

CHAPTER ONE

The Epicurean Argument

The Epicurean argument has provided the classical objection to the widely held view that death can be a harm to the person who dies. To attain the central aim of this book, first of all, I want to refute Epicurus in this chapter.

1.1 EXPLICATION OF THE EPICUREAN ARGUMENT

*I do not want to die—no; I neither want to die nor
do I want to want to die; I want to live for ever and
ever and ever.*

--Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sence of Life*

The common-sense view of death, as Harry S. Silverstein explains, is that a person's death is one of the greatest evils that can befall him.¹ However, Epicurus², in his paper "Letter to Menoeceus", develops a famous argument about death to challenge this common-sense view. Epicurus writes:

Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation...So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us,

since so long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.³

Call this the 'Epicurean argument'.

Put simply, the main point of the Epicurean argument is:

Death cannot be a harm or misfortune for the person who dies, for, when death occurs, there is no longer a subject to whom any harm or misfortune can be ascribed.⁴

It is quite apparent that according to the Epicurean argument, the answer to the question, 'Can death be a harm to the person who dies?' is simply, 'No!'

The Epicurean argument can be reconstructed as follows:

- (A) A state of affairs (or event) is a harm (or bad thing) for someone P *only if* P can experience it.
 - (B) Therefore, P's death is a harm to P *only if* it is a state of affairs that P can experience.
 - (C) P can experience a state of affairs *only if* it begins before P's death.
 - (D) P's death is not a state of affairs that begins before P's death.
 - (E) Therefore, P's death is not a state of affairs that P can experience.
- THEREFORE, P's death is not a harm to P.⁵

This reconstruction (which I call the 'standard interpretation of the Epicurean argument'⁶), with an appropriate (and I believe correct) understanding of the Epicurean argument, not only offers a clearer philosophical expression to the Epicurean argument, but also makes explicit some notions implicit in the Epicurean argument.⁷ Therefore, I believe that we thereby get a clearer and deeper understanding of the Epicurean argument.

For the rest of this section, I want to explicate the Epicurean argument and its standard interpretation.

1. The Epicurean argument does not rule out that our deaths are harms to others or someone else's death is a harm to us. It could be argued, for example, that my death can be a source of misery to others, especially to my family.

2. For an appropriate understanding of the Epicurean argument, it is very important to distinguish two concepts from each other:

- (1) Dying—the process whereby one comes to be dead or the process wherein certain causes operate to bring about one's death.
- (2) Death—the permanent and irreversible cessation of one's existence. Intuitively it is the state which one is in at and after one dies. In a word, death is 'being dead'. In this state there is apparently no subject left.

Dying takes place during a person's lifetime and, apart from the terminal stage, may thus be experienced. That is, when one is dying, one is still alive. On the other hand, death (being dead) is clearly not part of a person's life. If someone P died at T then his dying preceded T, whereas his death occurred at T and after T the subject is dead.⁸

There is no doubt that the conclusion of the Epicurean argument concerns *death (being dead)*, and not dying. The reasons for this are:

(i). It is very clear that a person's dying can be a harm to him, as Fischer states:

When one is dying, one is still alive. One can be conscious of dying, and dying can involve significant pain and suffering. It is not particularly puzzling why dying can be a bad thing for a person, insofar as pain and suffering can certainly be bad for an individual.⁹

(ii). In his argument, Epicurus says, '...when we are, death is not, and when death is come, we are not...' Here, what Epicurus talks about is a state of affairs which is temporally located when *we are not*. However, dying takes place during our lifetime. That is, when dying comes, we still are.

Therefore, the conclusion of the Epicurean argument does not rule out a person's dying being a harm to him.¹⁰

Some philosophers believe that there is a 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 If this stage *does* exist, then another issue arises: '*Is the conclusion of the Epicurean argument also about the stage intervening between dying and death (being dead)?*' or '*Does the conclusion*

of the Epicurean argument rule out the stage intervening between dying and death (being dead)?'

