

Why Is Death Bad?

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Source: *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Sep., 1986), pp. 213-221

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4319856>

Accessed: 24/02/2011 13:36

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WHY IS DEATH BAD?

(Received 14 October, 1985)

I. WHY IS DEATH BAD?

It seems that, whereas a person's death needn't be a bad thing for him, it *can* be. In some circumstances, death isn't a "bad thing" or an "evil" for a person. For instance, if a person has a terminal and very painful disease, he might rationally regard his own death as a good thing for him, or at least, he may regard it as something whose prospective occurrence shouldn't be regretted. But the attitude of a "normal" and healthy human being — adult or child — toward the prospect of his death is different; it is *not* unreasonable in certain cases to regard one's own death as a bad thing for oneself.¹ If this is so, then the question arises as to *why* death is bad, in those cases in which it is bad.

If one believes in an afterlife, one could explain how death (conceived of roughly as the cessation of bodily functioning) can be bad insofar as it can involve eternal torment — an indefinitely long sequence of (highly) unpleasant experiences. Of course, on this sort of account, death *needn't* be bad, even for a normal and healthy human being, since he may experience eternal bliss in the afterlife. If there is an afterlife, and for some it includes unpleasant experiences, then this would explain how death can be a bad thing, but it is controversial whether there is an afterlife. Since it is quite possible to deny the controversial assumption that there is an afterlife and yet regard death as a bad thing, it would be desirable to produce an explanation of death's badness which doesn't presuppose that there are experiences after death. Many have thought that such an explanation can be given.

If death can be a bad thing for a person, though not in virtue of including unpleasant experiences of that person, then death is a bad thing for a person in a way that is different from the way in which, say, *pain* is a bad thing for a person. That is, some things which are bad (or evil) for a person (such as pain) are "experienced as bad by the person", whereas other things which are bad for a person (such as death) are not (ever) experienced as bad by the per-

son.² Death, then, is assimilated to such bads as betrayal by a friend behind one's back, which, though never experienced as bad (one never finds out and suffers no bad consequences), are nevertheless bad for a person.³

Let's suppose that some things which are never experienced as bad by a person are nevertheless bad for the person. Death could then be an *experiential blank* and still be a bad thing for an individual. And one plausible explanation of why this is so is that death (though an experiential blank) is a *deprivation* of the good things of life. That is, when life is, on balance, good, then death is bad insofar as it robs one of this good: if one had died later than one actually did, then one would have had more of the good things in life. This is the sort of explanation of death's badness which is adopted by Thomas Nagel.⁴

But a problem emerges. We intuitively think that it is appropriate to have *asymmetric* attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence and death. We think that it is reasonable to regard death as a bad thing in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not. If death involves bad experiences in an afterlife, then this asymmetry could be explained. But we are assuming here that death's badness is *not* experienced as bad by the individual who dies. If this is so, how can we explain the intuitive asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence? Both periods are, after all, experiential blanks. And it seems that prenatal nonexistence constitutes a deprivation in a sense analogous to that in which death is a deprivation: if a person had been born earlier than he actually was born, then he would have had more of the good things in life. (When it is supposed that one is born earlier here, we hold fixed the date of one's death. Similarly, when it is supposed above that one dies later, we hold fixed the date of one's birth.) Being born at the time at which one was born (rather than earlier) is a deprivation in the same sense as dying at the time when one dies (rather than later). Both Epicurus and Lucretius argued that our ordinary asymmetric attitudes are irrational and since we don't regret prenatal nonexistence, we ought not regard death as a bad thing. If death is a bad insofar as it is a deprivation, the challenge posed by Epicurus and Lucretius is pressing: why should we treat prenatal and posthumous nonexistence asymmetrically?

