

## 140: Matters of life and death – 6 – The harm of death

### 1 Is Death harmful?

**Assumption:** death is the end of existence. (This a secular course & anyway no good reason to believe in afterlife.)

**Ancient puzzle:** how *can* death do you any harm?

If death is painless and unexpected, then *before* death you are not harmed, and *after* death you do not exist to *be* harmed! 'What you don't know can't hurt you.'

**Some conclude** that death is *not* a harm, *and* that it is therefore irrational to fear death.

They claim we are apt to confuse the *end* of consciousness with an *empty* consciousness – existing in utter blankness.

But perhaps not so – even if death is *not* a harm, maybe it can still be rational to fear it (see # 3 below).

### 2 Kinds of harm

**Three kinds** of putative harm of death – (1) *subjective frustration* of desire, (2) *objective frustration* of desire, (3) *prevention of subjective satisfaction* of desire.

A's desire for some state of affairs S is *subjectively satisfied* when A comes to *believe* that S has occurred, whether or not it really has.

A's desire for some state of affairs S is *objectively satisfied* when S actually occurs, whether or not A ever comes to believe it.

E.g. I want the Raiders to win the Superbowl, and hear that they have; but actually the Bucs have. My desire is subjectively satisfied but objectively frustrated.

E.g. I hear that the Raiders *haven't* won, when actually they have. My desire is subjectively frustrated but objectively satisfied.

Death cannot cause subjective frustrations of desire if death is the end of existence. So if subjective frustration is the *only* form of harm, death cannot be a harm.

Death can (and normally does) cause objective frustrations of desire:

– all projects which presuppose continued life are objectively frustrated by death. E.g. I want to write a book; or I want to visit the Seychelles; or I want to see my children graduate.

**But** are objective frustrations of desire a species of harm? (And are objective satisfactions of desire a species of good?)

If so, then not only will death (normally) be a harm, but: (1) we will be able to *harm the dead* (by preventing things that they wanted) and (2) we can *do good to the dead* (by fulfilling their wishes).

**Nagel** argues that objective frustrations of desire *are* a species of harm, and that death is bad for that reason.

E.g. the case of undiscovered adultery – I *want* my wife to be faithful, but she is not, and I never know or otherwise suffer subjectively. Am I harmed? People who know will *feel sorry for me*.

*Wrong* is done me (breach of contract etc.); and I am exposed to *risk* of subjective harm.

**But** consider after the fact – I finally die having lived happily with my wife throughout.

I *wasn't* harmed then? So objective frustrations aren't a species of harm? **But** someone might say: 'He was happy but his marriage was a sham'. Might this not be grounds for *pity*?

Distinguish the *perspective of a friend* or lover from the *perspective of an impartial benevolent spectator*.

To love someone involves adopting their goals as your own – you want what they want. So when what they want fails to happen, you will feel disappointment.

In this sense a friend can *feel sorry on my behalf*, even when I do not suffer. But an impartial spectator will only feel sorry for suffering?

The example of Astrid the astronaut and the statue of her late husband. The statue is destroyed but she can never know. Her friends may feel sorry on her behalf. But would it be an act of *benevolence* – would it do her good – to rebuild it? Surely, no.

⇒ Objective frustrations of desire are not a species of harm. Death cannot be a harm for *this* reason.

Death also causes the third putative harm – it prevents me from *continuing* to enjoy a subjectively satisfying existence. If I *had not* died I *would have* continued to have a satisfying life.

What prevents felt satisfaction harms me, even if I never know and never feel the lack?

E.g. the lawyer who defrauds me of a will I am unaware of – I am harmed although I never feel the lack of the money. If he had not done it, I would have enjoyed many things I did not, in fact, enjoy.

**So:** Death harms by preventing continued worthwhile life.

But is that *all*? Nagel's example of the brain-injury which reduces me to the life of a (contented) infant – surely I *am* harmed, though I *do continue to be satisfied*.

Another argument for objective frustrations as a species of harm?

But perhaps our intuition of harm, here, is because I (qua person) no longer exist? Perhaps this sort of brain-injury is *the same as death* for me, and the human who continues to enjoy infant satisfactions *isn't me*? My brain injury prevents *me* from enjoying the kinds of thing which make *my* life valuable.

### 3 Harm and fear

Stress that our reason to fear death & the badness of death can come apart. Reasons for going on living are *not* to avoid the harm of death, but because life is a presupposition of (almost) all projects and desires. I have reason to fear whatever may frustrate my projects.

(**Also:** even if death isn't a harm, it doesn't follow that there is nothing wrong with killing. If I don't want to die then death infringes autonomy, even if death isn't a harm.)

There is reason to *fear* death whenever desires for the future presuppose continued life. The *harm* of death is that of preventing continued satisfying life.

**So – (a)** I can have reason to fear death where death would *not* harm – e.g. where continued life would *not* be subjectively worthwhile, but there are things I want to *achieve*. E.g. the agent in war being tortured to death in a room where he has planted a bomb. He may be *afraid* that he will die before the bomb goes off!

**So – (b)** Death can be a harm although the person has no reason for staying alive, and so no reason to fear death. E.g. someone in a depression who has lost all interest in the future, but who *would* shortly enjoy a satisfying life again.

### 4 Explaining an Asymmetry

**A further puzzle** raised by many philosophers and discussed by Nagel:– how come we regard *future* non-existence as terrible, but not our non-existence in the *past*, before birth?

Compare saying of someone killed at 50: 'If he hadn't died he would have enjoyed a further 30 years of life' with 'If he had been born 30 years *earlier* he would have enjoyed that many extra years.' The latter is *not* any sort of tragedy!

**But** anyone born 30 years earlier would not have been *him*! The doctrine of *essentiality of origin*: – if my mother conceives at a different time, I do not exist; individual existence is *highly* contingent. (This fact will prove important for population issues.)

**So** one reason for the asymmetry is that living longer in the future is always logically possible, whereas living earlier is not. So past non-existence cannot be an object of genuine regret.

But is this the real reason?

**A real example** – people who have spent up to 30 years of their lives unconscious. They *do* have reason for regret. ('If only... I would have enjoyed 30 more years')

But their attitude to past loss is quite different from their attitude to the future, although the harm done is the same. Nagel makes heavy weather of this, and leaves it unresolved.

**The solution** is simple – all our desires are *forward-looking*. Past unconsciousness does not deprive me of anything that I *now* want, and so cannot be an object of *fear*, but an early death *would* so deprive me.