IS DEATH A BAD THING?

Mikel Burley

After examining arguments for and against the view that death is a bad thing, Mikel Burley tentatively endorses the Epicurean claim that death cannot rationally be judged bad. For moral reasons, however, this conclusion is acceptable only with regard to one's own death.

Two arguments concerning death

Is death a bad thing for the one who dies? Our natural response is surely to say that it is indeed a bad thing. What could be worse? Torture, or some other kind of severe and prolonged pain perhaps; but death, however it comes about, is generally placed pretty high up the list of bad happenings. Many philosophers have accepted this view. Aristotle, for example, declared that 'death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a). Others, meanwhile, have rejected it, perhaps most famously Epicurus, who agreed with Aristotle's point that nothing is any longer either good or bad for the dead, but, as we shall see shortly, drew from this a very different conclusion.

What Aristotle seems to be proposing is that death is terrible because it permanently prevents our enjoying goods or suffering evils. Presumably the crucial factor here is the privation of goods, since being prevented from suffering evils is not obviously to be regretted. My reading of the Aristotelian argument can be elaborated as follows:

1. Having experiences is, in itself, a good thing, even though some of them are bad.
2. Being alive is a necessary condition for having experiences.
3. Therefore it is good to be alive.
4. Death is the cessation of life.
5. Therefore death is a bad thing.

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This argument, whether or not it can rightly be attributed to Aristotle, accords roughly with our everyday intuitions on the (negative) value of death. If pressed, most of us would probably admit that there are conceivable circumstances in which the bad things in a person's life come to outweigh the good ones and that this imbalance can become so severe that the life of that person ceases to be worth living. But such circumstances are exceptional, and hence for most people, most of the time, it is better to be alive than not.

One way of understanding Epicurus's challenge to this proposal is to ask: *When* is death a bad thing for the person who dies? Aristotle would have trouble claiming that it is bad once the person is dead, for he has already acknowledged that nothing is good or bad for the dead. The claim must, therefore, be that death is bad for the person who is *going to die* but is at present still alive (this being a situation that we are all in). What Epicurus asserts is that the only genuine bad things are those which have a presently-encountered hedonically-deleterious effect, or (in simpler terms) are unpleasant for us *now*. This criterion of badness rules out death's qualifying as a bad thing, for when a person is alive, death is not present, and when the person is dead, she does not experience any unpleasantness precisely because she no longer exists (see Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus*, 125).

Whereas my reading of Aristotle's argument chimes harmoniously with our intuitions (or prejudices) on the subject, the Epicurean position is likely to appear dubious. In order to identify what might be found objectionable in it, let us present the argument point by point:

1. Goodness consists in pleasantness and badness in unpleasantness (or pain).
2. Being alive is a necessary condition for anything's being experienced (as pleasant, unpleasant, or anything else), and hence also for anything's being good or bad for us.

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3. Death extinguishes us, and thus also extinguishes the possibility of anything's being good or bad for us.
4. Therefore death (being dead, or not existing) is not a bad thing for the one who has died.
5. And neither is it a bad thing for the one who is going to die, since a thing that is not present cannot be a source of pain (or of any feeling at all).

A further step in Epicurus's reasoning comes when he suggests that, because death is not a bad thing, it is irrational to fear it and we do ourselves unnecessary harm by continuing to fear and worry about it. I shall return briefly to this psychotherapeutic element in Epicureanism later, but for now I want to focus on the axiological (value-related) claim that death is not a bad thing.

The assumption of annihilation

It bears emphasising that the Aristotelian and Epicurean arguments outlined in the previous section share the assumption that death entails personal annihilation. The reason why 'nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead' is that the dead are thought no longer to exist. In view of the prevalence of materialist annihilationism in much current philosophy and science, this assumption may not strike a modern audience as especially controversial. It remains, however, a metaphysical assertion rather than an empirical certainty, and many intelligent philosophers and religious thinkers have denied it. It is difficult to see how anything even approximating certainty or consensus could be arrived at on such a spiritually troublesome issue, and I do not intend to venture into the arguments here. For our present purposes, we must be content to treat the Aristotelian and Epicurean positions as conditional upon the assumption that death entails annihilation even though the possibility remains that this assumption is false.

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The hedonic criterion of value

The Epicurean starting-point is that the value of a thing depends upon the extent to which it gives us pleasure or pain. The more pleasant an experience, the more the object of that experience may legitimately be characterised as good, and the more painful, the more the object may be characterised as bad. This is generally known as a hedonic criterion of value, after the Greek term *hedoné*, meaning 'joy, pleasure, delight'. One way of attacking the Epicurean view of death is to place in question the hedonic criterion.