One way to respond to the challenge (and thus defend the Nagelian explanation of death's badness) is to say that, whereas one could (logically) have lived longer, it is logically impossible that one should have been born much earlier. Further, the claim is that it is irrational (or impossible) to regret that a proposition which is necessarily false isn't true.⁵ This response is un-

satisfying. It is not clear that it is logically impossible that an individual should have been born substantially earlier than he actually was. It is not at all clear, for instance, that Socrates – the very same Socrates – couldn't (logically) have come into being ten years earlier than he in fact did. Why exactly should (roughly) the actual time of one's birth be an essential property of a person? Given that the essentiality of the actual time of birth is a *controversial* metaphysical claim, it is unsatisfying to use it as part of an explanation of the intuitive asymmetry.⁶ The explanation will not be acceptable to anyone who denies the assumption.⁷ If it is at least logically possible that one should have been born much earlier (and no reason has been offered to rule this out), then we still need to develop a response to the challenge raised by Epicurus and Lucretius (insofar as we cling to the explanation of death's badness in terms of deprivation).

Recently, Derek Parfit has suggested another response.⁸ His position could be put as follows. We have a (not irrational) bias toward the future to the extent that there are cases where we are indifferent toward (or care substantially less about) our own past suffering but *not* indifferent toward our own future suffering. Since there are such cases, and the attitudes therein seem rational, the general principle that it is always rational to have symmetric attitudes toward (comparable) past and future bads is false, and so it might be true that it isn't irrational to have asymmetric attitudes toward our own past and future nonexistence (where such periods of nonexistence are taken to be *bad*s). Thus, death could be considered a bad thing for us, and yet we needn't assume symmetric attitudes toward death and prenatal nonexistence.

Consider Parfit's example:

I am in some hospital, to have some kind of surgery. This kind of surgery is completely safe, and always successful. Since I know this, I have no fears about the effects. The surgery may be brief, or it may instead take a long time. Because I have to co-operate with the surgeon, I cannot have anaesthetics. I have had this surgery once before, and I can remember how painful it is. Under a new policy, because the operation is so painful, patients are now afterwards made to forget it. Some drug removes their memories of the last few hours.

I have just woken up. I cannot remember going to sleep. I ask my nurse if it has been decided when my operation is to be, and how long it must take. She says that she knows the facts about both me and another patient, but that she cannot remember which facts apply to whom. She can tell me only that the following is true. I may be the patient who had his operation yesterday. In that case, my operation was the longest ever performed, lasting ten hours. I may instead be the patient who is to have a short operation later today. It is either true that I did suffer for ten hours, or true that I shall suffer for one hour.

I ask the nurse to find out which is true. While she is away, it is clear to me which I prefer to be true. If I learn that the first is true, I shall be greatly relieved.⁹

Parfit's claim is that it seems to be a deep-seated feature of us that we regard our own past and future sufferings asymmetrically. He doesn't explicitly defend the rationality of this sort of asymmetry, but he has pointed to a class of examples involving bads *other than death* in which it doesn't appear obviously unreasonable to hold asymmetric attitudes.¹⁰

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that Parfit is correct about his example. The problem is that it cannot be extended to the case of death. The reason is that Parfit's case involves a bad for a person which is *experienced as bad by the person*. One's own pain is perhaps paradigmatic of such bads. But death is not a bad of this kind; indeed, the entire problem of justifying our intuitive asymmetric attitudes arises precisely because death is a bad for a person which is *not* experienced as bad by the person. Further, it seems that it is plausible to suppose that Parfit's conclusion will *only* apply to cases involving bads experienced as bad by the person. Cases which are structurally similar to Parfit's except involving bads *not* experienced as bad by the person yield *symmetric* attitudes.

Suppose, for instance, that you know that either some friends of yours have betrayed you behind your back nine times in the past or some friend will betray you behind your back once in the future. Here, it seems that you should prefer the one betrayal in the future (given that the betrayals are comparable, etc.). It also appears that, given a choice between being mocked once behind your back in the past and being similarly treated once in the future, you should be *indifferent*. (Of course, we assume here that you know that you can have no effect on the future events).¹¹ These cases suggest that Parfit's point only applies to the class of bads experienced as bad by the person, and *not* to the class of bads (like death) which are *not* experienced as bad by the person.

