

INTRODUCTION

It is popularly believed that death is the most terrifying of ills. Besides, death is a matter of ultimate concern for each of us—everyone will directly face it *sooner or later*. But no one, while still alive, can ever experience it. This might be part of the reason why death has appeared as a riddle or mystery (or even an inexpressible beauty) to many human beings. Given this, it should not be any surprise that death has long been addressed in a variety of inquiries: religion (or theology), psychology, medicine, and literature. Of course, *philosophy* is among these. Death in fact is a vitally important topic in philosophy. Plato (427-437 B.C.) even insisted that, ‘...those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death.’¹

There are many *philosophical* puzzles pertaining to death. Some of them relate to moral problems such as euthanasia or abortion. Others are related to metaphysical problems, which are relatively more basic and abstract. There are important connections between metaphysical and moral questions. In this book, however, I will not focus on these moral issues. Rather, I will investigate one of the more basic and abstract problems concerning the nature of death: ‘*Can death be a harm to the person who dies?*’ (To this question, my answer is, ‘Yes!’)

In exploring the reason for the affirmative answer to this question, I want to avoid getting involved in not only a variety of religious, psychological or even medical issues about death, but also various moral issues about death. In particular, I do not want to deal with the issue over whether there is a soul², or whether there is an afterlife.³ I will just assume that there is no soul (and no afterlife). In contrast, I will assume that death is complete annihilation. That is, when dead, the very person has permanently ceased to exist.

Although most people regard death as a great harm to be avoided, Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) tells us that death is *nothing to us*. The most powerful part of his argument for this conclusion can be put as follows:

In order to be harmed, a person must be in existence at the time. But death is the cessation of one's existence which is beyond harm or gain. Thus, death cannot be a harm.⁴

This argument can be expressed as follows:

- (1) No harm can befall one who does not exist.
- (2) Death is complete annihilation. When dead, one does not exist.
- (3) Thus, no harm can befall one who is dead.
- (4) Therefore, death cannot be a harm.

Although Epicurus' argument is untenable (as we will see in Chapter One, Section Two), he *does* however raise a very serious challenge for the position on the other side—the 'missing subject problem'. In a very important sense, any theory attempting to justify the badness of death (e.g. the deprivation theory) is merely a reply to (or the resolution of) the missing subject problem. To justify the claim that death can be a harm to the person who dies, of course, it is necessary for me to resolve the missing subject problem. In this book, in justifying the badness of death, I will focus on the resolution of the missing subject problem.

For the purpose of the discussions later, it is important to have an appropriate understanding of the concept of death. It is useful therefore to distinguish the notion 'dying' from the notion 'death'. Put simply, dying is the process whereby one comes to be dead. When a person is dying, he⁵ is still alive. Apparently, dying can involve significant pain and suffering. Thus, it is not particularly puzzling why dying can be a harm to a person, insofar as pain and suffering can certainly be a harm to an individual. On the other hand, death is an experiential blank.⁶ But what exactly is 'death'?

According to John Martin Fischer, there are three different approaches to illustrating or exposing the concept(s) of (human) death: (1) the biological approach, (2) the moral approach, and (3) the metaphysical approach. With respect to the biological approach, Fischer writes:

[The biological] approach takes the relevant or significant aspects of human life to be those in virtue of which we are *organisms* of a certain kind. The proponents of this approach attempt to derive illumination about death from the notion that it is particularly significant that humans are organisms of a certain sort.⁷

He describes the moral approach as follows:

[The moral approach] is to seek illumination of human death by reference to moral intuitions about when it is justifiable to regard and treat a person as dead.⁸

As to the metaphysical approach, Fischer says:

[The metaphysical] approach to elucidating human death proceeds via metaphysical considerations. Specifically, one version of this approach claims that an adequate understanding of the nature and criteria of personal identity will lead to an appropriate account of human death.⁹

For one to have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the notion of death, it is necessary to investigate all the issues related to these three approaches. However, since I want to focus on the missing subject problem, I will not discuss all these issues. For the purpose of the discussion in this book, I think it is enough to define 'death' as *the permanent and irreversible cessation of one's existence*.

This definition can be interpreted in terms of consciousness (or psychology) or biology. Some philosophers, however, insist that death should be defined as the termination of conscious (or mental) life but not the termination of biological life.¹⁰ For convenience, I will ignore the issue of whether death should be defined that way or not. I will simply suppose that whenever the termination of conscious (or mental) life happens, the termination of biological life happens as well.

