

# 8. Is death bad?

Martín Abreu Zavaleta

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Most people don't want to die. They think it would be bad *for them* if they died. However, some ancient philosophers known as *hedonists* denied that death was bad for the person who died. They agreed with the commonsensical claim that a person's death could be bad for other people: their friends, family and other people who loved them would undergo considerable suffering as a result of that person's death. They also thought that the *process of dying* itself could be a very bad thing for the person who is dying: some people go through great pain when they die, many times as the result of illness. But *the state of being dead*, they thought, is not bad for someone who undergoes it. In this lecture we'll consider some of their most popular arguments and some avenues of response.

## 1 The deprivation argument

Epicurus was a sort of intellectual leader for ancient hedonists. According to him, only pleasure was *intrinsically* good and only pain was *intrinsically* bad. Other things could be good or bad, but merely because of the pleasure or pain they would bring you. If things are good or bad in that second way, we'll say that they are *extrinsically* good or bad. For instance, suppose that eating candy brings you a lot of pleasure. Then eating candy would be *extrinsically* good for you, because of the pleasure it produces in you, which is *intrinsically* good.

Contemporarily, when someone is described as a hedonist, we may feel tempted to think of him as a person who knows no restraint, and whose quest for pleasure leads him to a life of excess. Epicureans didn't think of their hedonism in that way. Sometimes, something that brings you a lot of pleasure when you're doing it can bring you great pain later, so they advocated for a pretty measured life. For instance, think about what happens when you overeat and later have a stomach ache. Because some things can bring you pleasure at the moment but a lot of pain later, they suggest having a measured life: that way, you will get pleasure without experiencing pain.

Because of their views about what is good or bad, Epicureans thought that the state of being dead (from now on, I'll just refer to this state as death) could not be bad for the person who is dead. They thought that a person ceases to exist the moment she dies. Since in order to experience pleasure or pain, one must at least exist, someone who is dead can't experience pleasure or pain. Death is therefore "nothing to us", i.e. it is neither good nor bad. Here is one version of the argument, offered by Epicurus himself:

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. (Letter to Menoecius, p. 31)

This passage by Epicurus suggests at least two lines of reasoning, but let's focus on the one that has come to be called the *deprivation argument*:

- (1) Something is good or bad for a person if and only if it is the experience of some sensation, or if it produces the experience of some sensation. [Hedonism]
- (2) Death prevents us from having any sensation. [Deprivation<sub>1</sub>]
- (3) Death is not the experience of any sensation.[Deprivation<sub>2</sub>]
- (4) We should be concerned with something only if it is good or bad. [Assumption]
- (5) Death is not good or bad. [From (1), (2), (3)]
- (6) So we should not be concerned with death. [From (4), (5)]<sup>1</sup>

Premise (1) is just Epicurus' hedonism. Premises (2) and (3) follow from his claim that death is deprivation of sensation: if death is deprivation of sensation, then it's not a sensation itself, and it prevents us from experiencing any sensation. Claim (4) is an independent assumption, but it seems to be justified. We can understand it as saying that we should only want what is good or brings us good things, and fear what is bad or brings us bad things. (5) follows from hedonism, together with the deprivation claim, i.e. the conjunction of (2) and (3). Finally, the conclusion follows from (5) and (4), by the rule of inference *modus tollens*.<sup>2</sup> Call this argument DA1.

Here is a similar argument by Lucretius (this is the argument you had to reconstruct in the assignment):

Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, ... For he whom evil is to befall, must in his own person exist at the very time it comes, if the misery and suffering are haply to have any place at all; but since death precludes this, and forbids him to be, upon whom the ills can be brought, you may be sure that we have nothing to fear after death, and that he who exists not, cannot become miserable, and that it matters not a whit whether he has been born into life at any other time, when immortal death has taken away his mortal life.(*On the Nature of Things*, Book 3, 860-9)

Again, the conclusion is that death should not concern us, i.e. that we should neither want it nor fear it. Lucretius was also a hedonist, but unlike Epicurus, he doesn't make this premise explicit. This makes a more general interpretation of the argument available to us:

- (1) In order for something to be bad for someone at a given time, that person must exist at the time the bad thing is bad for her. [Assumption]
- (2) Once a person dies, she ceases to exist. [Assumption]
- (3) So once a person dies, nothing can be bad for her (including the state of being dead). [from (1) and (2)]

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<sup>1</sup>I have decided to present the argument in this informal way for the sake of readability.

<sup>2</sup>Modus tollens is the following form of inference: from *if P then Q*, and *not Q*, infer *not P*.

- (4) If something is not bad for a person at the time it happens, it can't be bad for that person at any other time. [Assumption]
- (5) So while a person is alive, future death cannot be bad for her. [From (3) and (4)]
- (6) We should only fear things that are bad for us at some point in time. [Assumption]
- (7) So we should not fear death. [From (3), (4) and (5)]

Notice that this reconstruction of the argument doesn't explicitly assume that only sensations can be good or bad for us. We know based on Lucretius' writings that he in fact made that assumption, and the passage under consideration also reveals this in saying "if the misery and suffering are haply to have any place at all". However, let's consider the version of the argument I just wrote, since it seems to be more general than Epicurus's argument. Call this new argument DA2.

(1) and (2) are just assumptions Lucretius makes. (3) follows from (1) and (2) by the following line of reasoning: if someone dies, then she doesn't exist at any time after she dies. Another way of stating (1) is this: if someone doesn't exist at a given time, then nothing bad can happen to her at that time. So now we can just connect the conditional in (1) with the conditional in (2): if someone dies, then nothing bad can happen to her at any time after she dies. The rest is left as an exercise for the reader.

