

Is It a Bad Thing to Die?

That we age and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves is both unbearable and the commonest thing in the world – it happens to everybody.

– John Updike

Several years ago I heard two men arguing. At the apex of their dispute one said to the other, "I'm going to kill you!" The other responded, "The way my life is going, death would be an upgrade." Might death *ever* be an upgrade or is it invariably a bad thing to die? Possibly death is neither good nor bad; perhaps it is neutral.

In the first chapter of *Mortal Questions*, Thomas Nagel asks, "If death is the unequivocal and permanent end of our existence, the question arises whether it is a bad thing to die" (1979, p. 1). Like Professor Nagel, in this chapter death is assumed as nonexistence (*annihilation*), a "mere blank," as he characterized death in his writing. This approach reduces the question to a mere consideration of the end of life itself without speculation about postmortem status.

Based on the premise that something is bad if it destroys something good, it is reasonable to assert that death is bad because it destroys life (life being good). However, not every life is good. The approximate 40,000 annual suicides in the United States is compelling evidence that at least that number of people do not consider their life to be good. No doubt, many of them complained, "I did not ask to be born and now I am in an unchosen situation with innumerable other conditions not of my choosing" (Malikow, 2014, p. 28). The painfulness of life is such that some, like David Benetar, advocate *antinatalism*, "the belief that it is immoral to have children because they are not consulted about their entrance into the world" (p. 29). Antinatalists contend every life includes considerable pain, regardless of the pleasure that is experienced. Hence, we are *Better Never to Have Been* (Benetar, 2006). An antinatalist could argue that death is good because it brings to an end something bad – life.

Epicurus aphoristically expressed his belief that death is nonexistence: "Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when death does come, we no longer exist" (2016). If something is bad for us only when we are affected by it and if death is nonexistence then death cannot be bad because after death we have no sensation. While the prospect of death might be disturbing, the arrival of death begins nonexistence. Nagel seems to disagree with this reasoning, positing that even if death is nonexistence its badness resides in bringing to an end "all the good that life contains" (Nagel, 1979, p. 1). For him, even a painful life includes some things that are good, however few they might be. Therefore, death is bad because it deprives the deceased of whatever good he was experiencing. But how can this be? If death is a "mere blank" (the premise of this chapter), there is no one who is being deprived. Deprivation is an experience and there can be no experience without an experiencer. Without a plaintiff there can be no case against death. By analogy, a psychiatrist who has written a book in which the secrets of a deceased patient are disclosed does no harm to the patient. If the patient no longer exists, there is no one being deprived of physician-patient confidentiality. A similar analogy is a deceased person whose last will and testament is not honored. In this case there is no one to experience disappointment and betrayal. (In neither of these analogies is it suggested that others would not be harmed by the doctor's disclosures or the misadministration of the will.) Deprivation will be further addressed later in this chapter.

Neither the Apostle Paul nor Socrates thought of death as a bad thing. In the *New Testament*, The Apostle Paul taunted death when he rhetorically asked, "Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 16:55, NIV). He believed heaven is the destination for those who die as followers of Christ. At Socrates' trial for corrupting the youth of Athens by not believing in the gods he faced death unafraid. As recorded in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates hypothesized death either as an eternity of undisturbed sleep or relocation to a place of better existence:

Let us reflect in another way, and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good, for one of two things: either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like

the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man, I will not say a private man, but even the great king, will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death is like this, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead are, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there, Minos and Rhadamanthus and Aeacus and Triptolemus, and other sons of God who were righteous in their own life, that pilgrimage will be worth making. What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I, too, shall have a wonderful interest in a place where I can converse with Palamedes, and Ajax, the son of Telamon, and other heroes of old, who have suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in that; I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! For in that world they do not put a man to death for this; certainly not. For besides being happier in that world

**than in this, they will be immortal, if what is said is true
(Plato, 399 B.C.E.).**

Another contribution to the argument that it is not a bad thing to die is the impossibility of imagining what it is like to be dead. Just as it is impossible to imagine what it is like to be unconscious or in the undisturbed sleep to which Socrates alluded it is impossible to conceptualize the experience of death. If death is nonexistence and, therefore, unawareness, then *not being* is something no one among the living can conceive. By definition, a *being* cannot imagine *not being*.

