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# HOW WE SHOULD THINK ABOUT DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF NAGEL'S AND BLACKBURN'S APPROACHES

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## ABSTRACT

If we consider the issues in the area of metaphysics, death would undoubtedly be counted as one of the most important. The importance of this issue begins with its status as a fact and at the same time our difficulty in conceptualizing this fact. We do not know how to think about something we in a sense know. It leads us again and again to strive to conceptualize something that cannot be communicated as experience, as understandable. This essay will mainly observe Thomas Nagel's and Simon Blackburn's philosophical observations on these questions, against the observations on death from Greek philosophy. The essay will show how we should move beyond a thinking about death, to a consideration of how the fact of death should influence our reflections on our lives.

**Keywords:** Death, Thomas Nagel, Simon Blackburn,

## Why Death Matters

Every human being is aware that death is a 'condition' or 'something' that all of us, one day, have to face. This is the first fact. However, the second fact is that we have no idea what death is like. What does this tell us? We generally tend to think about the end of life as a fact. Yet this fact

itself seems to become more obscure when we pursue it further. Another problem is that we tend to understand death as a 'condition' even though we have no idea what that condition is. Therefore, it may be better to say rather that we imagine what death is, instead of knowing what death is.

So... what is death then? And what kind of question is it? The American Philosopher Thomas Nagel labeled this as a 'mortal question.' There are two books, according to Nagel, that discuss this issue. Namely *Mortal Questions* (1979) and *What Does It All Mean?* (1987).

It is worth keeping in mind that to discover the 'essence' or the 'nature' of death is not the central point of this work. Nagel simply puts forth a hypothesis concerning the nature of death, or permanent loss, while not making judgements about it. According to Nagel:

“Since I want to leave aside the question whether we are, or might be, immortal in some form, I shall simply use the word ‘death’ and its cognates in this discussion to mean *permanent* death, unsupplemented by any form of conscious survival. I want to ask whether death is in itself an evil; and how great an evil, and what kind, it might be.”<sup>2</sup>

So, let's simply say, death in this context is nothing, but death in an empirical sense. Definitely, we could, in a sense, doubt that in order to give a response to a specific question, the very clear hypothesis (which comes prior to that question) needs to be done seriously. Nevertheless, one could still wonder why the hypothesis was concluded in that way. Is it enough for one to say just because it is understandable?

The reply whether what death would seem like from the section 'Death' in *What Does It All Mean?* is not far more different. That is to say, he still basically believes that death should be considered as the end of life. In other words, death and loss are totally equal. He again approaches the problem by distancing himself from the belief there is a life after death.

“... If we go only by ordinary observation, rather than religious doctrines or spiritualist claims to communicate with the dead, there is no reason to believe in an afterlife. Is that, however, a reason to believe that there is *not* an afterlife? I think so, but others may prefer to remain neutral. Still others may believe in an afterlife on the basis of faith, in the absence of evidence. I myself don’t fully understand how this kind of faith-inspired belief is possible, but evidently some people can manage it, and even find it natural.”<sup>3</sup>

We may now see that his standpoints were scientific even though he did not go much in detail. I personally think that Nagel set his own philosophical hypothesis in this way to lead to the next question (or problem) which he considered more fundamental, namely ‘how should we think (or feel) about death?’ To put it more specifically, death may imply other things, one might say, but to us, human beings who exist in the world, death in this context can universally be understood by our own common sense.

While Nagel’s reply to the question whether what death seems to be simple, the response from Simon Blackburn’s, is more complex and debatable. He stated his standpoint as follows:

“I have talked throughout of death as extinction, and ignored the alleged possibility of an afterlife. I believe that we are only tempted to think we can make sense of this idea because of the mistake about imagination that we have already confronted. Mankind’s long obsession with existence in the hereafter is the result of a philosophical error.”<sup>4</sup>

The first sentence above can obviously guarantee his thought to a certain extent. Death is nothing, but loss. The question of whether there is life after death was also ignored due to the fact that death for him is claimed as the state that cannot be imagined. In other words, I suppose,

the point itself does not deal with rationality or even the point itself is not the case at all. Hence, we can basically conclude here that the meanings of death between Nagel's and Blackburn's in this context are similar. However, it may be said that one of the key points which would help us to understand Blackburn's thought about the nature of death better is placed at the last sentence, especially in the last words "... is the result of a philosophical error". But what does it mean by that then?

