

An Investigation into the Fear of Death

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March 31, 1997

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### Part I - Humor and death

“Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with the lid on it. Nor do I, really.... It’s silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead... which should make all the difference... shouldn’t it? I mean, you’d never know you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being asleep in a box. Not that I’d like to sleep in a box mind you, not without any air -- you’d wake up dead, for a start, and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That’s the bit I don’t like, frankly. That’s why I don’t think of it.... Because you’d be helpless, wouldn’t you? Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you’d be in there for ever. Even taking into account the fact that you’re dead. It isn’t a pleasant thought. Especially if you’re dead, really, ask yourself, if I asked you straight off -- I’m going to stuff you in that box now, would you rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you’d prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You’d have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking -- well, at least I’m not dead!”<sup>1</sup>

-Rosencrantz

### **Part I Introduction**

Death, the most certain and uncertain of all events, strikes a deep insecurity within all of us. Fear is our most primal and instinctual reaction to death, and in this paper we shall examine this fascinating relationship between human beings and the fact of their mortality. The purpose of this paper is not to depress the reader nor to scare him or her, but rather to come to a

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<sup>1</sup>p.70-71 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

deeper understanding of death whereby we may fairly evaluate our fears. Our thesis shall be to investigate the fear of death and the belief that death is an evil. By clarifying our notions about death as a harm to the individual I hope to show how many of our fears about death may be unwarranted and even irrational. We shall champion the Epicurean view that death is nothing to us, and by doing so expose some of our confused beliefs about death. By holding to the Epicurean view of death, we may discover that death is actually nothing to be feared after all.

Our investigation will begin with a short analysis of fear. For the purposes of this investigation, we will not entertain ideas about an afterlife. We will do this to limit the scope of our topic and focus our thoughts. I believe much of our fear of death arises from its finality, and the extension of consciousness past death diffuses much of what makes this endeavor so interesting. If there is life after death, judgments about death become rather simple and perfunctory. We would say that for someone moving on to heaven, death was certainly good, and for someone heading for hell, death was definitely bad. But this dodges what is for me the most interesting aspects of death: its mystery and finality. Death, when seen as the end, takes on a whole new aura. So, for our investigation, we will assume that death marks the permanent and irreversible end of consciousness. Death is the transition from being to non-being, while dying, in contrast, is a state of life which should not be confused with death. Dying can be a painful and tragic experience, death is not experience, but represents the end of all our experiences. Our analysis of fear shall look at five different fears produced from meditations upon death as the permanent end of our conscious experience of life.

In the next section, we shall defend the Epicurean claim that death is nothing to us. This does not mean that death is nothing for everyone, but specifically for the individual who

dies. Of course the death of a friend or loved one is a great tragedy, but what we shall look at is the death of the actual individual. The claim is that death is nothing for the person who dies because at death that individual ceases to be a subject that can suffer any kind of harm at all. In response to this position we shall hear several modern philosophers criticize this view of death. Lead by Thomas Nagel's deprivation theory, these philosophers will try to show how death actually is a harm or loss for the individual. They employ a variety of theories to show how something can be bad for an individual even if that person does not experience this harm. Against these attacks I will defend the Epicurean position and try to expose the confusion of perspective inherent in these positions. This examination will focus on the evil of death, and how this notion leads to our fears about death. We will defend the claim that death is nothing to us, thereby demonstrating how and why the fear of death is irrational. I hope that in seeing death as nothing to us some of our fears might actually dissolve. If death is truly nothing to us, then all our fears and worries about death only serve to diminish our experience of life while we are still alive. In the conclusion, we shall reflect back upon the progression of our analysis, and end with some final comments on the importance of humor in dealing with death.

we fear death? In this section we shall examine five different expressions of people's fear of death. For each, we shall see how these statements not only describe a specific fear of death, but how they implicitly accuse death of being the perpetrator, or catalyst for their misery.

The first category represents people's fear of the permanent deprivation of the goods in life. Here people fear death because it takes away all the joys and pleasures in life. No longer may we engage in those activities which make us happy, for we are eternally cut off from these

“Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death? There must have been one, a moment, in childhood when it first occurred to you that you don’t go on for ever. It must have been shattering -- stamped into one’s memory. And yet I can’t remember it. It never occurred to me at all. What does one make of that? We must be born with an intuition of mortality. Before we know the words for it, before we know that there are words, out we come, bloodied and squalling with the knowledge that for all the compasses in the world, there is only one direction, and time is its only measure.”<sup>2</sup>

-Rosencrantz

## Part II People’s Fear of Death<sup>3</sup>

That first awareness must have been terribly frightening, for even now, with a greater maturity and a deeper wisdom, death still scares many of us. But why do we fear death? In this section we shall examine five different expressions of people’s fear of death. For each, we shall see how these statements not only describe a specific fear of death, but how they implicitly accuse death of being the perpetrator and catalyst for their misery.