The main problem with hedonism is that it seems to leave us without any way of distinguishing between two types of judgement that we ordinarily do wish to distinguish between. One of these is the sort of subjective judgement I make when I assert that I prefer pears to apples. If asked, I might come up with one or two fairly unexciting reasons for having this preference, but neither these reasons nor the preference itself amount to an argument as to why anyone else should prefer pears. My own personal judgement on the matter carries no implications for how anyone else should judge it.

The second type of judgement concerns a more objective evaluation, as, for example, when I assert that reading philosophy is better than watching TV soap operas. When I make such an assertion, I am not saying merely that I *prefer* reading philosophy to watching soaps and that, if your preference is the other way around, then that is just as valid as mine. Rather, I am claiming that reading philosophy is, objectively, better than watching soap operas, independently of what my or anyone else's preference on the matter might be. Indeed, it would not invalidate the claim if I myself happened to prefer watching soap operas to reading philosophy, since this would show merely that my own preference was out of line with the standard of value that I was appealing to. In the case of an objective value judgement, what is more important than whether the preferences of the judgement's proponent coincide with the judgement itself is whether convincing reasons can be given as to why the judgement is valid.

The difference, then, between a subjective and an objec-

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tive judgement is that, whereas the former may be based exclusively upon personal taste, the latter claims universality. What the hedonic value-criterion, endorsed by Epicurus, seems to require, however, is that all judgements be reduced to the subjective kind. According to hedonism, at least in its crude form, all the soap-loving hedonist need do to refute the assertion that reading philosophy is better than watching soaps, is to affirm that she enjoys doing the latter more than the former. To the non-hedonist, this response smells fishy, for it begs the question whether a higher criterion of goodness exists beyond personal pleasure.

Hedonism need not be this crude, however. It can be made sufficiently pliable to accommodate different levels of judgement by merely admitting that pleasures may be distinguished into 'higher' and 'lower' varieties. Once admitted, this distinction enables even the hedonist to argue that reading philosophy is better than watching soap operas, on the grounds that the form of pleasure derived therefrom is more comprehensively satisfying.

Notwithstanding the modern-day self-gratificatory associations of the term 'Epicurean', Epicurus himself advocated the refinement of our aesthetic sensibility as opposed to its over-indulgence. The wise person, he says, desires not the largest portion of food, but the most pleasant (*loc.cit.*, 126). It can, therefore, reasonably be assumed that the Epicurean version of hedonism is pliable in the way described above. And thus it cannot be rejected for precluding an important distinction between different orders of judgement.

The anticipation of death is terrible

Even if we are willing to grant to Epicurus the legitimacy of the hedonic criterion of value, we may remain reluctant to accept that death is not a bad thing. It is unclear, however, from what basis we could argue this point, for the Epicurean view, apparently shared by Aristotle, that death is no bad thing for the one who is now dead seems unimpeachable. In view of this, several opponents of Epicurus have stressed that, despite its valuelessness for the dead themselves, death remains bad for

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the living precisely because the prospect of being annihilated is inherently terrifying. Plutarch, for example, asserts that 'The face of death that all men fear as terrifying and grim and dark is that of insentience, oblivion, and ignorance' (quoted in Charles Segal, *Lucretius on Death and Anxiety*, p. 14). When this is borne in mind, Plutarch contends, Epicurus's assurance that death entails annihilation, far from consoling those who fear it, serves only to reinforce their terror. More recently Philip Larkin makes the same point, though more tersely than Plutarch, when, in his poem *Aubade*, he complains of 'specious stuff that says *No rational being / Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing / That this is what we fear [...] / The anaesthetic from which none come round.'

The problem with this sort of argument is that it isn't really an argument at all; it is merely an assertion of a psychological predicament. It may well be the case that someone, whether me, Plutarch, Larkin or anyone else, finds the thought of his own annihilation distressing. Indeed, this may for many people be the most distressing of all thoughts, and thus may be something we persistently avoid thinking about (as the likes of Pascal and Heidegger have emphasised). But the fact that many people are terrified by a certain thought is not in itself good evidence that the object of the thought in question deserves to be feared. The fear could very easily have arisen as the result of a common confusion. And this is precisely the Epicurean claim with regard to the fear of death. When we examine the issue clearly and dispassionately we see that, as Epicurus puts it, 'that which gives no trouble when it comes, is but an empty pain in anticipation' (125). Those who fear this 'empty pain' have, as Epicurus's most famous advocate, Lucretius, observes, 'contaminated' the thought of themselves-as-dead with their own present sensation (see *De Rerum Natura*, book 3).

