deprives us of the goods of life. Granted, if continued life would be terrible, then death might not deprive. But if it does deprive us of good experiences, then it is bad because it is bad to be deprived of any good.[2]

3. Lucretius’ Argument

This common sense reaction to Epicurus plays right into Lucretius’ hands. For if we say that death is bad because it deprives us of time alive, then when we were born also deprives us of time alive, since we could have been born earlier than we were (or whenever we began to exist). However, since no one fears missing out on time before they were born, they should not fear missing out on time after they die.

Lucretius writes:

Look back again to see how the past ages of everlasting time, before we were born, have been as naught to us. These then nature holds up to us as a mirror of the time that is to come, when we are dead and gone. Is there aught that looks terrible in this, aught that seems gloomy? Is it not a calmer rest than any sleep?[3]

4. Responding to Lucretius

If we concede that being born “late” is just as bad as dying “early,” then maybe we should lament both when we were born and when we will die.[4]

However, this is hard to believe and even harder to actually do.

Alternatively, even if our non-existence before birth and after death both deprive, maybe death deprives us of something we care about, whereas we are indifferent to time we missed before we were born.[5] That is, we could simply have a preference for the future.[6]

However, even if true, this preference merely explains why we care about missing future goods by dying when we will instead of the goods we missed by being born when we were. Lucretius’ claim is that our preference is irrational, since the two periods of non-existence are symmetrical, so we should have similar attitudes toward them. Lucretius can even agree that we are biased toward the future; that, he would say, is the problem!

5. A Different Answer to Lucretius

Here is a more promising response.[7] I might die later than I will, but I could not have been born earlier than I was. Anyone born earlier would not be me, because different gametes would produce a different individual.[8] If so, then I can rationally lament the one but not the other.

But here’s a problem: if particular gametes determine one’s identity, in vitro fertilization (IVF) shows how the same human being could exist earlier.[9] If the embryo from which a person developed were
implanted earlier than it was, it seems that that same person could have existed earlier than she did.

The earlier IVF human being would indeed be identical to the later one, but the term “human being” is ambiguous between “human organism,” which is a biological concept, and “person,” which is a metaphysical concept. Permanent coma victims, for example, are obviously human organisms, but not persons in the sense in which you are a person, namely, as a center of rational self-awareness. Conversely, Superman, were he to exist, would be a person in that sense, though obviously not a member of our species.

So the embryo could have been implanted earlier, which would have resulted in the same human organism as the later implanted embryo, but would it have given rise to the same person?[10]

We care about the details of our lives. Our concerns, memories, hopes, relationships, and all that makes our lives worth living matters to each of us. That is what death threatens. Call this our “thick personhood,” to distinguish it from the bare human organism shorn of one’s biographical life.[11] So even if an earlier existing human organism would be identical to a later existing one, that is not what matters to each of us.[12]

If I die tomorrow (contrary to fact, I fervently hope!), I can nevertheless easily imagine extending my established biography past tomorrow, but I cannot imagine my biography beginning earlier than it did. How, for example, could I have met my wife before she was born? Unless we can somehow push everything back in time in lock-step unison, our thick personhoods cannot possibly exist earlier than they do.[13]

We cannot be deprived of impossible things, such as the cake we ate yesterday. Since it is impossible for thick persons to exist earlier than they do, one cannot be deprived of time before birth. But it is possible to die later than one will, so we can be deprived of that time.[14] If so, this answers Lucretius.

6. Conclusion

So to return to the intuitive response to Epicurus: since death typically deprives us of good life experiences, that’s what makes it bad, thus justifying some appropriate level of fear. That’s what most of us thought initially, and it looks like we were right.

Notes

[1] Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” Principal Doctrines, Library of Liberal Arts, Russel Geer, tr., 1978. p. 54. For Epicurus, happiness (understood as pleasure) is the only thing that has intrinsic value, that is, pleasure is the only thing valuable for its own sake; it is the end with respect to which everything else is a means, and so it is the ultimate goal in life. Fear of death causes extreme anxiety, thus ruining our lives. This is no idle issue. How we face the prospect of our own death is perhaps the greatest quandary of the human condition. This applies to those who think death is annihilation and maybe even more so to those who deny it.

Lucretius, a committed Epicurean, expresses gratitude to his mentor for freeing him from the fear of death that afflicts so many people, causing them to lead desperate lives and to do awful things; On the Nature of Things, Bk II, p. 65, Cecil Bailey, tr, Oxford University Press, 1950:

Sweet it is, when on the great sea the winds are buffeting the waters, to gaze from the land on another’s great struggles; not because it is pleasure or joy that any one should be distressed, but because it is sweet to perceive from what misfortune you yourself are free.