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<sup>2</sup>p.71-72 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

<sup>3</sup>p.104-105 Language Metaphysics and Death

goods and left with nothing. Death harms us by intruding onto life and depriving us of all that is good and pleasurable. Death is evil because it strips us of all that is desirable in life.

The next fear is that of leaving those things we love behind. Death tears us away from our loved ones, so that we can no longer care for them and oversee their welfare. Death also pulls us away from the great projects we begin in life, leaving them up to someone else to finish, some one who might not have the same vision and dream. At death, we lose the power and influence over all the things we held dear, and this powerlessness represents another great harm that death inflicts upon us. Death is evil since it cuts off our ability to affect the lives of those we love, and it inhibits us from completing the projects that are most meaningful to us.

The third fear is that the world will go on without us. Here, the individual imagines the world going on without their input or influence, and is struck by the meaninglessness of it all. The individual does not matter to the world; the single person is inessential, disposable, meaningless. This sense of one's life being a mere flash in the span of existence, without which the world will get along quite nicely, engenders a horrible sense of futility. Nothing one does matters, so why bother at all? Death, when seen in this way, drains life of all that is meaningful and important. Death harms us by stripping away any purpose life could possibly have, and reducing our lives to a meaningless blip in time.

Another fear brought about by death is the fear of posthumous judgment. In this situation, we fear death because it leaves us powerless to affect the judgments of others. No longer can one remedy a situation, no longer can one explain oneself and make apologies. With death our ability to affect our character ceases, and judgment shall pass on our lives without our

input. Death harms us by stripping away our power to affect the way others judge us. Death is evil because it deprives us of our power and influence against our will.

The final fear is most simply the fear of the unknown. We fear death because it forces us to face a great mystery, an absolute nothingness from which no one returns. Maybe there is a heaven, a hell? Maybe there is reincarnation or maybe there is nothing at all? We do not know. We have theories, speculation, and scattered reports about an afterlife, but our knowledge is certainly inconclusive. So, while our investigation shall avoid considerations of an afterlife, I think it is still important to note that mystery and uncertainty are integral components in our fear of death. Death is evil because it forces us to confront the fearful unknown without our consent.

With all of these fears, death is made out to be the evil doer, who brings these misfortunes upon us. It is important to note that in most of these fears a sense of powerlessness permeates the fear. This is significant because death does not strip us of power but of existence altogether. I believe this misunderstanding may lie at the heart of our dilemma. On the other hand, these assertions about the evil of death appear very intuitive and appropriate, but are they? Is our condemnation of death as evil justified? In the next section, we investigate the Epicurean position on the evil of death to discover if death actually harms us in the ways we believe it does. Having examined the evil of death, we shall return to these fears in part four, where we shall reconsider their cogency in the face of our new awareness of death. If we uphold the Epicurean position that death is nothing to us, then we must seriously reconsider the validity of our fears about death.

*P's death is not a state of affairs that begins before P's death*

*Therefore:*



### Part III The Evil of Death

#### The Epicurean Argument

Epicurus presents his argument most clearly and succinctly in his letters to Menoeceus, where he says :

“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 concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is

not, and the latter are no more.” -Epicurus, *Letter*

*to Menoeceus*

The argument proposes that death cannot harm us, because while we are alive death does not harm us, and once we are dead there is no one to be harmed. The argument seems straightforward enough, but to make it's claim more clear and explicit we shall borrow Stephen Rosenbaum's illustration of the position, where he states:

“1.) A state of affairs is bad for person P only if P can experience it at

some time.

2.) Therefore, P's being dead is bad for P only if it is a state of affairs that

P can experience at some time.

3.) P can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins before

P's death.

4.) P's being dead is not a state of affairs that begins before P's death.

Therefore:

5.)P's being dead is not bad for P."<sup>4</sup>

Using this as our guide to the Epicurean position, consider some objections to this rather formidable argument.

### Deprivation theory<sup>5</sup>

In his deprivation theory, Thomas Nagel begins by asserting that if death is to be seen as an evil, it must be in what it deprives us of, and not because of any positive features. Death can only be an evil in its taking away life, not in its leading one to a state of non-existence. Assuming that one is not horribly depressed and contemplating suicide, life is generally thought of as a good thing. It is good simply to be alive. Therefore death, being the loss of this good thing, should be considered evil.

But how can death, which is never experienced (premise #1), be bad for the individual? Nagel responds to this objection by asserting that there are evils which can befall a person, even though they are evils one does not experience. In his betrayal example, he cites a situation where a friend or a loved one betrays a certain individual. He has us imagine a situation where a man is defamed and ridiculed behind his back, but never finds out. The man's supposed friends despise him, yet treat him politely to his face. One does not know of this betrayal, one does not experience the betrayal, yet we would still say that some harm has been done. If we accept this line of argument, then we must alter our interpretation of premise one. We must allow for there to be certain legitimate harms to a person which the subject does not directly experience.