DA1 is valid, so if we are to object to it, that must be by rejecting at least one of its premises. One way of rejecting (2) and (3) would be by claiming that there is some sort of afterlife in which we can still have experiences. However, this seems contentious. Another option would be to reject (4), but this by itself seems pretty plausible. Whatever implausibility it may have would be derived from the thought that the only things that are good or bad are sensations or things that produce sensations in us. The latter is premise (1), so perhaps we should look at that premise instead.

There are at least three ways of rejecting (1). In order to clarify them, it will be helpful to use the distinction between things that are intrinsically good or bad and things that are extrinsically good or bad. We can reject (1) by rejecting that sensations are the only things that are *intrinsically* good or bad, by rejecting that producing a sensation is the only way in which something can be *extrinsically* good or bad, or by rejecting both.

Let's consider the second strategy: rejecting that producing something bad is the only way in which something can be extrinsically bad. Perhaps something can be bad for you if it *deprives* you of something that is good. For instance, suppose that you like band X very much, and if you went to their concert, that would bring you a lot of pleasure. Unfortunately, you miss the concert, and instead you stayed home and washed the dishes. Let's suppose that the thought that you miss the concert doesn't bring you any pain, nor does washing the dishes. Then being absent from the concert didn't produce you any pain, but it *deprived* you from a lot of pleasure. Surely this would be bad, insofar as it would make the total pleasure in your life to be less than it would have been had you attended the concert. On this view, deprivation of a good thing is an *extrinsically bad* thing.

This way of rejecting DA1 seems reasonable enough, and it doesn't even require rejecting the main tenets of hedonism. Moreover, it explains why DA1 fails: the argument fails because it doesn't recognize that there are more ways of being bad than the ones presented in premise (1). **Question:** Is this also a good way of rejecting DA2?

## 2 The symmetry argument

The line of response we just saw is not new. Many people held it in the past as a response to Epicurus' argument. With his symmetry argument, Lucretius raises a new objection to this line of response. Here is the argument, in the words of Lucretius:

And just as in the time that went before we felt no pain—when Carthaginians came from all sides to wage war, and the world struck by the disturbing upheaval of war shook and quivered under the high vaults of heaven, and it was unclear whose kingdom should fall all men on the land and sea—so when we are no more, when the body and soul from which combination we are formed have come apart, then no doubt there will be nothing to us (who will not be then) which will be able to move our senses in the slightest, not even if earth and sea and sky are mixed together.

The argument points out that not being born yet is similar to being dead in that the two deprive us from pleasure. Here is an illustration. Consider a person who really likes paraphernalia from the 60s, he likes to listen to music from the 60s and the only thing preventing him from wearing the kinds of clothes that people used back in the 60s is the fear of public embarrassment. This person, let's suppose, would have been much happier if he had lived in the 60s, but alas, he was born in the 90s. Being born in the 90s has deprived him from all the pleasure he would have had if he had been born in the 40s, say, and being an adult during the 60s.

According to the line of reasoning we pursued against Epicurus, it is a great misfortune for this person to have been born in the 90s, since he could have lived a much happier life had he been born in the 40s. But ordinarily, it strikes us as a mistake to think that it is a misfortune not to have been born earlier. This is the point of Lucretius' symmetry argument, which we might reconstruct as follows:

- (1) Looking back from within a lifetime, our pre-natal non-existence should not concern us.
- (2) Pre-natal existence is relevantly like post-mortem non-existence.
- (3) So Looking forward from within a lifetime, our post-mortem existence should not concern us.<sup>3</sup>

We have seen that pre-natal non-existence is relevantly like post-mortem non-existence with respect to the deprivation of pleasure, so the matter rests on whether our pre-natal non-existence should concern us or not. **Question:** What do you think? Should we be concerned with our pre-natal non-existence? Why?

## 3 When is death bad for us?

DA2 included interesting premises that the others don't. These are (1) and (4) in DA2. Assuming that a person ceases to exist the moment she dies, nothing bad can happen to her after she dies. This raises a challenge for those who think that death is bad for us and admit that a person ceases to exist when she dies: when is death bad for us? It can't be bad when we are death, since don't exist; but it can't be bad for us when we are alive, since it is not present. Epicurus also seems aware that this

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<sup>3</sup>See Warren 2001 for a criticism of this reconstruction.

challenge can be raised when he says: “so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist”.

However, notice that it is not the case that if something is bad for someone at a given time, then the bad thing must have happened to her at that time. To see this, consider the following case. John has no money for college. If he wants to go to college, he will have to take a part-time job and ask for a loan to a bank. If his parents had saved money for John to go to college, he wouldn't have this problem now. But instead they dilapidated their money gambling (which, by the way, made their lives really happy). So it seems that it was bad for John that his parents gambled instead of saving money for him to go to college. But since John wasn't even born back when that happened, it wasn't bad for him then. Instead, it is bad for him *now* that his parents lost their money gambling *back then*.

Now we can see what was wrong with DA2. DA2 assumed that if something is not bad for a person at the time it happens, it can't be bad for that person at any other time. But we just saw a counterexample to that claim. So if we have a response to the symmetry argument, we will be able to say that future death is bad for us *now*. **Question:** how convincing do you find this response? why should future deprivation of good things be bad for us now, rather than being bad for us in the future?