

“Death”

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Reflection on death gives rise to a variety of philosophical questions. One of the deepest of these is a question about the nature of death. Typically, philosophers interpret this question as a call for an analysis, or definition, of the concept of death. Plato proposed to define death as the separation of soul from body. This definition is not acceptable to materialists, who think that there are no souls. It is also unacceptable to anyone who thinks that plants and lower animals have no souls, but can die. Others have defined death simply as the cessation of life. This too is problematic, since an organism that goes into suspended animation ceases to live, but may not die.

Death is described as ‘mysterious’. It is not clear what this means. Suppose we cannot formulate a satisfactory analysis of the concept of death. In this respect death would be mysterious – but no more so than any other concept that defies analysis. Some have said that what makes death especially mysterious and frightening is the fact that we cannot know what it will be like.

Death is typically regarded as a great evil, especially if it strikes someone too soon. However, Epicurus and others argued that death cannot harm those who die, since people go out of existence when they die, and people cannot be harmed at times when they don’t exist. Others have countered that the evil of death may lie in the fact that death deprives us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had lived. On this view death may be a great evil for a person, even if the person ceases to exist at the moment of death.

Philosophers have also been concerned with the question whether people can survive death. The question is open to several interpretations, depending upon what we take people to be, and what we mean by ‘survive’. Traditional materialists take each person to be a purely physical object – a human body. Since human bodies generally continue to exist after death, such materialists presumably must say that we generally survive death. However, such survival would be of little value to the deceased, since the surviving entity is just a lifeless corpse. Dualists take each person to have both a body and a soul. A dualist may maintain that at death the soul separates from the body, and continues to enjoy (or suffer) various experiences after the body has died.

Some who believe in survival think that the eternal life of the soul after bodily death can be a good beyond comparison. But Bernard Williams has argued that eternal life would be profoundly unattractive. If we imagine ourselves perpetually stuck at a given age, we may reasonably fear that eternal life will eventually become rather boring. On the other hand, if we imagine ourselves experiencing an endless sequence of varied “lives”, each disconnected from the others, then it is questionable whether it will in fact be “one person” who lives eternally.

Finally, there are questions about death and the meaning of life. Suppose death marks the end of all conscious experience. Would our lives then be rendered meaningless? Or would the fact of impending death help us to recognize the value of our lives, and thereby give deeper meaning to life?

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1 Analysis of death vs. criterion of death

The most fundamental philosophical question about death is the question about its nature, or essence – ‘What is death?’ When philosophers offer answers to this question, they may be said to be defining death. It is important to recognize that two distinct projects may be confused under a single name – ‘defining death’. The first of these projects is a project in conceptual analysis. Those who engage in it try to give an account of the nature of death. Since death is the event that takes place when an organism dies, one way to explain the nature of death would be to formulate a definition of ‘x dies at t’. If successful, such a definition would tell us what we mean when we say that something dies, and thus reveal the nature of death.

Among the most popular proposals is:

D1: x dies at t =df. x ceases to be alive at t.

A definition of this sort is successful if it is true. A fully adequate definition of death would display the structure of the concept of death.

The second, or “criterial”, project is a project in public policy. For many practical purposes, it is important that we have agreement on the question whether a person is dead or alive. Furthermore, for practical purposes, it is important that there be agreement about the time of death. Even if we agreed that D1 is true, we might still be in grave doubt about whether certain people are dead. For example, consider a person whose brain has been irreparably destroyed in an accident, but whose

blood is being oxygenated and circulated by a combination of life-support mechanisms. Since it is unclear whether people such as this have ceased being alive, it is unclear whether they are dead.

Those who engage in the criterial project try to formulate a relatively easy to apply criterion of human death. Such a criterion would pick out an observable change that occurs around the time when most would agree humans die. The proposal then would be that this change (e.g., cessation of electrical activity in the brain; cessation of respiration; cessation of heartbeat; etc.) should be taken to be the legal mark of death. If the proposal were accepted, then medical personnel, undertakers, etc. could appeal to the criterion as a legal defense. ‘There were no brainwaves when I shut off the respirator – so he was already dead.’

Conceptual analysis would yield a necessary truth about the structure of the concept of death. The search for such analyses fits into an honored philosophical tradition going back to Plato and Aristotle. It is relevantly like the attempts to analyse the concepts of knowledge, causation, goodness, truth, etc. So the analytical project is classically philosophical. The criterial project, if successful, would lead to a contingently useful criterion of human death. If it were accepted by the courts, it might remain in use for decades (until medical technology made it obsolete). But it would at best be a contingent principle whose value would be temporary and practical. The project itself requires knowledge of medical details and legal precedents, but does not seem to be a project for which philosophers are especially well qualified. I shall have nothing further to say about the criterial project.