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<sup>4</sup>p. 119, Language Metaphysics and death

<sup>5</sup>p. 2-10 Mortal Questions

Nagel continues by confronting the objection that when death comes the subject is no more and thus cannot be harmed. If death has truly taken the individual, then how can we apply harm to a non-existent entity? In response to this claim, Nagel proposes an example of deprivation to a living person, where the old person does not exist, but yet we still want to assign the harm to him. His example is that a very intelligent man receives a brain injury which reduces him to a state analogous to that of a contented infant. The man no longer has the thoughts and desires he used to have, but is quite content with very simple provisions. Even though the large infant before us seems very happy, we would like to consider such an occurrence a harm or evil to the brilliant man who received the injury. The problem is that the contented infant has not been harmed; he is quite happy in his room playing with his toys. The man with the brilliant mind no longer exists as a subject, and yet we still think that he was harmed, that he experienced a misfortune. We want to attach misfortune to the man who existed before the accident, not the oversized baby who stands before us.

If we want to hold to the belief that this was a misfortune for the man, then we must reconstruct our understanding of the temporal relation between the subject of a misfortune and the circumstances that constitute it. If we think back on the man and all his possibilities before the injury, and attach the harm to this man, then we can say that the injury was a misfortune for him. But if we deny this possibility, we must also deny that the man experienced any misfortune -- which, to Nagel, seems an absurd conclusion. Even though the subject may no longer exist, we can still feel justified in placing the harm onto the man who existed before the accident, and pitying him in light of who he could have been.

In response to the problem of placing the misfortune of death on a time line, Nagel tries to dismiss the objection as confused. He says that death does not need to be located within life for it to be an evil. The fact that one's life is over, rather than the past or present conditions, constitutes the misfortune. He continues by saying "Nevertheless, if there is a loss, someone must suffer it, and he must have existence and specific spatial and temporal location even if the loss itself does not."<sup>6</sup> So the person must exist in space and time, but the loss need not.

At the end of his essay, Nagel takes on the problem of our asymmetrical attitudes towards prenatal and posthumous existence. The objection here is that if death and posthumous non-existence are to be seen as an evil, then why do we not see prenatal non-existence in the same light? Why do we see eternal nothingness after life as evil, while infinite nothingness before life is seen as neutral? In response, Nagel states that death represents a loss of life, and this loss of a good thing is evil. Whereas before birth we had nothing to lose, so the time before birth need not be seen as depriving us of anything. Posthumous non-existence deprives us of life, while prenatal non-existence does not.

Having laid forth the bulk of Nagel's theory, I shall take on the Epicurean position and attempt to reject Nagel's proposal. Looking first at Nagel's betrayal analogy, we might notice that for a person to be harmed he or she must experience the harm. In Nagel's betrayal example the betrayed man is not harmed because he does not experience anything bad. IN what sense are we harmed if there is absolutely no recognition of it. Since there is no pain or discomfort, there is nothing to signal any kind of misfortune. It is only that we, as objective observers, step back and view his situation as unfortunate, but until he gains knowledge of the

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<sup>6</sup>p.7 Mortal Questions

betrayal it cannot affect his existence. His experience of life does not include the betrayal because he has no idea about it. Until and unless the action affects the individual in some way that he or she is aware of, I cannot see how we can consider this a harm, when viewed from the perspective of the individual.

Nagel, standing outside the situation can make judgments and evaluate the situation, but the actual person, with no knowledge of the betrayal experiences nothing. In what sense is something a harm that never occurs in my experience of the world. To use a different example, say my mother dies today and I do not find out for a week. Until the news reaches me, her death has no effect upon me, it's as if it hasn't happened yet. I will go about my day unaffected, and if I happen to die before the news reaches me, I would find it difficult to say that her death harmed me. There was no grief, no loss, nothing. Again, we as outsiders with greater knowledge than the individual can see how the loss of ones mother is terrible, and once I found out I would be devastated, but until experienced the loss does not effect me at all.

Now, it may be that the man in the betrayal analogy may have some sort of awareness of his betrayal feeling very strange around his friends, and this disturbing feeling could be bad. And in my example, I might have nightmares about my mother dying, but if there was no sensation, no awareness whatsoever that anything was wrong, then we cannot say that the actual, personal, temporal man was harmed. He was harmed from our third person perspective, but he does not have this perspective and experiences no misfortune. Until the betrayal is discovered and becomes a reality from his perspective, it can have no effect upon him.