Strangely enough, he did try to explain this point further in the section 'Not-being', but the result we get is nothing (or at best only unclear examples). Nonetheless, in my opinion, I think at least we could guess what he had in mind. He stated like this as follows:

"... Some may think that they can satisfactorily model an afterlife on this one: the soul is then a kind of ghost, a shadowy version of a person, the kind of things that people claim to see... As projections of our own mental states, these phenomena may be real enough: a house in which a partner or child has died is indeed haunted by their absence... But being haunted by an absence is not being by a kind of thing..."<sup>5</sup>

I personally believe what he would like to clarify here is the confusion between the condition of 'being present' and 'being absent'. That is to say, the state of death (absence) does not at all overlap with the state of living (presence). In other words, we tend to think that death is a part of our life, but it is actually not. We make a philosophical mistake in believing that the two states are working together.

### **Thinking about Death: Problems and Arguments**

These are only initial problems when we think about death as a pure absence. Nagel and Blackburn did respond to this in various ways even though their approach tends to be the same. In this part, we clarify and critique their approach by appealing to arguments taken from Epicurus (341-270 BC) and his follower Lucretius (99-55 BC).

### ***Problem 1: Confronting the Epicurean Circle***

In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus wrote:

“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.”<sup>6</sup>

To put it simply, “where death is, I am not; where I am, death is not” (Holt, 2019). In other words, there is not any involvement at all between the two states of nature. Thus, to answer the question how we should think about death, for Epicurus, is then simple. That is, there is nothing to think about since it has had nothing to do with us in the first place. In short, to think about it is not the case. This includes the emotion like fear as well. He claimed that it is totally irrational to fear death.

If we look at it (Epicurean formula), one may say that this point of view seems similar to Nagel’s and Blackburn’s. They have the same viewpoint about the problem of death considered as a fact, but concerning interpretation they part ways. I will consider Blackburn’s first, and then Nagel, and finally I will provide my own criticism.

According to Blackburn, there were two parts that he did interpret quite clear about this point. He stated in his work (see bibliography) like this as follows:

“If we try to imagine death, we probably think of cold, of silence, of immobility: a state which then goes on, unchanging, for a very long time – forever, in fact. The ultimate Big Sleep. And that may seem a rather grim prospect, even if the sleep in question is beautifully peaceful. But we have already put a foot wrong if we are on this path. We are trying to imagine what it will be like *for ourselves*, and that is a crucial false step. My death will be like nothing, for me, because there will be no ‘me’ left. It will not be like being cold, or silent, or immobile, or being

in a hole in the ground, nor, if my body is cremated, will it be like being put in a fire. It will be like nothing. For me, that is. The world, of course, will go on being like it is, or perhaps changing, for everyone else who is still around.”<sup>7</sup>

This was written in the section, called ‘The Big Sleep’, and another part which is going to be shown was placed in the section named ‘Not-being’.

“... In cases where until recently there was something or someone, that may itself be something terrible to lament and mourn. I suppose I secretly hope, like many others, that friends and family will be at least a little sad when it happens to me, which I hope will happen only after a benign old age pottering around and correcting my philosophical works. But for myself, it will be nothing about which I will be bothered.”<sup>8</sup>

If we look at the first quotation, we see that Blackburn tended to approach the problem as Epicurus did. Blackburn suggested that it is a very big mistake for human beings to try to imagine something that cannot actually be imagined. And death is counted in this category. He also made it clear that it is impossible to think about death as such and such, due to the fact that there will be no person thinking after death. The second quotation, suggests that this is nothing to worry about.

Thus, in which way precisely should we think about death, according to Blackburn? I suppose that his points of view are not far more different from Epicurean. Namely since death has had nothing to with us, therefore there is no reason at all to think about it. Nonetheless, one might say that to think in this way is rather idealistic and not so practical. I think Blackburn understood this point for he acknowledges the sadness of his loved ones.

