



Determined to Die

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The object of this paper is to demonstrate that a rational fear of death is unsupportable and, in all likelihood, counterproductive to the general pursuit of a 'good' life. To this end I examine three principal arguments for the alleged badness of death advanced by David Benatar, arguments which form much of the foundation for a rational fear of death. For Benatar, the 'badness' of death is held to stem from its attendant suffering, deprivation of future potential 'goods,' and annihilation of one principal 'good'-one's biographical self. In response to the first assertion, I present a modified epicurean view, holding suffering to be more appropriately associated with the phenomenon of life than death. To the second, I present the inevitability of death as nihilating all future possibilities, undermining claims of genuine deprivation. Finally, I examine the asserted 'badness' of the annihilation of one's self, arguing that such an evaluation ultimately rests on a modified version of the deprivation account, an argument which itself is nullified by the very phenomenon of annihilation. If the asserted 'badness' of death may thus be rejected, there seems little reason to consciously fear death, though it may still arouse an instinctive revulsion among those it has yet to afflict.

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Introduction

Is death something to be feared? To many, the question may appear ridiculous, given the overwhelmingly affirmative answer that so many are wont to give in response.

To most if not all of humanity, death looms monolithic on the horizon, a hideous cyclopean obelisk to which all are inexorably drawn, against our will and judgment, for an ultimate and futile sacrifice to existence. We are all finite, and condemned to a constant awareness of our limited time and resources within existence. Given this, a reflexive revulsion at the idea of annihilation seems hardly surprising; an instinctive fear of death is to be expected among the members of any species which manages to survive for some period of time. It may even be argued that the question which opens this paper is rendered utterly meaningless if death is something which it is biologically impossible not to fear. It is not my intention, however, to explore this question of instinct much further, as doing so would ultimately prove somewhat akin to debating the philosophical merits of arachnophobia or other “prerational”¹ behaviours. There seems to be some significant difference between agoraphobia, for example, and being perturbed to find oneself in the middle of a wide-open field during an electric storm. The question of whether, upon conscious reflection, one should evaluate annihilation as an evil appears to be distinct from our instinctive revulsion in the face of death, and provides far more fertile ground for inquiry. The object of this paper is quite simple; to demonstrate that a rational fear of death-writ-large is both unfounded and, in all likelihood, counterproductive to the general business of living a ‘good’ life. Far from re-affirming our primal fears, such an inquiry may even provide some solace to a species condemned to an awareness of its perpetual march towards oblivion.

¹ David Benatar, “Death” in *The Human Predicament*, ed. David Benatar, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105.

The Fear of Death

David Benatar sums up the rationalized fear of death in *The Human Predicament* (2017), presenting three highly compelling and largely independent avenues for evaluating death as 'bad.' The first, and perhaps most intuitive, rests on our fear of the suffering inflicted by death, both for the deceased during the process of dying and for those friends and relatives who survive them. It is undeniable that dying is rarely a physically painless process, often putting the individual through a litany of agonies and indignities. The second, termed the "deprivation account"², holds death to be bad as it closes off all future possibilities—both good and bad—for the deceased, denying them by default an almost infinite quantity of the 'goods' of existence, regardless of the net misery which such an existence might entail. If this deprivation of future existence, with its attendant potential pleasures, is viewed as 'bad' for the deceased, then death may indeed be seen to do significant harm to the dead and dying. Finally, death may be seen to be 'bad' in and of itself, as it utterly destroys the biographical self, annihilating the psychological continuity which we perceive as ourselves in a way which is utterly arbitrary and irreversible. If annihilation itself constitutes this sort of bad-in-itself, a rationalized fear in the face of death would seem an inevitable conclusion.

While Benatar's work focuses primarily on the relation of death to the deceased, much of his groundwork is equally applicable to those as yet unafflicted. Death may cause both physical and mental suffering directly for those who survive the deceased. For example, the death of a parent may cause the surviving children to suffer both

² Benatar., 101.

hunger and grief. Similarly, death may be seen to deny the deceased's friends and relatives a host of potential benefits, ranging from affection to labour, in much the same way as it deprives the individual of possible future goods. The very annihilation of an individual may be viewed as bad in and of itself, as it destroys the social entity which was the deceased, excising them from our collective reality and leaving nothing in their place³. Even the memories of the deceased, which may endure in the thoughts of their surviving fellows, may be tainted by the sheer shock of annihilation, the affective tragedy of losing a fellow self. The deaths of others serve as a constant and brutish reminder of our own impending demise, with all of its apparent horrors. The assertion that death is a great evil thus appears relatively sound; death causes suffering, deprivation, and destruction for both the individual deceased and their surviving compatriots, all of which can uncontroversially be viewed as bad for all involved.

Insufferable Epicurus

There are, however, several dissenting views which must be taken into account before a final verdict on the value of death can be reached. The first, famously articulated by Epicurus, pertains mainly to the suffering associated with death. For the Epicurean, death is nothing to be feared by the living, as "...when we exist death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist"⁴. The suffering attendant to death lies entirely within one's time alive, and the very possibility of suffering is nihilated by one's demise. Even the mental anguish of contemplating one's finiteness is

³ Benatar., 109.