Nagel's bright man example appears to present a more difficult problem, but really relies on the same assumptions. The contented idiot has not been harmed, because he has no

experience of any misfortune. He is simply a contented idiot. Maybe if he learned of his misfortune, and it pained him greatly, then we could say he was harmed, but without such a realization I think we must maintain that he experienced no harm. We can observe from the outside that an individual has lost a certain mental capability, but for the person himself, he experienced no harm. The bright man is gone, and as if dead cannot be the subject of any harm. To say he was harmed would be like saying one was harmed by death before one dies, and that is ridiculous.

In addition, the bright man is thought to have been harmed because his new existence as an infant is worse off than his previous state. Yet can we always say that one would be better off living rather than dying? Might we not imagine a situation where death is preferable to life? What if the man had a stroke or developed cancer, resulting in years of pain and anguish and costing his family their life savings? Might we then say that death was a good thing? Can we ever be so sure as to discount these possibilities? According to Nagel's proposal, we can only think of death as an evil if we imagine his continued future to be a positive one. However, we cannot predict this. We can never know the future for certain, so we can never justly judge anyone's death to be good or evil. We can theorize that they might have lived a good life, but we can never know for sure.

I find Nagel's response to the question of when one experiences the harm of death unconvincing. He states that it is more important that it occurred, rather than designating when it occurred. It appears to me that Nagel is sidestepping a serious criticism here. When one is alive, death is obviously not a harm. When one is dead, one is no longer a subject to be harmed. One is either alive or dead and either state refutes any evaluation of death as evil. Nagel wants

to say that death is evil, but does not want to face the contradictions involved in designating when this harm occurs.

In confronting our asymmetrical attitudes towards prenatal and posthumous non-existence, Nagel tries to show how death deprives us of life while birth grants life. This seems sensible, though if he cannot make out his claim that death is a loss for any one at any time, then I have a hard time accepting this argument. If there is no subject to experience the loss, then death is not a loss. If death is not a loss, then there should be no reason to hold asymmetrical attitudes towards birth and death. Once again, Nagel tries to step back from the individual and judge things from the perspective of an objective observer. This move inevitably leads away from the actual experience of the individual which is the primary concern of our investigation.

#### Spatialization Theory<sup>7</sup>

In his essay on the Evil of death, Harry S. Silverstein provides us with a most intriguing response to the Epicurean position. Silverstein proposes that the entire dilemma is caused by what he terms a temporal assumption, which may be rectified when we see our lives in the light of a four dimensional space-time continuum. He proposes that our bias towards three-dimensional space creates our confusion about the evil of death, and when seen properly there is no dilemma at all.

Silverstein begins his resolution with a look at the Epicurean belief in a value-feeling connection, a term which Silverstein abbreviates as the VCF. He says that the Epicureans hold to the belief that only when one experiences an ill can we say some harm has

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<sup>7</sup>P.95-116 The Metaphysics of Death

occurred. If an experience does not elicit some bad feeling it cannot be considered an evil for the individual. (Thus only when there is feeling can there be value for the individual -- VCF) In response to this assertion, Silverstein wants to say that values may be *atemporal*. He rejects Nagel's notion that death can be a loss, but believes that if we see our lives as a "life-whole" along a four dimensional space time continuum, death can be seen as an evil.

Silverstein begins his theory by saying that, in the same way spatially distant events can exist even though they do not exist here, temporal events can exist even though they do not exist now. He supports this assertion by citing from W.V. Quine's "Physical Objects," where Quine puts forth a defense of four-dimensional space-time. He tries to show that we need four dimensional space to properly understand the world. In one example he says, "We say Elsa Lanchester is the Widow of Charles Laughton; but there is no Charles Laughton for her to be the widow of, and there never was any, either, as long as she was his widow."<sup>8</sup> Quine believes that only with four-dimensional space can Elsa be the widow of Charles, because then we can see his existence and her widowhood simultaneously.

Silverstein believes that the adoption of four dimensional space-time is the key to solving the Epicurean dilemma. By accepting a four-dimensional space-time perspective, posthumous events can exist for us and harm us. One's death can coexist with one's life when viewed from a timeless perspective, so that one's death becomes a possible object of one's suffering. Once we can see death as causing harm or suffering, then we can see death as an evil. Silverstein praises his position as a sort of champion of common sense. He believes that this four dimensional space-time is "a central presupposition of common sense itself." Only with

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<sup>8</sup> p.101 The Metaphysics of Death



this attitude towards time can Elsa be Charles's widow, even when Charles is dead. Only by accepting four-dimensional space-time can death harm us, even when we are dead.

In the conclusion Silverstein states: "In short, it is the four-dimensional ability to understand life in duration terms, to view one's life as a temporal whole and to make evaluative comparisons between it and alternative possible life-wholes, which ultimately accounts for the fact that statements of the form "A's death is an evil for A" are commonly regarded as not merely intelligible, but true."