While Blackburn seemed to agree with the Epicurean argument to a certain extent, Nagel approached it in another way. In his work, 'Death' & 'The Meaning of Life' (1987: 91) Nagel invited us to think about death by asking whether it is a good thing, a bad thing, or neutral. Nagel's approach here tends to be more practical rather than metaphysical.

“If death without anything after it is either a good or bad thing for the person who dies, it must be a *negative* good or evil. Since in itself it is nothing, it can't be either pleasant or unpleasant. If it's good, that must be because it is the absence of something bad (like boredom or pain); if it's bad, that must be because it is the absence of something good (like interesting or pleasant experiences).”<sup>9</sup>

We can see that this explanation that he replied to this issue has a certain wisdom. If we think that death is bad, it means that something good has been deprived. Likewise, if we think that death is good, the explanation would be that it lacks something bad.

Nagel uses the term 'negative evil'. He writes:

“When you die, all the good things in your life come to a stop: no more meals, movies, travel, conversation, love, work, books, music, or anything else. If those things would be good, their absence is bad.”<sup>10</sup>

Another example involves a man faced with two types of death.

“For instance, suppose he is trapped in a burning building, and a beam falls on his head, killing him instantly. As a result, he doesn't suffer the agony of being burned to death. It seems that in that case we can say he was lucky to be killed painlessly, because it avoided something worse. Death at that time was a negative good...”<sup>11</sup>

According to ‘Death’ in *Mortal Questions*, ‘Why ‘death’ matters?’, the question of whether death is bad is actually the central point of this work.

There are two ways it responds to Epicurean belief. First, similar to the idea of ‘negative evil’, Nagel chose the word ‘deprivation’. He formulates his hypothesis as follows: “... it can be said that life is all we have and the loss of it is the greatest loss we can sustain”, then he stated “If death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of.”<sup>12</sup>

Deprivation plays an important role in his analysis of ‘after-death’ or ‘something like after-death’ which Epicurus never paid attention to at all. He gave us this example which he called ‘the example of deprivation whose severity approaches that of death’:

“Suppose an intelligent person receives a brain injury that reduces him to the mental condition of a contented infant, and that such desires as remain to him can be satisfied by a custodian, so that he is free from care. Such a development would be widely regarded as a severe misfortune, not only for his friends and relations, or for society, but also and primarily, for the person himself. This does not mean that a contented infant is unfortunate. The intelligent adult who has been *reduced* to this condition is the subject of the misfortune. He is the one we pity, though of course he does not mind his condition.”<sup>13</sup>

We see that Nagel is focusing on ‘value of life’, not that of death. The purpose of this example reflect the Epicurean position which holds the idea that there is not worse than totally losing the state of sensation. Nevertheless, there is still a question whether ‘negative evil’ would apply to someone in state of pain or despair. As far as I have observed, it seems that he did not answer this question clearly, but there is another case which is, in a way, similar or at least, can be compared.



“There are elements which, if added to one’s experiences, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one’s experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral*: it is emphatically positive.”<sup>14</sup>

From the explanations and arguments above, we may see that there are actually two ways we should think about death. Either we should think death is bad or, we should consider death as neutral. If we believe in the former, it would mean that we prioritize the value of life. Yet if we go for the latter, it suggests that we consider death as a separate entity, and view death in an ontological rather than a practical sense. However, one can still wonder, which position is “correct”. I would suggest that instead of asking which one is more right, we should consider which leads to more problems. For example, one may disagree with Nagel’s deprivation account on the reasoning that we could imagine what life is only when we are alive. Nevertheless, if Nagel’s idea does not seem to be convincing, does this mean that Epicurus’s or Blackburn’s viewpoint is better? The biggest problem is clarifying whether such a hypothesis concerning death is connected to fact or truth.

### ***Problem 2: Seeing Eternity as (Dis)Similarity***

While Blackburn seems to be close to Epicurus, in the next aspect of death he comes opposite. The case is whether or not, as Holt (2009) put it, “it does not matter whether you die young or old, for in either case you’ll be dead for an eternity”.