2 Death as separation of body from soul

In the *Phaedo*, Plato describes an exchange between Socrates and Simmias:

Soc: ... Do we believe that there is such a thing as death?

Soc: Is it not the separation of soul and body? And to be dead is the completion of this; when the soul exists in herself, and is released from the body and the body is released from the soul, what is this but death?

Sim: Just so.

These remarks suggest a view about the nature of death:

D2: x dies at t =df. x 's soul separates from x 's body at t .

This is problematic. One problem is that D2 entails that if a thing is to die, it must have a soul. Yet many find it hard to believe that plants (which clearly can die) have souls. Similarly, many find it hard to believe that every living cell has a soul. Yet these cells can die.

Many philosophers accept a materialist conception of people. They think that people are material objects – their bodies. Materialists of this sort think that people have no souls. Unless they want to say that people never die, D2 is clearly unacceptable to such materialists.

3 Death as the cessation of life

The most popular analysis of the concept of death is expressed by D1. One problem with D1 is obscurity. There is great controversy about the concept of life. Some claim that to be alive is to be able to engage in life processes, such as nutrition, respiration, and reproduction. Others say that life requires the presence of a soul, or other animating substance. Still others define life by appeal to the notion that living things are able to resist the force of entropy. A number of incompatible accounts of the nature of life have been proposed, but none enjoys universal acceptance. Hence, it is not entirely clear that we know precisely what we mean when we say that something is alive. Since in D1 death is defined by appeal to the concept of life, D1 inherits the obscurity of the concept of life.

Furthermore, D1 seems to be inconsistent with certain empirical facts. One fact concerns suspended animation. Freezing, drying, and certain other procedures may be used to arrest the life functions of formerly living entities. Viruses, bacteria, and other microorganisms are placed in suspended animation in laboratories as a matter of course. Sperm, eggs, and blastulas of horses, cows, and even human beings may be held in this state for months or years. Since all the life functions of such entities have been suspended, it seems that they have ceased to live. But since such entities can return to life again later, it seems that they have not died. D1 therefore fails, since it implies that when such organisms go into suspended animation, they die.

In light of this difficulty with suspended animation, it might appear that it would be better to define death not as the mere cessation of life, but as the permanent cessation of life:

D3: x dies at t =df. x ceases permanently to be alive at t .

If an organism goes into suspended animation, but will later return to life, D3 implies that it has not died. Its loss of life was not permanent. Thus, D3 seems to be an improvement over D1.

Nevertheless, D3 is still problematic. Suppose two similar organisms go into suspended animation at some time. Suppose one is later brought back to life, whereas the other is not. Then during the period when both were in suspended animation, the first was not dead (since it had not permanently ceased to live) but the second was already dead (since it had permanently ceased to be alive). This may seem odd, since the two organisms might have been cell-for-cell duplicates during the period of suspended animation, yet according to D3 one was already dead and the other was not. This shows that D3 conflicts with the intuitively plausible notion that the life and death of an organism depends upon the intrinsic character of that organism.

Thus none of the traditional analyses of the concept of death is clearly correct. The fundamental question about death remains unanswered: we do not know precisely what death is.

4 The Mystery of Death

A recurrent theme in popular (as well as some philosophical) thought about death is the idea that death is mysterious. As we have seen, it is difficult to formulate a satisfactory philosophical analysis of the concept of death. If it is impossible to analyse the concept of death, then it is impossible to explain precisely what we mean when we say that something dies. It might be said then that in virtue of this fact death is mysterious. Of course, death is not distinctively mysterious in this way – all other unanalyzable concepts are equally mysterious in this way.

Yet it is widely thought that there is a special mystery about death. Some seem to take this mystery to be this: we cannot know or even conceive what being dead will be like. This might be thought to follow from the fact that most of us who are living have no recollection of ever having been dead, and thus we lack first-hand experience of what death is like. Furthermore, since there is considerable doubt about the veracity of the testimony of those few who claim to recall having been dead, none of us has a reliable second-hand report of what death is like.

A deeper reason for thinking it hard to imagine death is this: suppose death is an “experiential blank”. That is, suppose that the dead have absolutely no psychological experiences. It has been claimed that being dead is impossible to conceptualize precisely because being dead is like this.