In response to Silverstein we should first notice how his four dimensional space-time moves us to an atemporal perspective of life. We are removed from the actual individual, much in the same way that Nagel's deprivation removes us. We can see how his four-dimensional time is a useful concept, but I don't believe it can discount the VCF. In order for one to be harmed by an event, one must experience it. One must actually experience some sort of harm or misfortune. Here we find ourselves struggling with the same confusion which caught Nagel. We are judging the persons experience from above, which is fine, but it is not the experience of the individual. Seeing death from this four-dimensional perspective might be very illuminating for the being taking on the perspective, but the individual who is dead can no longer take any perspective. Silverstein succumbs to this almost irresistible urge to confuse our personal temporal experience of life with an abstract, atemporal perspective of life. Observing life is not the same as experiencing life. We may be able to fairly judge that the individual was harmed, but persons actual experience of death entails no harm. I believe the Epicureans can consistently hold to their premise that for an individual to be harmed he must experience the misfortune, even though we can see the event for the tragedy that it is.

### Possible Worlds<sup>9</sup>

In his essay "Puzzles about the Evil of Death," Fred Feldman expands upon Silverstein's idea of Life-wholes by arguing for a possible worlds interpretation of the evil of death. Assuming that there are possible worlds, which he describes as various ways that the world could have been, Feldman creates a hedonistic system for evaluating and comparing these different worlds. By comparing the world in which one died to another where one did not die, he hopes to show how the actualization of the former world can be seen as a harm. In the end, Feldman hopes to show how the idea that one's death can be an evil is not paradoxical, but quite rational and consistent.

Feldman begins his work by introducing the applicability of possible worlds to philosophical reflection. He proposes the example of a certain man named Myron who smokes. He then asks us to imagine a world in which everything else were the same except Myron did not smoke. Feldman wants to say that the actual Myron does not need to exist in two different worlds. We merely need to consider the proposition of a world that *might have been* where Myron did not smoke.

Having established that, Feldman then searches for a mode of comparison between possible worlds. In accordance with the Epicurean hedonism, Feldman decides to use a hedonistic system of evaluation. The value of a world for a person shall be determined by the amount of pleasure experienced in that world -- minus the degree of pain experienced. Now, while Feldman himself does not believe this simplistic model adequately evaluates human life,

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<sup>9</sup>p. 143-156 Confrontations with the Reaper

he wants to use it because it accords closely with the Epicurean position. Feldman believes that if he can prove his point using a hedonistic model of evaluation, any other standard of evaluation could only make his position easier. Feldman accepts the assumptions that someone can be harmed only as long as he or she exists, and at death one ceases to exist. Even with these assumptions and a hedonistic axiology, Feldman believes he can prove his point.

In the second part of his essay, Feldman investigates what makes a thing bad for someone. Applying his hedonistic axiology, Feldman proposes that any state of affairs which causes pain or reduces pleasure can be considered harmful to the individual. He offers an example of a woman named Dolores, who decides to move to Bolivia. Calling this state of affairs  $b$ , Feldman contrasts this with the nearest possible world  $-b$ , where Dolores does not go to Bolivia. In the world  $b$ , Dolores goes to Bolivia and the rest of her life is a nightmare; all her pleasures and pains for her whole life add up to a mere 100 points. Whereas, in world  $-b$ , Dolores has a great time and ends her life with a impressive 1,000 pleasure points. In this example, Feldman hopes to show how moving to Bolivia can be seen as a harm because it cost Dolores 900 points, that she could have had if she had not moved to Bolivia.

Now, to apply this process to death, Feldman proposes a situation where in one world he dies en route to Europe, ending his life with only 500 pleasure points. In another world, where Feldman does not go to Europe and die, he lives on to enjoy an extra 600 pleasure points, ending his life with 1,100. Here Feldman hopes to say that his death was a great misfortune to him since it cost him 600 pleasure points, which would have been actualized in the nearest possible world. Feldman points out that he is not saying death is always bad for the deceased, only that it can be under certain circumstances.

Having proposed his theory, Feldman now takes on the typical Epicurean criticisms. The first attack is as follows: if a person no longer exists, how can he be harmed? Feldman responds by claiming that "a state of affairs can be bad for a person whether it occurs before he exists, while he exists, or after he exists. The only requirement is that his welfare level at the nearest world where it occurs is lower than his welfare level at the nearest world where it does not occur." Feldman maintains that in our comparison of possible worlds, any state of affairs which diminished our welfare quotient is harmful. Therefore, the person's current state becomes irrelevant since we are evaluating the entire life and not the present situation itself.

Another criticism Feldman takes on is that of dates. When exactly does this misfortune occur? Before death? After death? In response to this attack, Feldman maintains that the harm incurred by death and all other unfortunate experiences happen eternally. One possible world is always worse than the other. Our comparison is timeless, since we are viewing the lives as abstract wholes. An unfortunate state of affairs will always be unfortunate in any possible world. Death does not harm the individual at any time, but is eternally an unfortunate state of affairs for that possible world in comparison with other worlds where the avoidance of death would have led to a more pleasurable existence.