An interesting, relevant question concerning *not being* is, "If it is bad for us not to exist after death why is not also bad for us not to exist before birth?" Nagel addressed this asymmetrical question when he wrote: "... none of us existed before we were born (or conceived), but few regard that as a misfortune" (1979, p. 2). Mark Twain also weighed in on this issue with his inimitable, wry humor:

Annihilation has no terrors for me, because I have already tried it before I was born – a hundred million years – and I have suffered more in an hour, in this life, than I can remember to have suffered in the whole hundred million years put together. There was a peace, a serenity, an absence of all sense of responsibility, an absence of worry, an absence of care, grief, perplexity; and the presence of a deep content and unbroken satisfaction in that hundred million years of holiday which I look back on with a tender longing and with a grateful desire to resume when the opportunity comes (Neider, 1990, p. 49).

Prenatal nonexistence is not the same as postmortem nonexistence. First, the life I might have had if I had been born earlier would not have been my life. Except for having been born a few minutes or even several weeks earlier, the life I might have had owing to an earlier birth would be so different from my actual life that it would be the life of another person. For instance, had I been born in 1839 instead of 1949 I might have fought and died in the Civil War instead of teaching at Syracuse University and fathering my delightful daughter. There is no inherent loss in a prenatal life

that might have been because such a life never existed, rendering no loss to me or anyone else.

Second, something that never existed produces no results. Similarly, someone who never existed experiences no loss (or anything else). Expressed musically, "nothing (a life that never existed) from nothing (events that never happened) leaves nothing (Preston and Fisher, 1974). As Nagel argued,

(I)f 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. The fact that Beethoven had no children may have been a cause of regret to him, or a sad thing for the world, but it cannot be described as a misfortune for the children he never had (1979, p. 4).

Another situation that offers an opportunity to explore the possibility of death as a bad thing is a near fatal accident that left a man in a persistent vegetative state (PVS). As an unresponsive patient on a respirator and feeding tube, he is kept alive only through these interventions. After ten years in this state, the man dies. Assuming he had no mental activity while comatose, what would have been the difference *to him* between immediate death in the accident and the death he actually experienced ten years later? What badness did death add to his comatose existence? If there is a difference *to the man* between immediate death and death preceded by a coma, how is this difference described?

In a sense, no death is untimely. Like the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, death arrives in its own time. Still, some deaths are referred to as untimely when they occur before the anticipated eighty or ninety years of life. Again, the question arises, for whom are these deaths tragic? Certainly it is not for the deceased. Viktor Frankl died at 92; King David had a son who lived only six days. Frankl had a long, productive life that touched millions of people. The name of David's son is not given in the biblical passage that describes his brief life; perhaps he died without a name. The impact of the infant's death on David is writ large in the Hebrew Bible (2 Samuel 11,12; Psalm 51). Dr. Frankl's four page obituary in *The New York Times* is a testimony to the significance of

his life and implies a great number of people were saddened by his passing. But neither he nor the infant experienced death as a bad thing for himself. Although Frankl and David's son did not have lives of equal length, both will be dead forever. The unpleasantness is experienced by the bereaved.

A poet has written, "For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been'" (Whittier, 1856). According to contemporary philosopher Shelly Kagan, *what might have been* is the ground upon which death can be considered a bad thing even for the deceased. In his treatise on death, he cautions, "it actually takes some work to spell out exactly how nonexistence could be bad for me" (2012, p. 210). This work includes answering the question, "What is badness?" Kagan and others subdivide badness into three categories: *intrinsic*, *instrumental*, and *comparative*. Something is *intrinsically bad* if it is bad in and of itself. For example, a migraine headache is intrinsically bad because it is painful. Something is *instrumentally bad* if it produces bad results. Kagan offers unemployment as an example of something bad because of what it might cause:

Losing your job, for example, is not intrinsically bad – it's not bad in and of itself – but it is instrumentally bad, because it can lead to poverty and debt, which in turn can lead to pain, suffering, and other intrinsic bads (p. 211).