Note that there are two different kinds of cases within the class of things which a particular person might reasonably regret (or wish wouldn't happen or take to be bad), but which he himself doesn't experience as bad. One kind contains things which no person experiences as bad (such as death). Another kind contains things which are experienced as bad by *another* person (such as another's pain). If it is reasonable to take temporally symmetric attitudes toward regrettable things which we don't experience as bad and which *no one* experiences as bad, then it shouldn't be surprising that we take temporally symmetric attitudes toward regrettable things which are experienced as bad *by others*. And Parfit has produced just such an example:

I am an exile from some country, where I have left my widowed mother. Though I am deeply concerned about her, I very seldom get news. I have known for some time that she is fatally ill, and cannot live long. I am now told something new. My mother's illness has become very painful, in a way that drugs cannot relieve. For the next few months, before she dies, she faces a terrible ordeal. That she will soon die I already knew. But I am deeply distressed to learn of the suffering that she must endure.

A day later I am told that I had been partly misinformed. The facts were right, but not the timing. My mother did have many months of suffering, but she is now dead.¹²

Parfit claims, about this example, that the new piece of information – that my mother's suffering is in the past – should *not* have a crucial impact on my attitude. Concerning the suffering of others it is rational to have temporally symmetric attitudes. This is precisely what one should expect in the light of the foregoing discussion of the appropriateness of temporally symmetric attitudes toward certain bads not experienced as bad by the person – those not experienced by *anyone*. The difference between our symmetric attitudes toward another's past and future suffering and our asymmetric attitudes toward our own past and future suffering is a special case of the difference between our attitudes toward bads not experienced by us and bads experienced by us. If this is correct, it is appropriate to have temporally symmetric attitudes toward the class of regrettable things experienced by others, even if it is appropriate to have temporally asymmetric attitudes toward the class of regrettable things experienced by us.¹³ Thus Parfit's own example highlights the inadequacy of the present response to the challenge posed by Epicurus and Lucretius, viz. the response suggested by Parfit's examples of temporally asymmetric attitudes toward experienced bads.

It might seem appealing to suggest that what makes death a bad thing for a person is that it is the deprivation of good things *already had* by the person. On this account, the asymmetry between our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence is due to the fact that the time before our birth cannot be conceived as a deprivation of good things we have *already had*, whereas the time after our death clearly can be so conceived. But why exactly should we care especially about the lack of good things we already have had, in comparison with the lack of good things which we could have had, had we been born earlier?

The plausibility of the suggestion may come from a psychological truth which says that, in general, if a person has experienced a good thing and then been deprived of it, he tends to lament its absence (to "miss it") in a way in which a person who has never experienced the good *doesn't*. If a person has regularly drunk fine wines with dinner, he regrets the lack of a fine

wine at tonight's dinner more than someone who has never had a fine wine with dinner.

But why would one regret the absence of something good to which one has grown accustomed? Presumably, because one tends to be *frustrated* by the lack of such goods – their absence causes *unpleasant experiences*. When a person accustomed to fine wines must do without, he is likely to have unpleasant experiences caused by the (partially involuntary) comparison of his present quite ordinary wine with his past delightful wines. In general, it is true that, when one is accustomed to a good thing, its absence causes unpleasant experiences and is therefore especially regrettable.

But clearly this principle is not applicable to death, since death deprives a person of goods *without* causing *any* experiences at all (according to our supposition). The psychological principle may apply to bads which are experienced as bad by a person (or which *cause* unpleasant experiences had by the person), but it doesn't apply to death, since it is *not* such a bad. So this explanation of our asymmetric attitudes suffers from the same problem as the above strategy. Suppose, on the other hand, that we do not appeal to the psychological principle and instead conceive of death as a bad which is *not* experienced. Then insofar as it is held that in regretting the prospect of death we regret the future deprivation of goods we have already had, it would be equally reasonable to regret the prenatal deprivation of such goods, goods which, we *now* know, could have graced our life had it begun earlier.