It is important to identify at the outset six assumptions which will be made throughout this book:

1. I presuppose that life (or being alive) is *generally* good.
2. The word 'bad' has come to be used by some authors, such as Fischer, as a synonym for 'harm'; this usage of an adjective as a noun may grate on the ears of some readers. However, the prevalence of this usage has made it difficult to avoid in the discussion that follows. In fact, the following four concepts—'harm', 'misfortune', 'evil', or 'bad'—are slightly different. It seems that 'evil' is full of the flavour of religion or mystery. On the other hand, 'misfortune' seems to be subjective, comparing with 'harm'. And the

badness of death, as we will see, is an objective matter. Thus, I think 'harm' is the best term to choose among these four. However, for convenience, I will not distinguish between them, except to note a difference between 'bad' and the rest of them in terms of degree. For example, 'harm' ('misfortune', or 'evil') suggests a more serious 'bad', whereas 'bad' suggests a slight 'harm' ('misfortune', or 'evil').

3. In this book, I want to justify the badness of *death*, but not the badness of dying. That is to say, what I am concerned about is the state of being dead, but not the process of dying.

Some philosophers, like Stephen E. Rosenbaum, believe that, apart from these two stages, there is a third stage intervening between dying and death (being dead). This stage takes place at the end of dying and the beginning of death (being dead).¹¹ To deal with the various problems (or issues) related to this stage would divert me from the main path. Indeed, it is certainly not an easy task to deal with all these issues. For example, it is not clear whether or not this stage exists. Nor is it clear whether or not it takes time (if it *does* exist). In order to focus on the resolution of the missing subject problem, I will just presuppose that there is *no* such stage.

Even if this stage exists, I, in making this presupposition, still do not miss the point. For even in this situation, I can, by showing that death (being dead) can be a harm to a person, still prove that this stage can be a harm as well. That is, I can prove that all three stages can be harms. The reason for this is as follows. Evidently, dying can be a harm. If I can establish that death, which is farther from dying in time, can also be a harm, then it would be false to claim that this stage, which is closer to dying in time, cannot also be a harm.

4. By 'the death event', I mean a process following from the cause of death to death (being dead). No doubt, it is very likely that one would feel discomfort or even experience some pain in this process. One could be tortured to death, or otherwise made to suffer before his death (being dead). However, it should be emphasised here that, while defining a death event as above, I do not include the possible harm or evil one might suffer in this process. So described, a death event could be considered as equivalent to a *painless* process leading to death (being dead).

It is clear that death (being dead) is the state of affairs directly brought about by the death event. Given that the death event is understood in this way, the following conclusion can be reached: If the death event is not a harm to a person, then death (being dead) should not be a harm to him either: whereas if

the death event is a harm to him, then death (being dead) must be a harm to him as well. In contrast, if death (being dead) is not a harm to him, then the death event should not be a harm to him either; whereas if death (being dead) is a harm to him, then the death event must be a harm to him as well.

In fact, it makes no difference whether we say death (being dead) is a harm (or not a harm) or the death event is a harm (or not a harm).¹² However, the characteristics of the death event are clearer and thus, more easily grasped. That is to say, it is easier for us to discuss or investigate the relevant issues or questions by using the notion of the death event. Given this, instead of using 'death' (being dead), I will mostly use 'the death event' in the following discussion.

5. Some philosophers, such as Jeff McMahan, have suggested that personal identity is a matter of degree. If so, then death is also a matter of degree.¹³ While I take this point, in order to concentrate on the missing subject problem, I will presuppose that personal identity is not a matter of degree, and thus the temporal boundaries of birth and death will be assumed to be quite sharp.

6. According to the Epicurean argument, death is not a harm even to a young person. To simplify discussion, by 'death' in this book I mean the premature cessation of life unless otherwise indicated.

It should be emphasised here that the purpose of this book is to justify the claim that death can be a harm to the person who dies. If there is an afterlife, then clearly death can be a harm. For we can imagine a peculiarly terrifying state in our afterlife in which we somehow continue to exist and hence suffer. In other words, if we presuppose that there is a soul, then we can justify this claim easily. On the other hand, if we presuppose that there is no soul, then this claim would meet a very difficult challenge from Epicurus as shown above—the missing subject problem. My book is an argument against the missing subject problem, so I assume that there is no soul. In sum, I make these assumptions purely for the sake of argument, not because I necessarily think that they are true.

Now, let me outline the structure of this book.

The Epicurean argument concludes that death is *never* a harm to the person who dies. Most philosophers have attempted (often unsuccessfully) to reject this conclusion. The Epicurean conclusion directly contradicts the conclusion I will reach in this book—death *can* be a harm to the person who dies. My first objective will therefore be to reject the Epicurean argument. If



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