The final criticism Feldman takes on is the prenatal vs. posthumous dilemma. Feldman believes that if we hold the birth date constant and push back the person's death, the individual shall have more life and presumably more pleasure. If we hold the death date constant and move back the person's birth, then we can see them also having more life and more pleasure. The confusion sets in because people always hold the birth date constant when pushing death back, but do not always hold the death date constant. In this case, if I live fifty

years being born in 1975 or 1945 it shouldn't matter, for I still live the same amount of life. However, if moving my birth date back thirty years would elongate my life by thirty years, having me die at eighty instead of fifty, then surely this would be good. Feldman hopes to show that prenatal and posthumous existence are symmetrical and all that matters is how long we are alive and how much pleasure we experience.

Taking the Epicurean position again, it should be obvious that Feldman's whole theory rests on the same kind of atemporal evaluation that Silverstein's does. Feldman wants to step back out of time to evaluate our lives as a whole. But in what sense does this evaluation relate to me when I am dead? It seems that Feldman, who is alive, can judge my life as good or bad because of death. But the actual death itself could not have been bad for me, the actual temporal individual, because I am no longer there to be harmed. Feldman, tries to judge one's life as bad, and in his objective judgment somehow move back to the individual actually being harmed. The individual can never see his completed life-whole, because once it is complete he is no more. In the comparison of possible worlds, who is doing the comparing but Feldman himself? He stands back in his abstract perspective of life and judges the life of the deceased as good or bad, but the deceased cannot have this perspective. His personal experience of life is no more. He cannot feel; he cannot experience; he cannot be harmed.

### Annihilation<sup>10</sup>

Steven Luper-Foy takes a different angle on the Epicurean dilemma by proposing a moral and pragmatic argument for the acceptance of death as an evil. Luper-Foy encapsulates

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<sup>10</sup>p.270-290 The Metaphysics of Death

his thesis nicely by saying "Those of us who are uncomfortable or even bitter about dying are appalled by the cheerful indifference of people who are capable of agreeing with Epicurus's absurd claim that death is nothing to us. What would people have to be like to really think that their deaths are nothing to them? The answer, as we shall see, is that to the extent that such people are understandable at all, they are rather cold-hearted and passionless." He continues by saying, "The Epicureans think that death is nothing to them only because they think that life is nothing to them." Luper-Foy means to show how the acceptance of the Epicurean position would be an intolerable development, leading to the destruction of society as we know it. His argument proposes that the acceptance of the Epicurean position would lead to so many contradictions and undesirable circumstances that by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, he concludes that death must be an evil.

In his essay Luper-Foy goes about proposing contradictions and limitations to the Epicurean view. For our purposes we shall only concern ourselves with his criticisms, for we shall maintain a strong unmitigated stance on the Epicurean position. His first attack comes against the Epicurean indifference. Luper-Foy states that if the Epicurean is truly indifferent to death, then under no circumstances could he prefer death to anything or anything to death. But this seems absurd to Luper-Foy. If you had the choice of death or eternal torment, you would certainly choose death. Yet, Luper-Foy believes the staunch Epicurean could make no such choice because he must maintain his indifference towards death. On the other side, the Epicurean cannot prefer to continue living his good life, because to do so would show a preference for life and would designate death as a sort of misfortune. So the true Epicurean, leading a full and pleasurable life, could not say that he did not want to die because to do so

would show a preference. He would have to remain continually ambivalent to his future, since to prefer to live would contradict his theory.

Luper-Foy continues by proposing that a society of Epicureans could not condemn murder, because death is not a harm for the victim. The murderer has not harmed the victim at all, so the only harm would be to society. Yet to say that to murder some one is not to harm him seems rather strange, and morally unappealing to Luper-Foy. However, the Epicurean in maintaining that death is nothing to us, must hold his ground and admit that murder does not harm the individual. Should we accept a theory that could allow such a conclusion?

Luper-Foy then attacks the Epicurean motivation. He says, "Since the Epicureans never have any reason to avoid dying, it may appear that they have no reason to do anything." If the Epicurean is in each moment indifferent to whether he lives or dies, how can he engage the world and live passionately? Luper-Foy writes "Since the Epicureans cannot allow themselves any motivation to live, they must ensure that they never think that it would be good to live." This is so because thinking of life as good would show a preference for living over dying.

The picture that Luper-Foy paints for us is terribly bleak. According to his analysis, the Epicurean life must be dark and languid. There is no caring, no motivation, no lust for life. Why would we ever want to accept a theory which leads to such an end? If Luper-Foy is right, we have good reason to search for a new theory to replace the Epicurean view that death is nothing to us.