If death is taken to be a bad thing for a person, and it is appropriate to take symmetric attitudes toward past and future bads that are not experienced as bad by the person, then either we ought radically to revise our attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence, or we haven't explained why death is a bad thing for a person. In "Annie Hall", Woody Allen says, "We have two complaints about life. First, life is terrible. And second, life is too short." If life is terrible, it is – in the typical case – because of bad experiences. But if life is too short, why?

II. WHY DEATH IS BAD

Imagine that you are in some hospital to test a drug. The drug induces intense pleasure for an hour followed by amnesia. You awaken and ask the nurse about your situation. She says that either you tried the drug yesterday (and had an hour of pleasure) or you will try the drug tomorrow (and will have an

hour of pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow. There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes to “experienced goods” which is parallel to the asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced bads: we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures.

Perhaps it is this temporal asymmetry in our attitudes toward certain goods, and not the asymmetry in our attitudes toward bads, which explains our asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. Death is a bad insofar as it is a deprivation of the good things in life (some of which, let us suppose, are “experienced as good” by the individual). If death occurs in the future, then it is a deprivation of something to which we look forward and about which we care — *future* experienced goods. But prenatal nonexistence is a deprivation of *past* experienced goods, goods to which we are indifferent. Death deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent.

Thus we can defend Nagel’s account of the badness of death by explaining the asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. This explanation makes use of a principle clearly related to (but different from) Parfit’s principle concerning the asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future experienced bads. If we have asymmetric attitudes toward past and future experienced goods, then death is a bad thing in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not.¹⁴

Let us end with a fanciful example which illustrates the present point. It is now 1985 and you will live eighty years in any case. Suppose you are given the following choice. Either you were born in 1915 and will die in 1995, or you were born in 1925 and will die in 2005. In each case, we will suppose, your life contains the same amount of pleasure and pain, distributed evenly through time. It is quite clear that you would prefer the second option — you want your good experiences in the future. Note that the periods before 1915 and after 2005 involve “experiential blanks” *in any case*. However, on the first option there is an “extra” blank between 1995 and 2005, and on the second option this extra blank is placed between 1915 and 1925. If one focuses simply on this experiential blank of ten years and asks whether it would be better to have the blank in the past or the future, it seems that one shouldn’t care. That is, as argued above, it is rational for a person to have temporally symmetric attitudes toward bads not experienced by him. Thus, our preference for the second option — living more in the future — cannot be

explained directly by an alleged asymmetry in our attitudes toward experiential blanks. Rather, it is crucial that the placement of the “extra” experiential blank of ten years *determines* the temporal distribution of experienced goods, since we do have temporally asymmetric attitudes toward experienced goods.

Nagel is correct to assimilate death to a bad such as betrayal by a friend behind one’s back – both bads do not involve unpleasant experiences. But the two sorts of bads are interestingly different. If death occurs later than it actually does, we will have a stream of good experiences in the future. The *alternative* to death is good experiences, whereas (in the typical case, at least) the alternative to a future betrayal behind one’s back is *not* good experiences. Thus prenatal and posthumous nonexistence deprive us of things to which we have temporally asymmetric attitudes, whereas past and future betrayals do not. Death’s badness is similar to the badness of betrayal behind one’s back, but different in a way which explains why death is rationally regarded as worse than prenatal nonexistence.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ This does not imply that it is rational to *preoccupy* oneself with one’s own death or to focus one’s attention upon it constantly, etc.

² Something is “experienced as bad by a person” roughly speaking insofar as that thing causes unpleasant experiential episodes in the person (and perhaps, the person believes that the thing is causing such experiences).

³ Thomas Nagel discusses such bads in: “Death”, reprinted in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 1–10. Also, Robert Nozick discusses similar examples in: “On the Randian Argument”, in Jeffrey Paul (ed.), *Reading Nozick* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), pp. 218–222.

