

"Why should I worry about dying? It's not going to happen in my lifetime!"
—Raymond Smullyan

The End of It All

What we've seen from work on personal identity is that what it takes for us to *survive* is very controversial. That means that what it takes for us to *definitively die* is very controversial as well. To avoid these problems, let's define:

Unambiguous Death: a point at which some living entity ceases to exist forever, whatever it takes for that to happen.

Our final question:

Is unambiguous death bad for the deceased?

Of course my death, say, might be bad for my friends and relatives. But is it bad *for me*? This is a question in a whole new area of philosophy called **value theory**—the branch of philosophy dealing with questions about good, bad, right and wrong.

Almost every normal person *fears* death. So what reasons could we have for doubting that death is always harmful? Two worries from Epicureans:

The Temporal Argument

Versions of the following argument seem to be given by both Epicurus and Lucretius.

- (T1) If death harms me at all, it harms me at some time
- (T2) At all times, I'm either alive or dead
- (T3) Death doesn't harm me while I'm alive, since I'm not dead yet
- (T4) Death doesn't harm me while I'm dead, since I'm not around to be harmed
- (TC) Death doesn't harm me at all

The Symmetry Argument

Lucretius seems to offer something like the following argument.

- (S1) My pre-natal non-existence is not bad for me in any way
- (S2) My pre-natal non-existence is like my posthumous non-existence
in all respects relevant to my well being
- (SC) My posthumous non-existence is not bad for me in any way

Hedonism

There's an underlying motivation at work within both of these arguments, which Epicureans were quite explicit about—an idea about what could make someone's life go well or go poorly.

Hedonism: pleasurable experience and the absence of painful experience, are the only "intrinsic" goods.

By an "intrinsic" good I mean something that's good for its own sake, and not good *merely* for the sake of something else. Having money is pretty good, for example, but for instrumental purposes: it's good *because* it gets us other things that it can do, or get, for us. Correspondingly for the hedonist, pain is the only "intrinsic" harm.

Hedonism makes (T1), (T3) and (T4) look very attractive in the Temporal Argument, and arguably helps along (S2) as well. The Hedonists aren't the only people who have found these arguments compelling, of course. But maybe we will learn something important about ourselves, and either for or against the view that death is harm, if we look more closely at this thesis.