But must we accept Luper-Foy's propositions about the Epicurean attitude towards life? Let us consider some of Epicurus's own thoughts on these matters, and attempt to divine how he might have responded to Luper-Foy's criticisms. Epicurus said:

“The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offense to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as men choose food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is the longest. And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirableness of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born.”

Epicurus also said:

Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect.

Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation.”

From these quotes it appears that Epicurus was not calling for a kind of dull, lifeless existence, but a freedom from fear and worry. The assertion that death is nothing serves only to alleviate our irrational fears of death. It is not that we cannot prefer to be alive because we see death as nothing, but only that we recognize that our deaths will not harm us. The Epicurean claim seems clear enough, yet is it consistent? Can we see death as nothing, and prefer life over death?



Rosenbaum defends the Epicurean position by saying, "The Epicurean view that one's death is not bad for one, that it is not an evil, does not logically entail that one's death lacks other features. For example, it does not entail that one's death cannot occur prematurely or that one does not prefer that one not be dead." Rosenbaum believes that the statement that death is nothing to us is compatible with preferring living to being dead. He continues by saying "Epicurean hedonists would prefer living to not living on the ground that one can have pleasure, the highest good, both of the active and passive sort, while one is alive, but that one is insentient and not able to experience any pleasure in death." Luper-Foy does not believe that one can have a preference for life and still remain absolutely indifferent to death. But what grounds does he have for this claim? There is no logical necessity at work here. It seems that Luper-Foy's personal feelings have gotten the best of his logic. Luper-Foy presents a passionate defense of the Anti-Epicureans, but his sentiments turn out to have little substance.

### Confusing Perspectives

By now it should be abundantly clear that the major confusion of the anti-Epicureans lies in their adherence to an objective view of life and death. All of these theories are very scholarly, well constructed criticisms of the Epicurean position. Yet, in my readings of these various attacks on Epicurus, I discovered that they all make the same fundamental mistake of stepping back to view the individual's life. They know that they, as objective observers, can see how death is a harm, and they try to create a link to the actual individual being harmed. They imagine themselves watching life go on after

they are dead, they envision life without them and see clearly that death is an evil.

However, this is precisely the same mistake which leads to so many of our fears about death. We see ourselves helplessly watching life go on without us. Now while this may be an interesting intellectual exercise, it is never a real experience. The key to dispelling our fears about death is to understand that death is the final possibility, beyond which we can have no experience.

When we see the problem clearly, our confusion disappears. Of course, death is a tragedy, and most of us would prefer living to dying. Death, as viewed by any observer, is most certainly a great misfortune. However, for the individual who actually dies, death is nothing. One is either alive, and thus not harmed by death, or dead, and therefore incapable of being harmed by anything. The key lies in the fact that the individual who dies ceases to be an entity which can experience. Nothing can happen to the person because they no longer exist. We can reflect on their memory, but the memory is not the person. The anti-Epicureans become confused when they judge death to be an evil from a third person perspective. They stand back and see the person's life laid out before them, and from that perspective they can claim that death is a harm, and so it is. However, they forget that this perspective is impossible for the individual who is dead. For him there are no more perspectives, no more experiences. The entire dilemma rests on this fundamental confusion of abstract and personal perspectives on death. By concentrating on the individual's actual experience, we can avoid many problems, and maybe see through some of our anxieties about death.

Part IV. A Re-... "There was no deceiving himself: something terrible, new and more important than anything before in his life, was taking place within him, of which he alone was aware.... Suddenly he felt the old, familiar loathsome taste in his mouth. His heart sank and he felt dazed.... "Yes, life was there and now it is going, going and I cannot stop it." A chill came over him, his breathing ceased, and he felt only the throbbing of his heart.

When "When I am not, what will there be? There will be nothing. Then, where shall I be when I am no more? Can this be dying? No, I don't want to!" He jumped up and tried to light a candle, felt for it with trembling hands, dropped the candle and candlestick on the floor, and fell back on his pillow.

That Caius -- man in the abstract -- was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others.... Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyitch, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die, that would be too terrible...."

-Leo Tolstoy

#### Part IV A Reconsideration of the Fear of Death

If it is clear now that death is truly nothing to us, then why do so many of us, like Ivan Ilyitch, have a very real fear of death? If death is not a harm to us, then it must be irrational to fear death, for why would we fear that which cannot hurt us. This being true, why do we cling to our irrational fears of death? As I hunted at earlier, the answer here lies in the same confusion of perspective that led the anti-Epicurean arguments astray.

When we, as humans, try to view our existence from both an actual perspective and an abstract one, we engender a panicked sort of confusion construed as anxiety about death. When we, like Ivan, realize that the we, like Caius, must die -- we get very anxious. Our vision of ourselves as very real and very alive collides with our perception of ourselves as ephemeral beings existing for a short span of time. The collision of these perspectives creates an unbearable anxiety which culminates in a view of the absurdity of death. As Ivan illustrates so wonderfully, the individual cannot comprehend that he who is so vital and alive could possibly be extinguished forever.