It remains an open question whether, having understood that one's own emotional response to the thought of annihilation is the product of confusion, one is then able to transform that response by means of a cognitive adjustment. Such a transformation was certainly desired by Epicurus, and was

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central to his therapeutic enterprise. He held that the fear of death was an unnecessary burden, assuagable by pursuing the right sort of contemplation. Whether or not this remedial endeavour can be successful, however, the substantive claim stands firm, namely that, if one accepts both the annihilationist prognosis (that death entails oblivion) and the 'pliable' version of hedonism outlined earlier, then the conclusion that death is not a bad thing seems unavoidable.

Worrying moral implications

A further objection to the Epicurean denial of death's malignity comes from those who regard its implications as morally unacceptable. The moral problem arises in the following way. If we believe in our own case that death is not a bad thing because we will not be around to endure it, then we are left with no reason for regarding *anyone's* death as a bad thing for the individual concerned. And if we admit that death is not a bad thing for the person concerned, then we seem to have eliminated the primary reason for caring whether anyone lives or dies.

The problem can be illustrated as follows. Imagine a scenario in which an innocent person is murdered by an assailant. The murder happens to be a messy and bloody one and causes enormous pain to the victim. This pain gives the Epicurean grounds for condemning the murder, since the hedonic criterion places a negative value on such an experience. But now let us imagine a cleaner murder, in which the victim is injected with a lethal drug while asleep. No unpleasant sensations are felt. Surely we would not want to forgo our judgement that a wrong has been committed, and yet the Epicurean would struggle to explain why killing someone painlessly is a bad thing. Of course, there may be consequences for other people: the victim's family and friends are likely to suffer grief and anger, and if the victim had been an important member of the community her death may have significant social repercussions. All of these consequences, the Epicurean would agree, are deleterious effects of the murder. But in most cases we would want to say that these are merely secondary wrongs

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that the murderer has caused; the primary wrong is that the victim was killed, and this is a wrong because being killed is in general a bad thing *for the one who dies*. If we take away this reason for condemning the murder, we fundamentally undermine the sanction against killing.

To sharpen the point we might imagine that the victim, painlessly murdered in her sleep, was a hermit with no family, friends or social connections. No-one apart from the murderer knows that the hermit existed and no-one will ever find out about her murder. The murderer himself feels no anxiety or remorse and forgets the murder soon afterwards. Now the Epicurean has no reason whatsoever for condemning the murder. In principle, if there were some way of exterminating the whole human species, or the earth's ecosphere, in a perfectly painless manner, the Epicurean could hardly object. The contemporary American philosopher Palle Yourgrau makes a similar point with regard to the Nazi holocaust. '[I]f taken seriously,' says Yourgrau, the view that a person's death can be a bad thing only for others who are still alive and not for the person herself 'would make a mockery of the crimes committed at Auschwitz. [...] Is it not enough [...] that millions of innocents died at death camps like Auschwitz? Must we add to their fate by claiming [...] that their deaths were not after all misfortunes for them, but at most for *us*, the *living*?' ('Can the Dead Really Be Buried?', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 24, p. 55).

Our natural intuition is undoubtedly to say that it is upon the victims, and not ourselves, that the harm has been perpetrated. That is why we call them 'victims'. And surely we would still call them victims even if all of those killed by the Nazi regime were murdered painlessly in their sleep. But in acknowledging this, what have we really said? We have made a psychological observation about natural human attitudes, about how we regard the victims of murder. We have not made a truth claim about whether death really is a bad thing for the dead, and hence the Epicurean view has not been refuted. What *has* been shown, however, is that the Epicurean viewpoint cannot consistently be applied to the deaths of others in

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the way that it can to that of ourselves without causing outrage to our moral predilections.

Conclusion

Aristotle's argument seems uncharacteristically confused. His conclusion, that death is terrible, not only does not follow from the premise that nothing is good or bad for the dead, but is contradicted by it. And if Aristotle did not intend the argument to be understood in this way, he does not make it clear how else we are to understand it. The Epicurean argument, on the other hand, is both irritating and seductive. It jars against our intuitions while challenging us to find any fault in its logic. Although only a small selection of the possible arguments against the Epicurean view of death have been discussed here, I think enough has been said to indicate how difficult the task of finding such a fault is. The sort of issue that Yourgrau raises, while not refuting the Epicurean view, points up what it is we find so disturbing about that view. If the Epicurean argument remains persuasive, however (which, I think, it does), we are faced with the further disturbing fact that, at least in the case of others' deaths, we seem incapable of bringing our rational arguments into line with our moral intuitions.

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