

"I'd rather be dead than play Philadelphia."

—Apocryphal vaudeville joke

"I'd rather be in Philadelphia."

—W.C. Fields' desired Epitaph

Recall the Temporal Argument:

- (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

This argument was helped along by:

Hedonism: pleasurable experience is the only “intrinsic” good, and painful experience is the only intrinsic harm.

Recall the contrast:

Instrumental Good: something good because of something else it does or produces.

Intrinsic Good: something good “for its own sake.”

Nagel's Deprivation Account

Nagel is happy to concede that “[d]eath is not...an unfortunate state,” and to support this seems to endorse a version of the Symmetry Argument himself!

So how can we answer the Temporal Argument?

“If we are to make sense of the view that to die is bad, it must be on the ground that life is a good and death is the corresponding deprivation or loss, bad not because of any positive features but because of the desirability of what it removes.”

But, how can deprivation be bad if no one *minds* the deprivation?

Nagel's answer:

“...it is arbitrary to restrict the goods and evils that can befall a man to nonrelational properties ascribable to him at particular times.”

To say that harms can be “relational” is to say that you can be the subject of harms that don't manifest themselves directly in the space and time you occupy in life. (Consider: having your promises broken unbeknownst to you, or having your last will and testament violated.)

What kinds of relational harms occur in death? The idea is that *some circumstance can be considered a good, or harm, relative to what would have happened had the circumstance not occurred.* For example:

You have the choice of whether to put Sam in harsh labor in the mines. Is his resulting circumstance of being in the mines good or bad for Sam?

Answer(?): Depends on what Sam *would have been doing* if you hadn't send him to the mines. If he would have been tortured, being in the mines is a boon. If he would have been sent on cruise, it's a serious harm.

To illustrate how these kinds of relational harms might arise in death, Nagel raises the case of the individual whose intelligence is reduced by dementia to that of a 3-year old. Here there's nothing inherently wrong with the state of being, just that it deprives an individual of their adult life.

Okay, so which premise should we reject? Who suffers the harm of deprivation, and at what time?

“...most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than by his categorical state of the moment—and...while this subject can be exactly located in a sequence of places and times, the same is not necessarily true of the goods and ills that befall him.”

“...although the spatial and temporal locations of the individual who suffered the loss are clear enough, the misfortune itself cannot be so easily located. One must be content just to state that his life is over and there will never be any more of it. That *fact*, rather than his past or present condition, constitutes his misfortune...”

So it seems we should reject premise (T1). So far, so good. But the account seems like it might have picked up some awkward commitments...

Objection 1: Doesn't this mean it is a harm not to be born? Should we try to avoid perpetrating this harm? Nagel claims:

"Nevertheless if 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."

Objection 2: To treat death as a misfortune of this kind seems to require a conception of what a “normal alternative” would be. As Nagel puts it “Blindness is not a misfortune for a mole, nor would it be for a man, if that were the natural condition of the human race.” How do we choose the state that “would have happened” that should be used as a benchmark for good/harm? Isn't death or suffering “normal” for humans (at least at a certain age)?

We haven't really said anything yet about the symmetry argument. Does Nagel's view cope with that argument too?