In his book Mortal Questions, Thomas Nagel points out how these two perspectives are also responsible for creating the absurdity in life. He says, "We see ourselves from the outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: Not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the person whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded."

It is this overlapping of perspectives which engenders people's fear of death. If we were restricted to either single perspective, he could not have such fears. It is only because man, being the unique animal he is, can take on both of these points of view at the same time that he can fear death as passionately as he does. This irrational fear of death emanates from the conjoining of these perspectives. If Ivan could see this he might be relieved of some of the weighty fear of death. When we look at our lives as an incomplete whole we can fear that death shall cut short our time here on earth. However, if we hold to the moment by moment experience of death, we realize that can not harm us. Death is not a harmful experience but simply the end of all experience

#### Reexamining the Five Fears of Death

Now, we return to the five fears of death outlined at the onset of this essay. Holding to the maxim that death is nothing to us, we shall look at how our mistaken perceptions create these irrational fears.

When people fears death as the deprivation of all the goods in life, they is mistakenly imagining that they will be around to experience the loss. The confused individual projects him or herself into the future after they are dead, where they will somehow be without the good in life. However, these thoughts are obviously fallacious. One does not go on after death and cannot feel any loss at all. The individual does not lose anything; the person simply ceases to be.

The fear of leaving the people and things we love behind stems from the same sort of misunderstanding. The individual imagines the pain of watching loved ones live

on without them. We disappear and can no longer aid those they have left behind.

Again, the confusion lies in that we will not be around to observe the continued lives of our loved ones; we will no longer exist to lament their powerless situation.

The fear of meaninglessness takes hold when we step back from life and see it in a larger frame. We feel that because we shall die, nothing we do in life matters. But this does not follow. Life is either meaningful or not. Meaning in life is not dependent on it lasting a long time. If life is absurd and meaningless at seventy years, imagine how absurd and meaningless it would be at one million, much less if it went on eternally. The confused person is looking for meaning in life outside of life, but one can only find such meaning within life.

In fearing that our lives will be unfairly judged after our deaths, we mistakenly believe that we will feel the shame and the anguish of being defamed. We imagine ourselves up above, watching as others ridicule our character, powerless to intervene. We imagine how this position would frustrate us, yet again there is no us to be frustrated.

The fear of the unknown is a basic human fear. We all tense up when we walk into a dark room we have never entered before. Not knowing where one is going is very unnerving, but where are we going after death, when we are no more? If we assume that death actually is the end, then the subject is gone. There is no unknown to face. There is nothing after death. If one believes in an afterlife, then, if you are honest with yourself, you probably know where you are going, and have good reason to worry or not.

“The certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity - and now you strange apothecary souls have turned it into an ill tasting drop of poison that makes the whole of life repulsive.”<sup>11</sup>

-Fredrich Nietzsche

## Part V Conclusions

Throughout this investigation we have seen how our views on death are easily confused. When viewed rightly, it is clear that death is nothing to the individual who is dead. In this same vein, we have also shown how many of our fears about death are confused and irrational. We have asserted and defended the Epicurean position against a variety of attacks. In our inquiry, we saw not only that the Epicureans were right, but more importantly why they were right. The anti-Epicurean claims all cling to the same misconception of reality, they want to judge death from the outside, but this is not the Epicurean position. We all can see, as outsiders, how death is evil, but the significance of the Epicurean claim is that death cannot harm the individual. The dead do not experience, and thus cannot be harmed.

Our analysis began in an ominous manner, exploring man's fear of death. Now, in the conclusion, we have emerged from our investigation, hopefully freed from some of our anxieties about death. To conclude, I would like to reflect upon the importance of humor in dealing with death. Throughout this investigation we have been

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<sup>11</sup>p. 165 Basic writings of Nietzsche

urged towards a kind of acceptance or at least a reconciliation with death. With our new awareness of death we may be more inclined to accept our mortality, but this should not result in some listless resignation. We should endeavor to live as fully as possible leaving death for its proper time and place. For my part, humor has been the key in facing death without flinching or turning away. Humor lies somewhere between absolute acceptance and denial. We recognize the severity of death, but add a comic twist which makes it bearable and even laughable. So we shall end this essay with some remarks about death by Woody Allen.

“There’s an old Joke. Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of ‘em says: “Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.” The other one says, “Yeah, I know, and such small portions.” Well, that’s how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it’s all over much too quickly.”

“Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you’re dressed for it.”



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This Thesis was proofread by Professor Pemberton and Thomas Jason Shaffer.

“On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid in the production of this paper.”

- *William D. Hoase*