Rosenbaum, who believes that there is a stage intervening between dying and death (being dead), gives two reasons to refute the idea that the conclusion of the Epicurean argument is about the stage between dying and death (being dead):

- (1) Construing Epicurus as taking 'death' to be a sort of tertiary period in one's history would be an exceedingly uncharitable way of making him look silly.
- (2) The issue would be much less interesting if it concerned this tertiary period instead of death (being dead). What people seem to think as bad is not the moment of this tertiary period itself, but rather the abysmal nonexistence of being dead. This, at any rate, is what they fear, and that fear is what Epicurus wished to extinguish.¹²

Someone, who also believes that there is a stage intervening between dying and death (being dead), might try to reject Rosenbaum's argument as follows:

Although it is very clear that the conclusion of the Epicurean argument is not concerned with dying, it is not clear that it is concerned only with being dead. Epicurus might use only the term 'death' to refer to both 'the stage intervening between dying and being dead' and 'being dead'. In other words, the conclusion of the Epicurean argument might be concerned not only with being dead, but also with the stage intervening between dying and being dead. There is no reason to expect Epicurus to have thoughtfully distinguished between these two concepts and to have selected the Greek equivalent of 'being dead' to express his view. From these two reasons, what Rosenbaum can justify is only that, 'The conclusion of the Epicurean argument cannot be concerned *only* with this tertiary period' or "It is incorrect to take the term 'death' in the Epicurean argument to be *only* a sort of tertiary period in one's history." Indeed, from his two reasons, Rosenbaum cannot show that the stage intervening between dying and being dead cannot be a part of 'death' in Epicurus' sense.

This criticism sounds reasonable. If it is accepted, then Rosenbaum fails to show that the conclusion of the Epicurean argument rules out the stage intervening between dying and being dead. We now face a difficulty in judging or deciding whether 'death' in the Epicurean argument covers a stage intervening between dying and being dead. We should not expect to sort out this difficulty by considering *only* the Epicurean argument itself. We need also to consider some related factors.

The characteristics of the stage intervening between dying and being dead (if this stage exists) are still unclear. According to Rosenbaum, this stage is roughly the time at which a person becomes dead. However, it is not clear that it is a part of a person's lifetime. It is not clear that it takes time or, if so, how much time it takes. It may be a mere moment in time separating dying from being dead.¹³ Most importantly, it is not clear whether or not there is a subject left during this stage; nor is it clear, if there is a subject during this stage, what the characteristics of this subject are or in what sense it is a subject at all. Perhaps for this reason, Julian Lamont uses a strange circumlocution to call the subject (if we can call it 'subject') during this stage: 'qua presently living subject'.¹⁴ These unclear factors about the characteristics of this stage are partly responsible for our hesitation in judging or deciding whether 'death' in the Epicurean argument covers a stage intervening between dying and being dead (if this stage exists).

For the following reasons, I will suppose that 'death' in the Epicurean argument does not cover a stage intervening between dying and being dead.

(i). The essential characteristic of 'death' in the Epicurean argument is 'of no subject'. It is because of this characteristic that Epicurus concludes that 'death' (in Epicurus' sense) cannot be a harm to the person who dies. Thus, to Epicurus, 'no subject' is a criterion for 'death' in a very important sense. This stage is different from dying and being dead in some way. Otherwise, it would be nonsense to claim: 'There is a stage intervening between *dying* and *being dead*'. It is clear that, if one is in a state of 'being dead', then there is no subject left. Since this stage is different from 'being dead', it might not be appropriate to claim that, if one is in this stage, then there is no subject left. It might be more appropriate to say that there is a 'semi subject' left during this stage. If this is the case, then, according to Epicurus' criterion for death, it is not appropriate to count this stage (with a semi *subject*) as death.

(ii). If this stage is of 'no subject' (which is very improbable), then, according to Epicurus' criterion for death, 'death' in the Epicurean argument would

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