

Epicurus, Lucretius, and Nagel on Death

Summary

Epicurus

- Line 1:

P1 If you are not aware of something, then it cannot harm you.

P2 The dead are not aware of their death.

C Death is not a harm.

- He considers the objection: *But even if we are never aware of the state of being dead, we can be aware of death's approach. Can't that be a harm, even if death itself can't be a harm?* His response (line 4):

P1* If something is not a harm, then there is no reason to fear it.

P2* Death is not a harm. [from above]

C* There is no reason to fear death.

Lucretius

- Line 5 (a similar argument is found at Epicurus, line 5)

P1** In order for something to harm you, you must exist at the same time as that thing.

P2** When you are dead, you do not exist.

C** Death cannot harm you.

Nagel

- If death is a harm, then it is harmful not because *being dead* is a bad state to be in, but rather because *being alive* is a good state to be in, and death deprives us of this good.
 - His reasons for thinking that the state of nonexistence is not bad in and of itself: nobody views the time before their births as a misfortune; and nobody would have any objection to a *temporary* suspension of their existence (time travel or suspended animation, *eg*).
- Three *prima facie* difficulties with this view:

- Epicurus’s argument **P1–C**
- Lucretius’s argument **P1** –C****
- How could our *posthumous* deprivation of life be a harm if our *prenatal* deprivation of life was not?
- Nagel’s response to Epicurus’s argument is to reject **P1**.
 - His counterexample: people can be harmed by things that they aren’t aware of. For instance: a person whose spouse cheats on them is harmed, even if they never become aware of the infidelity.
- His response to Lucretius’s argument is to reject **P1****.
 - His counterexample: somebody could be harmed by things that happen after their deaths. For instance, if your best friend breaks a deathbed promise, you have been harmed.
- Nagel thinks that both Epicurus’s **P1** and Lucretius’s **P1**** involve an overly simplistic conception of what the subject of harm is and how it is that the subject is harmed.
 - Both Epicurus and Lucretius are assuming that the subject of harm must be a person who exists at the time that the harm occurs, and that, if they are harmed, then the harm must affect their immediate subjective experience (they must *feel* harmed).
 - Nagel’s counterexample: if a brilliant person receives a brain injury that reduces them to the mental condition of a contented infant, that person has been harmed. However, the harm cannot lie in their immediate subjective experience, since we do not think that the state of contented infants are harmful ones.
- On Nagel’s account, the subject of harm is not an individual at a time, but rather just the individual — that individual can be harmed even if there’s no point in the individual’s life *at which* they are harmed. Also, on Nagel’s view, whether something is a harm can depend upon more than the individual’s subjective experiences; it could depend too upon their *history* and which *possibilities* were open to them.
- He says the following about the argument from the symmetry of *posthumous/prenatal* nonexistence: early death deprives a person of further life, because if they were to die later, then they would have a longer life; but late birth does not deprive a person of more life, because, if they were to be born earlier, they would not necessarily have a longer life (they might just die earlier).
- Nagel considers whether it should matter how *expected* the possibility is. Since it isn’t normal to live past 85, is being denied that possibility a harm? He concludes that, even if it isn’t normal to live past 85, it would be good to — so being deprived of that possibility may still be a harm. In that case, he says, perhaps we’re all in store for a bad ending.