⁴ Nagel, *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

⁶ Even if one – controversially – held that generation from such and such gametes is an essential property of an individual, this would not commit one to the further essentialist claim in the text.

⁷ Nagel himself is unsatisfied with this response. (Nagel, *Ibid.* fn. 3, pp. 8–9). He points out that “it is too sophisticated to explain the simple difference between our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence.” (*Ibid.*) To explain his doubts, he presents an example (attributed to Robert Nozick) in which it is granted that it is logically possible that an individual be born years before he is actually born (by prematurely “hatching” the spore from which one develops), and yet it seems that even here the intuitive asymmetry is justified. Thus, the logical impossibility of being born earlier cannot *explain* the asymmetry in our attitudes.

⁸ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 165–185, esp. p. 175.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165–166.

¹⁰ Nagel seems to have been aware of some version of Parfit’s claim. Given his worries about the view that it is logically impossible that one should have been born much earlier

than one actually was, Nagel admits that "Lucretius' argument still awaits an answer". He continues (*Ibid.*, fn. 3, p. 9): "I suspect that it might require a general treatment of the difference between past and future in our attitudes toward our own lives. Our attitudes toward past and future pain are very different, for example. Derek Parfit's unpublished writings on this topic have revealed its difficulty to me."

¹¹ So a *symmetric* attitude towards past and future betrayals involves *preference* for one betrayal over several comparable ones regardless of when they occur and *indifference* between two comparable betrayals regardless of when they occur.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹³ Parfit (*Ibid.*, p. 182), says: "My own examples reveal a surprising asymmetry in our concern about our own and other people's pasts. I would not be distressed at all if I was reminded that I myself once had to endure several months of suffering. But I would be greatly distressed if I learnt that, before she died, my mother had to endure such an ordeal."

This asymmetry is not the same as the asymmetry between my attitudes toward my own past and my own future, yet the two asymmetries are connected as follows. The first asymmetry consists in my indifference to my own past suffering paired with my concern for another's past suffering. Given my concern for my own future suffering, it follows that I have asymmetric attitudes toward my own past suffering and my own future suffering. Given my concern for another's future suffering, it follows that I have symmetric attitudes toward another's past suffering and another's future suffering. Thus the contrast between temporally asymmetric attitudes regarding my own suffering and temporally symmetric attitudes regarding another's suffering stems from the 'surprising' asymmetry Parfit notes in the above-quoted passage. But the contrast in question, which arises from the 'surprising' asymmetry, is precisely what one should expect given the discussion in the text: the contrast matches up with the contrast between bads which one experiences and bads which one does not.

¹⁴ Though Parfit focuses upon examples involving temporally asymmetric attitudes towards pain, he speaks of our "bias toward the future" with respect to experienced goods such as pleasure as well. So he would endorse the principle about temporally asymmetric attitudes toward experienced goods, which grounds the foregoing explanation of the asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. Though this explanation is *consistent* with Parfit's remarks in the passages surrounding his discussion of Epicurus on death, that discussion itself does not indicate that he had the explanation in mind: "Epicurus's argument fails for a different reason: we are biased towards the future. Because we have this bias, the bare knowledge that we once suffered may not now disturb us. But our equanimity does not show that our past suffering was not bad. The same could be true of our past non-existence. Epicurus's argument therefore has force only for those people who lack the bias towards the future, and do not regret their past non-existence. There are no such people. So the argument has force for no one." (*Ibid.*, p. 175)

In any case, it is crucial to see that only the principle about temporally asymmetric attitudes toward experienced *goods* such as pleasure will afford an explanation of why death is bad. The principle about experienced *bads* which is suggested by Parfit's examples, it has been argued, will not generate such an explanation.

¹⁵ We would like to thank Phillip Bricker for helping us to arrive at the foregoing explanation of why death is bad.

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