⁴ Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus." In *Philosophy, a Bus Ride, and Dumb Luck*, ed A. Mele, (2007), 14.

utterly pointless, as one's capacity to contemplate death is entirely dependent on one's not being dead.

While this argument may not be intuitively convincing, particularly when one considers the suffering of those who survive the deceased, the assertion that suffering lies exclusively with the living is not entirely without merit. The suffering experienced by the friends and relatives of the deceased is by no means uniquely linked to the fact that a certain individual is dead. The sorrow, confusion, and potential material hardship of those unfortunate enough to be left without the deceased is precisely that; suffering associated with loss, not death per se. Suppose one's most cherished companion were to disappear permanently from one's life. The effects of such an event would seem largely indistinguishable from that same person's sudden death. It may be argued that one feels a unique sort of sorrow regarding death as a particular form of loss, but if one accepts the Epicurean view that death is not bad for the deceased, one need not bemoan death on these grounds. Mourning is the purview of the living, an experience tied to the loss of a shared existence with the departed, an experience by no means reliant on death for its fruition⁵. Thus, such suffering may be seen as wholly unrelated to death, in the eyes of the living and dead alike.

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For those unpersuaded by the Epicurean account, there remains a highly compelling avenue for maintaining the overall 'badness' of death; namely, that it deprives the deceased of existence and their survivors of shared existence, with all of

⁵Thomas Ligotti, *Conspiracy Against The Human Race*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 234.

its attendant joys and evils. Such an account cannot be dismissed simply on the basis that the dead experience nothing, as it holds this very lack of experience to constitute a harm in its own right. A rejection of this so-called “deprivation account”⁶ requires far greater metaphysical commitment than is entailed by the classical Epicurean view, resting on the assertion that, in reality, the inevitability of death necessarily implies that it constitutes no deprivation of any sort.

Death is a basic fact of life. All beings which have ever lived have died, and it seems overwhelmingly likely that all beings which are currently alive will share a similar fate. While it may be argued that the mere denial of some imaginable state of being constitutes a wrongful deprivation, this does not seem to constitute adequate grounds to assert that such deprivation is in any significant sense ‘bad’ for the individual. It is true that I lack angelic beauty and the accompanying wings and harp, but it hardly seems reasonable to say that I am wrongfully or significantly deprived of being an angel simply on the grounds that I am a mere human being. I am not deprived of that which cannot be, and what I am is a being destined, as are all other beings, to oblivion. I cannot reasonably expect to cheat death; therefore, I cannot reasonably expect to be able to enjoy the goods that death allegedly deprives me of. That death should deprive us of some possible future relies on the assumption that immortality is a genuinely salient possibility, against which can be mustered an overwhelming body of evidence. Unless the deprivation account is to be taken to its most ludicrous extremes, death need not be viewed as a genuine denial of possibility. Death, it would seem, is a certain reality of finite life, and by its very nature nullifies all possibility postmortem. One cannot be

⁶ Benatar., 102.

deprived of possibilities which do not exist and could not exist by the very certainty of ultimate non-existence.

It may be countered that premature death does indeed deprive, even if the abstracted phenomenon of death does not, allowing that a particular subset of deaths merit negative evaluation. However, if one considers the specific circumstances of any allegedly premature death, such an assertion appears difficult to maintain. The congenital heart defect leading to a still-birth, the psychological predilections precipitating a suicide at twenty, the trajectory of a No. 228 bus striking a woman in her fifties, the decay of one's cells in the face of cosmic radiation leading to a demise after a century of vivaciousness, all are a matter of unknowing particles hurtling through uncaring space in an unending and unbreakable chain of cause and effect. Whatever flash of affective agency may be glimpsed by such beings as ourselves is entirely illusory, a product of historical processes over which we exercise all the directive control of a boulder rolling inexorably down a hill. Given an awareness of every existent convergence of circumstance—an awareness which we are inherently denied as a matter of biological practicality—the very concept of possibility becomes highly questionable.

If death writ large is truly a matter of material certainty—an assertion for which one may present every human who has ever lived as evidence, barring the tiny minority who have yet to die—and one accepts a general principal of material cause and effect, even the most 'premature' of deaths would appear to deprive one of nothing, as the materially necessitated certainty of each particular death ultimately negates any and all future 'possibilities.' While the very inevitability of death may present its own source of

horror, it need not, just as I need not bemoan my non-angelic existential status. There is no tragedy in lacking that which cannot be, beyond that foisted upon humanity by the blessed curse of imagination⁷.

Annihilation: Tragedy or Nothingness?

For those still committed to the overall badness of death, there remains one avenue of argument; namely, that annihilation constitutes a form of basic wrong to the individual by virtue of its sheer destructive nature (Benatar, 2017, p. 106). For such an account, the very finality of death, its termination of the biographical experience of an individual, constitutes a credible reason to recoil at the prospect of death. If one wishes to expunge their rationalized fear of death, it seems they have little choice but to bite the bullet and simply reject this assertion. There is no existential sleight-of-hand which can bypass the assertion of annihilation's inherent badness.