While it must be admitted that it is quite difficult to form any clear conception of what an experiential blank would feel like, this may be a bogus problem. Perhaps it is difficult to imagine this feeling not because it is mysterious or hidden, but rather because there is no such feeling. If the dead have no experiences, then it is no wonder and no mystery that we cannot imagine what the experiences of the dead feel like.

5 The Evil of Death

Suppose that we cease to have psychological experiences at death. Then we cannot experience pain or any other sort of misfortune while dead. How then can death harm us? And if death cannot harm us, how can it be reasonable for us to fear death? Lucretius claimed that it would be more reasonable for us to view death with the same calm indifference with which we view the infinite stretch of time prior to our creation. These are ancient questions. They were discussed by Plato and by Epicurus and his followers. They are still discussed today.

Dualists who believe that our souls continue to live after our bodies die have an easy reply to these questions. They can say that we don't cease to have psychological experiences at death. If we go to hell, we will suffer eternal torment. Thus, death can harm us and (if we have been bad) it is quite reasonable for us to fear death. Our deaths will mark the beginning of the worst and longest period of misery we will ever experience.

The questions about the evil of death are more puzzling for materialists and others who accept the notion that the dead cannot experience pains or other misfortunes. How can such a person explain the evil of death?

Some (e.g., Thomas Nagel) reject the principle that we cannot be harmed by something that we do not experience. They claim that sometimes we are harmed by things that we never notice. They cite as examples the harms of deprivation. Suppose a person suffers a brain injury and is reduced to the mental state of a contented infant. She may experience no pain, and may not be aware of any misfortune, yet she has been seriously harmed simply by the deprivation of her mental capacities. According to a more extreme view, a person may be harmed by falling into nonexistence. Consider a girl who dies painlessly in her youth. Suppose that if she had lived, she would have been quite happy. Her death therefore seems to deprive her of a lifetime of happiness. Some (e.g., McMahan, Feldman) see this as a grave harm – though of course a harm of which the victim has no conscious experience. These philosophers claim that it may be reasonable for us to view death as a great evil – even if we will have no psychological experiences while dead. Perhaps the fear of death is not entirely irrational.

6 The Survival of Death

For a variety of reasons, many of us are deeply troubled by the question whether we will survive death. The question is open to several interpretations. Different interpretations arise from different conceptions of the metaphysics of persons, and from different conceptions of death and survival.

Materialists of one traditional sort maintain that people are just physical objects – their own bodies. On this view, there are no souls. People have psychological properties simply because their brains are functioning properly. A materialist of this sort might take the question about survival to be this: will I (= my body) continue to exist after I die? On this interpretation, the person is taken to be the human body; survival is taken to be continued existence. If we interpret the question in this way, the answer becomes fairly obvious. In the vast majority of cases the human body does continue to exist for at least a few months after it dies. However, since the body is then dead, and the brain is no longer functioning, it presumably has no psychological experiences. It is difficult to understand how anyone could take this sort of survival to be of any value to the deceased.

Such a materialist might reinterpret the question to mean this: will I continue to live after I die? Almost certainly, the answer to this question must be ‘no’. If you are just your body, and your body becomes dead and ceases forever to live when it dies, then you become dead and cease forever to live when you die.

Dualists maintain that each person has both a body and a soul. In classical forms of dualism, the soul is taken to be a non-physical object – not made of atoms or molecules. During life, the soul and body are intimately associated. Some would say that during life the soul “animates” the body.

Dualists of one traditional sort take each person to be a unified complex of body and soul. Descartes seems in some passages to endorse this view of persons. (‘I am not lodged in my body merely as a pilot in a ship, but so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermingled with it, that with it I form a unitary whole.’) It would be natural for such a dualist to adopt the Platonic conception, and take death to be the dissolution of the soul/body compound. For such a philosopher, the question about survival may come to this: ‘Will I (= this complex of body and soul) continue to exist after I am dissolved by death and my parts have gone their separate ways?’ Once we have

accepted the metaphysical assumptions of this sort of dualism, the answer to this question seems to be ‘No.’ If the person is the complex of body and soul, and the complex is destroyed by death, then the person is destroyed by death. Though the parts may continue to exist, the compound itself must cease to exist and to live at death.

