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Epicurus and Euthanasia

by

Louis Groarke

So, death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist.

Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus

Epicurus' conundrum has sparked considerable interest in contemporary philosophy.¹ Leaving aside the possibility that there is life after death, his argument — that there is no need to fear death, because where we are death is not, and where death is we are not — has a startling plausibility.² Startling because it conflicts so vehemently with more commonplace attitudes towards death. In the words of one author, "There is nothing a normal person (in reasonable health and tolerable circumstances) dreads more than his own death."³ Indeed it is precisely the possibility invoked by Epicurus, that death may entail our complete and utter annihilation, that strikes the most disturbing note of all. Simply put, what Epicurus tells us not to fear, most of us are (in some instinctive and unconscious way) afraid of.

In routine hedonist fashion Epicurus identifies the good with pleasure and the evil with pain. If, however, death entails the destruction of the subject, it must be the absence of both pleasure and pain; that is, it must be the absence of both good and evil. This is why, in Epicurus' view, death must be assigned in moral terms a kind of zero value. Being the absence of both pleasure and pain, it is the absence of all good, but it is also the absence of all evil.

Characteristic of Epicureanism and hedonism in general is an emphasis on the intrinsic value of sensation. One thinks, for example, of Henry Sidgwick who, at the end of the last century, identified the ultimate good with "good or desirable consciousness."⁴ Though prevalent today, it is the author's contention that this Epicurean emphasis is short-sighted and mistaken, and that it accounts for a basic misunderstanding that has arisen within contemporary ethics.

Harry Silverstein, in an article in *The Journal of Philosophy*, identifies as the "standard objection" to the Epicurean view, the idea that "death is simply an evil of deprivation, an evil consisting in the loss or lack of a positive good, namely, life."⁵ Silverstein writes: "There is a notorious difficulty with the view that death is an evil for the person who dies . . . [for] the evil of death seems to lack a subject. While one is still alive one has not, of course, suffered the evil of death; yet when one is dead one does not exist to be the recipient of goods and evils. But if the

supposed subject of the evil fails to exist, then the claim that death is an evil for the person who dies would seem not (merely) false but incoherent.”⁶

Our moral intuitions persist in telling us that subsequent to death some sort of moral injury has been perpetrated. The inability of hedonism in general to account for this moral insight is a measure of its short-comings. Epicurus does not demonstrate that death is not an evil, he only demonstrates that over and beyond the evil of suffering there is a more fundamental evil, the evil of non-existence. Epicurus is quite right to suggest that death cannot hurt us. Death is not something you literally suffer, for it puts an end to you and your ability to suffer. Yet there is not only the evil of suffering, but also the evil of non-existence.

What is frightening about death is not suffering (pain), but non-existence. It is not the state in which the “I” finds itself, but the absence of the “I.” This is where the injury lies. When you kill me, you destroy something I value, not my car, my house, my friends or my reputation, but something much more fundamental - “me.” My point of view inside the universe has been obliterated.

Non-existence is a much more fundamental injury than suffering. There are many different kinds of suffering. There is only one kind of non-existence. Despite its unpleasantness, suffering is the realization of a certain capacity, an expression of what we are, an act performed by our consciousness. Death is the annihilation of all that we are, of the very “stuff” or “substance” of our being, of all capacities, of any potential for experience. It is in a very real sense the creation of nothing from something.

We can distinguish between two kinds of goods and evils: the good of existence and the evil of non-existence, and the goods and evils of sensation, pleasure and pain. The problem with any form of hedonism, Epicurean, utilitarian or otherwise, is that it reduces all goods and evils to those of sensation. The Epicurean dilemma is a “categorical mistake,” the mistaken identification or conflation of two separate categories of evil. As Silverstein points out, we cannot attribute the evil of sensation (pain or suffering) to a non-existing subject. But on the contrary, we can, indeed we must attribute the evil of non-existence to a non-existing subject. Only an existing subject can experience pain. Only a non-existing subject can be non-existent. To be a previously existent subject who is no longer existent, this is what it means to suffer the evil of non-existence. The Epicurean dilemma arises through a misguided equation of these two categories of evil, when we consider the evil of non-existence as if it was a category of the evil of sensation.