Death cannot be intrinsically bad because it is nonexistence. Hence, in death nothing painful or anything else is experienced. Neither can death be instrumentally bad because it leads to nothing; its only consequence is not existing.

But Kagan proposes *comparative badness* applies to death, having an impact even on the deceased. Comparative badness exists when something is bad in comparison to something else that might have been. An example is an athlete who wins a bronze medal (third place) at the Olympic Games. Although a laudable accomplishment, a bronze medal is bad in comparison to the gold medal (first place) to which the athlete aspired, making the bronze medal comparatively bad. According to Kagan, comparative badness does not require awareness by the deceased. He concedes the dead are unaware of all the good that might have been, but posits they are no less deprived. Since death dispossesses them of the longer life they might have had, it is a bad thing for them to have died. Concerning this, Kagan offers an explanation:

Something can be bad *comparatively*. Something could be bad because of what you're not getting while you get this bad thing. It could be bad by virtue of what economists call "opportunity costs." It's not that its intrinsically bad, or even that its instrumentally bad; it's bad because while you're doing this, you're not getting something better (p. 211).

In the movie, "The Unforgiven," Clint Eastwood's character, William Munny, an aging outlaw and murderer, reflects, "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man, taking away all he's got and all he'll ever have" (1992). This is Kagan's argument, presented in drama. Death is bad for the man killed because it takes from him "all he'll ever have." Compared to life, the dead are deprived of whatever good a longer life would have provided.

But this argument is specious. Jack Kerouac died at 47 of complications from alcoholism, thereby depriving himself and others of the books he might have written. But does this nonexistent Kerouac care about those books? How could he? He doesn't exist. The deprivation belongs to the living who would have enjoyed those books. It is true that life acquaints us with the good we will leave behind when we die. But to leave these things behind does not mean we will miss them when we are gone. We would have to exist in order to miss the good with which life has acquainted us.

Professor Kagan's advocacy of the *deprivation theory* by asserting death is comparatively bad is somewhat intellectually appealing. Nevertheless, his argument is not compelling, even to him, and he admits to having some reservation about his position:

So when I appeal to the deprivation account, and say that the central thing about death is the fact that you're deprived of the good things in life, I don't mean to suggest that everything is sweetness and light with regard to the deprivation account. I think there are some residual puzzles – questions that have not yet been completely answered – about how it *can* be that death is bad (2012, p. 232).

Kagan seems to assume the conclusion of the argument he is making. He alludes to questions that will have to be answered *before* it can be explained why death is a bad thing for the deceased, yet he has already decided that it is. This constitutes begging the question.

Moreover, this issue calls for the application of the Principle of Ockham's Razor, which teaches explanations should be as uncomplicated as possible. In the present case there is no need to summon *comparative badness* into this fray. The simpler, more defensible analysis rests on the irrefutable premise that the dead do not experience the better that might have been. Nagel has written, "The trouble is that life familiarize us with the goods of which death deprives us" (1979, p. 5). The dead have no troubles; troubles are the possessions of the living. Nagel's analysis of the deaths of John Keats and Leo Tolstoy also applies to Kerouac's death at age 47.

The death of Keats at age 24 is generally regarded as tragic; that of Tolstoy at age 82 is not. Although they will both be dead forever, Keats' death deprived him of many years of life which were allowed to Tolstoy; so in a sense Keats' loss was greater (though not in the sense standardly employed in mathematical comparison of infinite quantities). However, this does not prove that Tolstoy's loss was insignificant. Perhaps we record an objection only to evils which are gratuitously added to the inevitable (p. 5).

To observers, the deaths of these three men at their respective ages are variously unfortunate. But to Keats, Tolstoy, and Kerouac, his own death ceased to be a bad thing the moment it arrived.

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