

Outline of Thomas Nagel, "Death"

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<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/deathol.htm>

- I. Statement of the problem.
 - If we assume that death is the permanent end of our existence, is death a bad thing?
- II. Two possible positions.
 - A. Death deprives of us life, which is all we have. Therefore, it is the greatest of all losses.
 - B. Death is the end of the subject. It is a mere blank, not a great loss. There is no subject left to experience the loss.
- III. If death is an evil, it is not because of its positive features, but because of what it deprives us of. Namely, life.
 - A. Life has value apart from its contents. When we take away all the good and bad experiences in life what is left over, the bare experience of life, is valuable in itself.
 - 1. The value of life does not attach to mere organic survival. Surviving in a coma does not appeal to us.
 - 2. The good of life can be multiplied by time. More is better than less.
 - B. The state of being dead, or nonexistent, is not evil in itself. It cannot be what makes death bad.
 - 1. Death is not an evil that one accumulates more of the longer one is dead.
 - 2. We would not regard a **temporary** suspension of life as a great misfortune in itself.
 - 3. We don't regard the long period of time before we were born, in which we did not exist, as a great misfortune.

- IV. Three objections.
 - A. It can be doubted that anything can be an evil unless it causes displeasure. How can a deprivation of life be an evil unless someone **minds** the deprivation?
 - B. In the case of death there is no subject left. How can it be a misfortune if there is no subject of the misfortune? Who suffers the misfortune?
 - C. How can the period of nonexistence after our death be bad, if the period before our birth is not bad.
- V. Replies to the objections.
 - A. The good or ill fortune of a person depends on a persons history and possibilities rather than just their momentary state. Therefore a terrible misfortune can befall a person even though they are not around to experience the misfortune.
 - 1. We consider ourselves to have been injured when someone acts against our wishes or interests, even when we are not aware of his or her actions.
 - 2. The discovery of wrongs done us in our absence make us unhappy because they are misfortunes. They are not misfortunes only because they made us unhappy when we discovered them.
 - 3. We consider a person who has become a vegetable to have suffered a grave misfortune, even though they may be quite happy in their new condition. We recognize this only when we consider the person he **could** be now.
 - B. Even though the person as subject does not survive his or her death, it can still be the subject of the misfortune. If he or she had not died, it would have gone on enjoying whatever good there is in living.
 - C. The period of time after death is time that death deprives us of. This is not true of the period of non-existence before birth. This explains the differences in our attitudes towards these two periods of non-existence.
- VI. The question still remains whether the non-realization of the possibility for further life is **always** a misfortune, or whether this depends on what can naturally be hoped for.

- A. Perhaps we can only regard as a misfortune those deprivations which add gratuitously to the inevitable evils we must endure. In this case, only premature death would be a great evil.
- B. Whether we see death as a deprivation depends upon the point of view we take up.
 - 1. Observed from the outside, objectively, a human being cannot live much more than 100 years. From this point of view, we can only feel deprived of those years which are allotted to beings of our type, but which we do not live long enough to enjoy.
 - 2. When looked at in terms of our own experience, subjectively, our life experience seems open ended. We can see no reason why our normal experiences cannot continue indefinitely. On this view death, no matter how inevitable, is the cancellation of an indefinitely extendible good. The fact that death is inevitable does not affect how it feels in our experience to look forward to the end of our experience.