[2] For development of this argument, see Thomas Nagel’s seminal article, “Death,” reprinted in Mortal Questions, Cambridge University Press, 1979. pp. 1-10. Many other philosophers develop the deprivation account, including Fred Feldman, in Confrontations with the Reaper, Oxford University Press, 1992; Ben Bradley, in Well-Being and Death, Oxford University Press, 2009; and Shelly Kagan, in Death, Yale University Press, 2012; and many more. The deprivation account is the most popular explanation for why death is bad, when it is bad. It is popular because it is intuitively correct, but like many seemingly obvious views in philosophy it requires more intellectual effort to establish than anyone ever imagined, as these books demonstrate. Death is a perennial topic for philosophy, but since Nagel’s article there has been a great deal of interest in the metaphysical and ethical questions surrounding death.


that we should try to view our births in the same way we view our deaths:

There are, after all, two ways in which we can rectify the apparently irrational emotional asymmetry [between late birth and early death]. On the one hand, we can follow Lucretius and cease viewing early death as a bad thing for Claudette. On the other hand, we can at least try to start viewing late birth as a bad thing. My suggestion is that in the present case the latter course would be preferable. I think it must be granted that our emotional reactions toward pleasures lost by early death are quite different from our emotional reactions toward similar pleasures lost by late birth. If my proposal is right, this emotional asymmetry is irrational.

That the lateness of our birth could be as tragic as our untimely death is even harder to accept than Lucretius’ recommendation that we become indifferent to death.

[5] Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, “Why Death is Bad,” *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986) pp. 213-21, p. 219. Brueckner and Fischer think that we could be born earlier than we were, but since we have a bias toward the future, we are indifferent to goods that we missed by being born when we were. See Lukas J. Meier (2019) “What Matters in the Mirror of Time: Why Lucretius’ Symmetry Argument Fails,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy,* 97:4, 651-660 for an account of what matters in pre-vital and post-mortem times.

[6] Fischer and Brueckner, “The Asymmetry of Early Death and Late Birth,” *Philosophical Studies* 71 (1993) 327-31; p. 328. appeal to a variation on a famous thought experiment of Derek Parfit’s that purports to show our temporal bias. (A “bias” is an irrational preference, since the idea of a rational bias seems incoherent.) Here is is Brueckner and Fischer’s version of Parfit’s thought experiment:

Imagine that you are in some hospital to test a drug. The drug induces intense pleasure for an hour followed by amnesia. You awaken and ask the nurse about your situation. She says that either you tried the drug yesterday (and had an hour of pleasure) or you will try the drug tomorrow (and will have an hour of pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow.


[8] For discussion of this claim, see *Origin Essentialism* by Chad Vance.


[C]onsider someone who is the product of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Her parents wanted a child but not until they were older. But they worried that conceiving a child when they were older would carry a higher risk that their child would have a congenital defect. So they had IVF and had the resulting embryos frozen. They then waited 15 years before implanting the embryo that in fact developed into this person. This seems to be a case in which, if the parents had implanted this same embryo earlier, the same person would have had an earlier origin...If this is right, there are some people who could have come into existence earlier than they did.

The issues of this case lead to what’s called “the non-identity problem”: for an introduction, see *The Non-Identity Problem* by Duncan Purves.

[10] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Bk II, ch xxvii, paragraph 9. Locke distinguished sharply between the “man” or the human organism and the “person,” which Locke said is “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.”


[12] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons,* Oxford University Press, 1984. Ch 12, “Why Our Identity Is Not What Matters.” Parfit argues that our continuing psychological sense of ourselves is what matters, not whether from some metaphysical point of view there is just one self-identical entity. He shows this by means of highly original thought experiments whereby a person undergoes fission, resulting in two streams of consciousness; since there are two, they cannot be numerically identical.

[13] Travis Timmerman, “Avoiding the Asymmetry Problem,” *Ratio* 31/1 (2018) pp. 88-102; Timmerman argues that since the Milky Way could have begun earlier than it did, someone could be deprived of the time he or she could have had had the Milky Way formed earlier.
In response, I, following Nagel, argue that we must put some limits on how possible a possibility must be for its non-realization to count as a misfortune. So even if it is possible for the Milky Way to have formed earlier than it did, one is not deprived of that additional possible time simply because the Milky Way did not form earlier than it could have. To miss out on time alive by dying in a car crash tomorrow hardly compares with missing out on time alive because the Milky Way formed later rather than earlier. The former is clearly a misfortune, whereas it is hard to see the latter that way. See my “Coming Into and Going Out of Existence,” in Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying, Travis Timmerman and Michael Cholbi, eds, Routledge 2020.

[14] The sense of “possible” here may be controversial. (For an overview of the many meanings of “possible” see Possibility and Necessity: An Introduction to Modality by Andre Leo Rusanuk). It seems possible that the pedestrian might not have stepped off the curb when he did and into the path of the car that struck and killed him. If we deny that, then we must also abandon the idea of deprivation, since deprivation implies that there could have been a different outcome of events. That is, if we cannot be deprived of impossible things and it is impossible for things to turn out different than they did, then we cannot be deprived by the way things turned out.

References
Bradley, Ben, Well-Being and Death, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Locke, John, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1690.

For Further Reading

Related Essays
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