

CHAPTER THREE

The Deprivation Theory

The deprivation theory is the most popular anti-Epicurean view.¹ Silverstein calls this view the standard argument against the Epicurean view.² In this chapter, I want to investigate whether or not this very popular anti-Epicurean view is satisfactory. To begin this task, let me first illustrate the deprivation theory.

3.1 EXPLICATION OF THE DEPRIVATION THEORY

In his well-known paper “Death”, Nagel claims, ‘If death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of.’³

Basically, this claim has pointed to a rough and vague picture of the deprivation theory. Nagel explicates the deprivation theory as follows:

...if death is an evil, it is the loss of life, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable...

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.⁴ (My emphasis.)

Similarly, Williams says:

[The Epicurean view] takes it as genuinely true of life that the satisfaction of desire, and possession of the *praemia vitae*, are good things...But now if we consider two lives, one very short and cut off before the *praemia* have been acquired, the other fully provided with the *praemia* and containing their enjoyment to a ripe age, it is very difficult to see why the second life, by these standards alone, is not to be thought better than the first...But if the *praemia vitae* are valuable...then surely getting to the point of possessing them is better than not getting to that point, longer enjoyment of them is better than shorter, and more of them, other things being equal, is better than less of them. But if so, then it just will not be true...that death is never an evil...⁵

Also, L. W. Sumner says:

To die is (as we say) to lose one's life. Generally speaking, a loss is a bad thing to the extent that the item lost is a good thing...Losing one's life must therefore be an evil when, and to the extent that, one's life is a good. Let us be more precise. Suppose that I own a fine watch for a year and then mislay it. What precisely have I lost? I cannot lose the year's possession and use of the watch, for that is in the past. What I have lost, then, is the use of the watch which I would have enjoyed had I continued to possess it. Losses are *future-oriented*: the main source of evil of a loss is the value which is thereby *foregone*...

We may therefore consider the misfortune of death as a loss and calculate its evil principally in terms of the value which it forecloses.⁶ (My emphasis.)

In summary, the deprivation theory can be explicated as follows: *Death is a harm to the person who dies because it deprives him of certain goods—the goods he would have enjoyed if he had not died.*

According to the deprivation theory, death is simply the harm of deprivation, a harm consisting in the loss, or lack, of possible *future* goods.⁸ Basically, the deprivation theorists believe that death is the unequivocal and permanent end of life and thus, an experiential blank.⁹ Thus, death, for them, is not a peculiarly terrifying state that one somehow exists to suffer from.

In the face of this account, it is natural for some people (especially Epicureans) to wonder:

How can death be a harm to the person who dies, if it is *merely* an experiential blank? In other words, can anything, which is not actually experienced as bad or unpleasant by a person, be a harm to him?

To defend and strengthen their theory, the deprivation theorists need at least to justify the following principle: Something that is never actually experienced as bad or unpleasant by a person *can* be a harm to him. Indeed, Nagel argues for this principle as follows:

We must now turn to the serious difficulties...about loss and privation in general, and about death in particular.

Essentially, there are three types of problems. First, doubt may be raised whether *anything* can be bad for a man without being positively unpleasant to him: specifically, it may be doubted that there are any evils that consist merely in the deprivation or absence of possible goods...

The first type of objection is expressed in general form by the common remark that what you don't know can't hurt you. It means that even if a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face, none of it can be counted as a misfortune for him so long as he does not suffer as a result. It means that a man is not injured if his wishes are ignored by the executor of his will, or if, after his death, the belief becomes current that all the literary works on which his fame rests were really written by his brother, who died in Mexico at the age of 28...

There certainly are goods and evils of a simple kind (including some pleasures and pains) which a person possesses at a given time simply in virtue of his condition at that time. But this is not true of all the things we regard as good or bad for a man...¹⁰

Similarly, Robert Nozick says:

...suppose we read the biography of a man who *felt* happy, took pride in his work, family life, etc. But we also read that his children, secretly, despised him; his wife, secretly, scorned him having innumerable affairs; his work was a subject of ridicule among all others, who kept their opinion from him; *every* source of satisfaction

in this man's life was built upon a falsehood, a deception. Do you, in reading about this man's life, think: 'What a *wonderful* life. I wish I, or my children, could lead it'?¹¹

I think that the examples in these two arguments have successfully justified this principle. Given this principle, some proponents of the deprivation theory might incautiously conclude that death *can* be a harm to the person who dies, even if it is a *mere* experiential blank.

However, some opponents of the deprivation theory, such as Rosenbaum, try to reject the deprivation theory by arguing as follows:

We agree that certain things never actually experienced as unpleasant or bad by a person can be a harm to that person. However, we cannot agree with the claim that death can be a harm to the person who dies. It is believed that the only way something can be a harm to a person is if it is *possible* for the person to experience it as unpleasant or bad. In other words, someone *can* be the subject of some harm *only if* he exists at the time the harm occurs—the Existence Requirement. But death—being an experiential blank that occurs after the person is alive or exists—cannot be experienced by the person who dies as unpleasant or bad. Thus, death cannot be a harm to the person who dies. Now the proponents of the deprivation theory adduce examples in which it is allegedly true that persons suffer harms or misfortunes of which they are unaware. But since none of these examples is an example in which the person has ceased to exist, and thus it is *impossible* for that person to experience the things as unpleasant or bad, none of the examples refutes the Existence Requirement. Thus, death should not be a harm to the person who dies¹²

This argument can be expressed as follows:

- (1) If the Existence Requirement is accepted, then this principle—something that is never actually experienced as bad or unpleasant by a person *can* be a harm to him—*cannot* apply to death. That is, if the Existence Requirement is accepted, then death *cannot* be a harm to the person who dies.
- (2) If death *cannot* be a harm to the person who dies, then the (conclusion of) deprivation theory is problematic.

- (3) The Existence Requirement must be accepted, unless the proponents of the deprivation theory can offer at least one counterexample to defeat it.
- (4) None of the examples the deprivation theorists offer decisively defeat the Existence Requirement.
- (5) Therefore, the deprivation theory is problematic.

However, I suggest that this argument does not successfully refute the deprivation theory. The reason is as follows. Certainly, it would be ideal for the proponents of the deprivation theory to raise an counterexample to decisively defeat the Existence Requirement. If so, the Existence Requirement would be rejected directly. In a sense, I would say, death is just the best example. However, the fact that *none of the proponent's examples decisively defeats the Existence Requirement* does not mean that the Existence Requirement must be accepted. Without giving any reason for accepting the Existence Requirement, those opponents of the deprivation theory are simply begging the question. Indeed, in Chapter One, Section Two, I have shown that the Existence Requirement is problematic. If the Existence Requirement is rejected, then the claim that none of the proponent's examples decisively defeats the Existence Requirement should not be treated as a refutation of the deprivation theory.¹³

Another major challenge for the deprivation theory comes from the Lucretian symmetry argument. The challenge goes like this:

Death is supposed to be an experiential blank that is bad insofar as it deprives the person who dies of the goods of life. Presumably, if one dies later rather than earlier, one can have more of the goods of life. But prenatal nonexistence seems in these ways precisely symmetric to death (conceived as posthumous nonexistence). That is, prenatal nonexistence is an indefinitely long experiential blank that is a deprivation of the goods of life: if one is born earlier rather than later, one can have more of the goods of life...But we do not regard prenatal nonexistence as a bad, misfortune, or harm; we do not tend to think it rational to regret it. Given this and the apparent symmetry between prenatal nonexistence and death (on the deprivation theory), it seems that we cannot consistently hold that death can be a bad thing for the person who dies, on the deprivation theory.¹⁴



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