As is generally recognized, hedonism does not provide any serious obstacle to euthanasia. Jeremy Bentham’s dictum, “To be happy or not to be at all,” expresses it well. Happiness is, of course, a worthy goal. However, the comment seems to betray a lack of courage or moral fortitude. (If I can make others happy in spite of my unhappiness, doesn’t this make my existence worthwhile?) The sight of the handicapped, the debilitated, the terminally-ill or the aged may, on occasion, be the source of extreme emotional discomfort. However, once we determine whether euthanasia is in an objective sense moral, we can cope with, orient and nuance our feelings from the appropriate moral perspective.

Some would argue that recourse to euthanasia is a legitimate response to

suffering, in extreme circumstances, even a duty. However, to suggest that when a patient, say a loved one, is inflicted with the evil of suffering, it is permissible to inflict upon them an even greater evil, the evil of non-existence, is from a moral point of view incoherent. Indeed, what the suffering person desires is not death itself but relief from pain. Death is desired as a means to an end, not as an end itself. The patient is willing to pay a terrible price to escape from what is perceived as an intolerable situation.

The question posed by euthanasia is not whether suffering is an evil, but whether death is an acceptable remedy for suffering. If, like Anthony Flew,⁷ we can accept without question "the sensation view of ethics," euthanasia can be justified. However, once we recognize death for the evil that it is, euthanasia becomes indefensible. One cannot, in moral terms, justify the elimination of an evil by the imposition of an even greater evil.

A hedonist might argue that society is sometimes compelled to inflict evil (i.e. pain) for a greater good (i.e. pleasure). However we cannot inflict death as a means to good, for as Epicurus points out death is the absence of both pleasure and pain, that is, on the level of mere sensations, it is the absence of both "good" and "evil." And it goes without saying that the evil of non-existence cannot be a means to the good of existence. Once we destroy someone, we cannot, in any way, recreate or restore their existence. Although suffering can (in the appropriate circumstances) be a means to pleasure, death cannot be a means to life.

Libertarians will no doubt protest that prohibitions against voluntary euthanasia are a serious violation of personal liberty, and that a patient faced with a lingering disease should be free to choose death if he so desires. One could object that a desire for death is (in most cases) a reflection of our unwillingness to care for or support the terminally ill. But what, in a more fundamental sense, does it mean to say that society must provide the individual with euthanasia as an option? To borrow a phrase that has surfaced recently, what does it mean to say that a patient has a "right to die?"⁸ The slogan seems a contradiction in terms. Can a person have a right to evil? Can society be *morally* constrained to inflict an evil upon a person at his mere request? Surely not. Once one recognizes death (or suffering) as an evil, one relinquishes any right to it.

Hedonism in general does not provide us with a person-centered, but a sensation-centered view of ethics. In so much as we value the "I" and not just pleasurable sensations, the destruction of the individual human being must of itself represent an immense moral evil. This does not mean that death as a natural process is to be abhorred or despised. It is the killing, the deliberate and irrevocable destruction of another human being that is morally indefensible.

Epicureanism, utilitarianism, or any other form of hedonism, represents an impoverished moral perspective. Why is the killing of the innocent universally abhorred? The sensation view of ethics cannot, in any fundamental sense, provide a convincing answer to this question. Death is not the introduction of a new and more fundamental kind of evil. Unless we recognize, in moral terms, the good and evil of existence — in popular terms "the right to life" — we cannot ascribe a moral injury to a subject who has already died.

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2. "Epicurus to Menoeceus," trans. C. Bailey, in A. I. Melden, ed., *Ethical Theories*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1967), pp. 143-149.
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5. Harry Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXVII (July 1980): 404.
6. Silverstein, p. 402.
7. Anthony Flew, "The Principle of Euthanasia," in Robert Hunt and John Arras eds., *Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine* (Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 225-239.
8. The expression seems quite popular in the mass media. Interestingly enough, the title of the text in which Flew's essay first appeared was *Euthanasia and the Right to Death*. [A. B. Downing, ed. (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1969).]