Dualists of another traditional sort take persons to be embodied souls. On this view, each living person is a soul that happens to be attached to a body. Descartes seems in other passages to endorse this view of persons. (‘... I have a body with which I am very closely conjoined, yet ... I am truly distinct from my body, and can exist without it.’) A philosopher who accepts this metaphysical conception of persons might understand the question about survival in this way: ‘Will I (= my soul) continue to have psychological experiences after my body has died?’ Although some have denied it, it seems conceivable that the correct answer to this question is ‘yes’, and it is somewhat easier to understand why someone who accepted this metaphysical conception of persons might be interested in this sort of survival.

It is interesting to note that on this second dualistic conception, it is not quite clear that people actually die. Of course, human bodies die. However, on the view in question, no person is a human body. Each living person is just a soul – albeit a soul that happens to be ensconced in a mortal body. The thing that continues to live after the death of the body is a thing that does not die – the soul. The thing that dies – the body – typically deteriorates and eventually goes out of existence after death.

7 Immortality

We might think that the concept of immortality is the concept of never dying. However, this would be slightly misleading, since it would imply that non-biological objects such as rocks and bricks, atoms and planets, numbers and properties, are all immortal. Since they never live, they never die. It would also be misleading to suppose that the concept of immortality is the concept of living sometime, but never dying, since this would have odd implications, too. Consider a living thing that goes into eternal suspended animation. It never dies, but this sort of immortality is hardly better than death.

It is better therefore to take the concept of immortality to be the concept of living forever. This seems more interesting, and is probably closer to the concept that has been discussed.

Some say that eternal life would be a great blessing – something of unsurpassable value. Perhaps they reason as follows: life is good; more of a good thing is always better than less; therefore eternal life is exceedingly good. But others (most notably Bernard Williams) have argued that eternal life could not possibly be desirable.

Williams considers several possible “models” of eternal life. On one, a person (identified as ‘E. M.’) remains eternally at the same biological age (in his example, the age is 42). Williams claims that after a few hundred years, this person would inevitably become bored with life. The boredom is inevitable, he insists, in virtue of the fact that ‘everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her.’

On another “model”, we imagine that E. M. does not remain at a constant biological age of 42, and does not retain a certain character. Rather, we imagine that E. M. lives out an endless succession of different lives, each with a new character and personality. In this way, E. M. avoids the tedium of the first model. Williams suggests that this is not a model on which a single person lives forever. Rather, it is a model on which a series of distinct persons live. Thus, it has no bearing on the question of the desirability of eternal life.

It could be argued, however, that Williams has neglected certain important possibilities. One is the possibility that there are activities whose pleasurable nature does not decrease with repetition. Another is that people may grow and change gradually over time, and thereby come to have new interests without losing their identities as individuals. Such growth might make it possible for a single individual to live forever without falling into the tedium that might result from steadfast pursuit of just one interest over an endless stretch of time.

8 Death and the Meaning of Life

A number of philosophers and others have suggested that there is some important connection between death and “the meaning of life”. A person who thinks that each of us inevitably dies, and that death is not followed by any sort of afterlife, may think that death makes life meaningless. In some passages, Schopenhauer seems to have expressed this view.

Others who believe in God and immortality may see it this way: God placed us here on earth in order that we may either sin or achieve our salvation. If we sin, we are punished with eternal damnation. If we achieve salvation, we are rewarded with eternal bliss. A person who accepts this picture might say that if there were no God and no afterlife in which to receive reward or punishment, then life would be ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing.’ In other words, if there were no God and no afterlife, then our lives would not be components in a larger and purposeful scheme. We would in this case live for a while, and then simply die. To many, if life were like this, it would be meaningless. Those who believe in an afterlife may take comfort in thoughts of this afterlife, and think that its existence serves to make ordinary life here on earth meaningful.

Yet it appears that sense can be made of the idea that life is meaningful even if it ends in death. If people have worthwhile goals, and exert themselves to achieve these goals, and take some pleasure both in the exertion and in the achievement, then their lives may be said to be meaningful – at least in what Paul Edwards calls “the terrestrial sense”. Death of course may bring an end to such meaningfulness, but the fact that they will someday die seems not to be able to rob people’s lives of this sort of meaningfulness while they live.

According to an even more extreme view, life is made more meaningful by the recognition that it will end with death. According to this view, we gain a deeper appreciation for the common details of our everyday experience when we fully realize that someday we will die, and will then have nothing at all.

References and further reading

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*Epicurus (341 BC - 270 BC) 'Letter to Menoecceus', translated by C. Bailey, in *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, edited and with an introduction by Whitney J. Oates, New York: The Modern Library, 1940), 30-34. (Classic statement of the view that since we will not exist once we are dead, death cannot harm us. Claims that the fear of death is wholly irrational.)

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