First, we must come to grips with just what is annihilated according to the annihilation account, and why this is held to be bad. For Benatar, the 'self' whose annihilation we are to recoil at consists of "...the string of psychologically connected states that constitute one's life" ⁸. My self can thus be described as the phenomenal experience of being me, the sum total of my experiences, hopes, dreams, drives etc. which combine to form a biographical self. In severing this string of phenomenal experience, death utterly destroys this self, which I may be quite attached to for a host

⁷ Ligotti., 235.

⁸ Benatar., 105.

of reasons. As such, I may evaluate the death of this fleshed-out self to cause me great harm, perhaps the most comprehensive of harms, as it utterly annihilates me.

However, it is not entirely clear that annihilation in itself should be viewed as bad. Destruction, writ large, refers to the transition of finite material objects from states of existence to non-existence. Life presents humanity with a constant smorgasbord of destruction. We destroy each other, our food, our creations of yesteryear, our environment, our 'old selves,' often seeming to hold the view that such destruction is either necessary, good, or both. It may even be cogently argued that each passing moment irreversibly annihilates its predecessors, rendering the very passage of time a matter of perpetual destruction. Unlike the generally accepted badness of death, destruction receives a far more circumstantial and ambivalent evaluation. The annihilation account cannot depend on the alleged malignancy of the phenomena of destruction or annihilation alone, as this does not seem to hold true for destruction in many senses. It is annihilation of the biographical self which is held to be particularly horrible⁹. The reason why such annihilation of the self can be held to be bad lies in what is implied by it for the deceased and their survivors. This self-annihilation constitutes a harm distinct from the ambivalent status of destruction because destruction of the biographical self is held to equally destroy all future possibilities pertaining to the individual. It is held to be a break in the psychological continuity of the individual's biographical experience, a destruction of the ongoing experience of the self and thus a harm to the self by means of denial. If true, the annihilation account may maintain that death is bad on the grounds of destruction of the self, as such self destruction implies

⁹ Benatar., 104.

the loss of near infinite future possibilities. However, this account no longer appears so distinct from the deprivation account, with the badness of annihilation lying not in some inherent phenomenological evil of destruction but in the perceived deprivation of the self which death foists upon all. If one accepts this interpretation, the annihilation account would seem to collapse entirely into the deprivation account, an account which I hope has been adequately addressed above.

It may still be countered that the badness of death entailed by the annihilation account lies not in some specific form of self deprivation, but in the very tragedy of the destruction of something we value—the biographical self. In response to this, I can only offer a rehash of the Epicurean argument, with certain deterministic adjuncts. The value which we assign to our selves is entirely subjective, and contingent upon the phenomenon of our existence. The inevitable cessation of our existence nihilates this evaluation; the universe assigns no objective value to our biographical selves, and the cessation of our biographical experience implies a cessation of our subjective evaluation of such selves. While we still draw breath we may assign a positive value to our existence, but only from a subjective perspective which wholly ceases to be at the moment of death. Objectively, we cannot assert the badness of death in the face of a meaningless universe, while subjectively, we cannot assert a value of death, as the very phenomenon of death nihilates the means by which we subjectively assign value. If one accepts death as inevitable, it would seem to constitute less a matter of destruction than a metaphysically certain endpoint to the biographical self. Death is part of the content of finite life, not its refutation or destruction. If one accepts the material nature of life, and the material determinism of that nature, death would seem to constitute less of a

destruction of something we value than an inevitable cessation of that which entails our capacity to value in the first place. If the very phenomenon of subjectivity is annihilated by death, its evaluations would seem to be annihilated alongside.

A Final Note

It is highly unlikely that the view expressed above--that there is no reason to view death as bad for oneself or for those who survive oneself--will be readily accepted. This is partly due to the evolutionary factors alluded to in the introduction, but also because of the host of metaphysical commitments and implications entailed by its adoption. If one is to accept the deterministic arguments presented against the deprivation account, the very concepts of free will, human agency, and modal possibility itself must be largely or wholly rejected. The scope of this paper demands that a host of concerns pertaining to these metaphysical and metaethical implications go unaddressed, leaving ample leeway for deaths more determined detractors.

However, the adoption of this view may prove reassuring to those less implacably committed to death's badness. Life, rather than a potentially infinite act of self-creation, may rather be viewed as a finite voyage of self-discovery, with its joys made certain by the very fact of their existence and its sorrows negated by the ambivalent certainty of an ultimate return to non-existence. I may still flinch away from a flame or duck from a gunshot, but I need not fear an annihilating hellfire which somehow harms my fellows and I. The fear, tragedy, and sorrow we consciously assign to death does nothing but add needlessly, if perhaps inevitably, to the plethora of miseries which crowd the attentions of the living. If they can be eschewed, why not ease our mortal

burdens slightly, to concentrate on discovering what will transpire rather than bemoaning what will not? Why fear death when we are all, ultimately, determined to die?

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