We will see that the Epicurean circle somehow does answer this problem. Since death, for the Epicureans, is not a part of human life, why should death matter to us even if someone who dies at a young age? The answer is it cannot. This is because, the essence of the two states are not measurable by quality and quantity. They exist independent from one another. Therefore, it is not enough only to say that they two cannot be compared, but they have no relationship.

I personally feel that this standpoint is rather extreme, the hypothesis on its own is very hard to prove as death in this sense could be categorized as objective while we at best can imagine death via our own senses.

Let's now come to Nagel. Since we have seen in the last part that his basic philosophical standpoint was to focus on the value of human life first. I shall first begin with the following observation:

“The death of Keats at 24 is generally regarded as tragic; that of Tolstoy at 82 is not. Although they will both be dead forever, Keats' death deprived him of many years of life which were allowed to Tolstoy; so in a clear sense Keats' loss was greater (though not in sense standardly employed in mathematical comparison between infinite quantities).”<sup>15</sup>

This is very clear and easy to understand. However, one may wonder whether it is rational to think in this way, especially when he says that “Keats' loss was greater”. There are three points to consider here. First, it is the assumption of a ‘quality’ that makes a young's person's loss greater. Second, is the temporal factor as ‘quantity’. And there is a third factor. Nagel writes:

“Let me add only two observations. First, the value of life and its contents does not attach to mere organic survival: almost everyone would be indifferent (other things equal) between immediate death and immediate coma followed by death twenty years later without reawakening. And second, like most goods, this can be multiplied by time: more is better than less.”<sup>16</sup>

The phrase ‘more is better than less’ may be the best reflection of his basic standpoint on the matter of death and the value of life. However, one could still wonder whether this case does cover all the cases even including the loss of someone at a young age who totally lacks morality.

The complexity that immediately emerges would be how to practically deal with the abstract condition like quality due to the fact that quality itself is also divided into many levels. Another remark that should as well be put would be the case why exactly old person's loss is seen to be less tragic than a young person's loss. I personally think that Nagel's and Blackburn's points of view on this were somehow totally alike. There is another quotation from Nagel which shows a simple paradox on this issue.

“Perhaps you have had the thought that nothing really matters, because in two hundred years we'll all be dead. This is a peculiar thought, because it's not clear why the fact that we'll be dead in two hundred years should imply that nothing we do now really matters.”<sup>17</sup>

Let's now consider Blackburn's thought. His thought about this issue was illustrated in the section 'Taking it lightly?'

“The death of someone young is much more of a tragedy than the death of someone elderly, just because the child's life was brimful of the prospects that will never materialize, whereas the elderly life is not. We feel the loss much more, and rightly so.”<sup>18</sup>

According to this explanation, there are two points to take into consideration. If Nagel's, formula of 'more is better than less' could measure the *badness* of death, does it mean that just to live longer is enough to reconcile its badness?

### ***Problem 3: Lucretius and his Symmetry Approach to Non-Existence***

Here we come to the last problem, the classic problem which was raised by Lucretius, an Epicurus's follower. This issue deals with the nature of prenatal and posthumous non-existence and whether they are different or alike.

“... Lucretius suggests, that’s silly, right? Nobody is upset about the fact that there was an eternity of nonexistence *before* they were born. In which case, he concludes, it doesn’t make any sense to be upset about the eternity of nonexistence *after* you die.”<sup>19</sup>

This undoubtedly shows how Epicurean he was. Any states, that is to say, which do not contain any sensations are totally distinct from the state of life. And this state of prenatal nonexistence is also counted to be in this type. The very strong point of this argument is to claim that since the period before our birth and after our death is categorized as ‘nonexistence’, there would then be no reason to divide the two cases. Thus, it is then irrational to fear death due to the fact that there is no difference between the state of death and the state of prenatal nonexistence. As Lucretius (cited in Kagan, 2012: 225) also suggested that “if nonexistence is so bad – and by the deprivation account it seems that we want to say that it is – shouldn’t I be upset at the fact that there was also this eternity of nonexistence before I was born?”.

Nagel, countered that the states of prenatal and posthumous nonexistence cannot be the same. He told us that the essence of the story is to look at humans’ experiences which have been deprived. Therefore, it would be totally nonsense to say that the states of posthumous and prenatal nonexistence are equal, since the state of prenatal nonexistence has never been filled with life and experiences. Nagel writes:

“That is not true, however, and the difference between the two explains why it is reasonable to regard them differently. It is true that both the time before a man’s birth and the time after his death are times when he does not exist. But the time after his death is time of which his death deprives him. It is time in which, had he not died then, he would be alive. Therefore any death entails the loss of *some* life that its victim would have led had he not died at that or any earlier point. We know perfectly well what it would be for him to have had it instead of losing it, and there is

no difficulty in identifying the loser.”<sup>20</sup>

Blackburn’s position lies somewhere in-between concerning this issue. That is, on the one hand, he tended to agree with Lucretius, but he was somehow still questioning the possibility of temporal asymmetry on the other. He writes:

“‘Death’ is no more mysterious than the ‘state’ of not yet being born. There will, next week and next year, be many people on earth who are not born yet, just as we ourselves were not born not so many years ago... We will be dead for a very long time, but it will not be boring, any more than it was boring waiting so long to be born.”<sup>21</sup>

And later he writes:

“Philosophically, it is not entirely clear why there is this temporal asymmetry about our imaginings – the very word ‘afterlife’ appears in the dictionaries, but its logical twin, ‘forelife’, does not.”<sup>22</sup>

Connecting this to Nagel, if deprivation account does play as a central theme, the problem that clearly occurs would be how we can be certain whether the state of prenatal nonexistence is equal to the state of posthumous nonexistence. While for the second case, which does not extremely hold deprivation account, one may argue that even though this account is claimed to be applied only to the state of posthumous nonexistence, yet does suggest that the nature of the two states are different?

Blackburn’s case, seems to be that even though Lucretius’s argument seems convincing in an empirical sense, it appears to run against common sense. As he suggests, while the word ‘afterlife’ is seen to be familiar, the word ‘forelife’ does not even seem to exist.

## *What we Lastly See?*

From all we have discussed, how should we consider death? If we follow one of the positions that we discussed, does it really matter, due to the fact that we are still alive. Yet aside from this knowing (or not knowing) what is important is what we lastly see. The fact is that death is death. It cannot be something else. This may be the very case to think about. To think about death is to think about our own life first. However, it does not mean that we have to think about it in the same way, or to see death as good or bad. Yet like I stated death cannot be something else even though we decided to follow Epicurus, Blackburn or Nagel. Lastly, it then seems that even though we consider the meaning of death, we finally in turn have to return to focus on our life.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Nagel, Thomas. "Death" in *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 15

<sup>3</sup> Nagel, Thomas. "Death & 'The Meaning of Life'" in *What Does It All Mean?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 90-91

<sup>4</sup> Blackburn, Simon. "Is Death to Be Feared? The Awful Abyss of Extinction" in *The Big Questions: Philosophy* (London: Quercus Publishing, 2009), 242

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 242

<sup>6</sup> Kagan, Shelly. "Epicurus' & 'Lucretius'" in *Death*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 213

<sup>7</sup> Blackburn, Is Death to Be Feared, 233

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 243

<sup>9</sup> Nagel, "Death & The Meaning of Life", 91-92

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 93

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 1987, 92

<sup>12</sup> (Nagel, 1979: 15-16).

<sup>13</sup> (Nagel, 1979: 20-21)

<sup>14</sup> (Nagel. 1979: 16)

<sup>15</sup> (Nagel, 1979: 24)

<sup>16</sup> (Nagel, 1979: 16)

<sup>17</sup> (Nagel, 1987: 95)

<sup>18</sup> (Blackburn, 2009: 239)

<sup>19</sup> (cited in Kagan, 2012: 225)

<sup>20</sup> (Nagel, 1979: 23)

<sup>21</sup> (Blackburn, 2009: 234)

<sup>22</sup> (Blackburn, 2009: 236)

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