

Death: A Propitious Misfortune

William Ferraiolo

As early as Thales, philosophers have argued that death is nothing to fear because the dead no longer exist and, therefore, cannot suffer or be harmed. This position has had its detractors through the ages, and they have argued in various ways that death must be regarded as a misfortune. After all, death ends life and any of its attendant benefits. In this paper, I will defend neither point of view. Instead, I will offer an account of the relationship between life and death intended to dilute the force of the view that death is a misfortune. In particular, I will argue that if death is a misfortune at all, it falls into a class of misfortunes that can only be suffered by those who have received a prior unearned benefit. I will call these *propitious misfortunes*. Death should be regarded as a propitious misfortune because it befalls only those fortunate enough to have been afforded the opportunity to exist in the first place. This may seem a trivial point, but it is not; if human life is a propitious phenomenon, this fact should not be trivialized or ignored in debates concerning the appropriate attitude toward death. The misfortune of death (if it is a misfortune) becomes much more palatable when it is balanced against the immense good fortune underlying the existence that it brings to an end.

Life and Death

There is something miraculous about human existence. This is either literally or figuratively the case. If there is a God, a designer of the Universe and all that is in it, then human existence is literally a miracle. It is the product of divine intervention or, at least, divine design and intention. We are here

because God decreed that it be so (“Let there be light!” and all that follows).

If, on the other hand, there is no God, no designer, no deity of any kind, and if the existence of human life is, at root, the product of brute, unguided forces of nature, then our presence in the Universe is a statistical marvel. Our existence is miraculous in the non-literal sense in which (say) multiple successive lottery wins would count as miraculous. If anyone balks at this loose use of the term “miraculous,” perhaps “astronomically lucky” would serve as an adequate substitute.

It is against this backdrop of the miraculous (or, at least, the astronomically lucky) character of our existence that I wish to explore the nature of death and its relationship to life. If life is a necessary prerequisite for death, and life is an unearned benefit of the highest order, then we must take our good fortune into account as we evaluate the alleged misfortune of death. If death can be coherently deemed a misfortune at all, this misfortune must be balanced against the weight of the good fortune that necessarily precedes it. Death can be a misfortune only in roughly the same sense as (say) the tax payment that accompanies a lottery win. In each case, the “burden” falls only upon those previously afforded an unearned benefit.

Epicurus is probably the best known (though not the earliest) defender of the position that death cannot be a misfortune, because the dead no longer exist, and if one does not exist, one cannot suffer or be damaged. Those antagonistic to this position have subsequently raised a variety of objections claiming that an individual can indeed suffer a misfortune (or an evil) as a result of her death. The Epicurean tradition has, of course, raised its counter-objections through the ages, and these have been designed to prove that only a misunderstanding of the true nature of death could account for the view that one’s death can be a misfortune for oneself. So goes the debate, and it continues to this day.

Perhaps the most common claim made against the Epicurean attitude toward death is that it fails to recognize the fact that death deprives the individual of future experiences that would have occurred had the individual's death not intervened. One's death deprives one of one's future life experiences, and it is this fact that (at least in most cases) constitutes the misfortune that is associated with death.

The Argument From Deprivation

The standard argument for this position runs roughly as follows:

If S dies, then S is thereby deprived of all future experiences.

If S's future experiences would have had overall positive value for S, then S's death deprives S of that positive value.

If S is deprived of positive value, then S suffers a misfortune.

Therefore, if S dies, then S thereby suffers a misfortune (at least in those cases in which S's future would have had overall positive value for S).

Hence Thomas Nagel claims that death, if it is an evil at all, can be so "only because of what it deprives us of."ⁱ Don Marquis, in "Why Abortion Is Immoral," argues that the termination of the life of the fetus deprives it of its future experiences, and it is for this reason that abortion is (perhaps with special exceptions)

immoral—it imposes an undeserved misfortune upon the fetus.ⁱⁱ Fred Feldman, in “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death,” argues that an individual’s death is, at least in some cases, an evil insofar as it is an event in the actual world such that the nearest possible world in which it does not happen is a world with greater overall positive value for the individual in question.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, Feldman claims that death is an evil insofar as it deprives us of positive experiences that we would have had we not died just then.

In making this case, Feldman develops a rough system for quantifying an individual’s welfare level in different possible worlds, and compares a possible world in which he dies in an airplane crash to the next nearest possible world in which he does not. He claims that:

. . . my death would be bad for me not because it would cause me to suffer pain, and not because it would itself be intrinsically bad for me. Rather, it would be bad for me because it would deprive me of 600 units of pleasure that I would have had if it had not happened when it did. More precisely, it would be bad for me because my welfare level at the nearest world where it occurs is 600 points lower than my welfare level at the nearest world where it does not occur.^{iv}

So, Feldman offers a perspicuous presentation of (probably) the most common view about death as a misfortune. Death is an evil because it deprives one of the life experience that one would otherwise have had. But if death does constitute deprivation, it can deprive us only of the goods or benefits associated with life. Life itself, however, is something of a lottery, and only the “lottery winners” can suffer the misfortune of death.

The Evolution and Birth Lotteries

Let us suppose that there is no God, no deity, no designer of the Universe. If organic life is the outcome of an unguided process of evolution, then the existence of the human species is a propitious accident (for *humans* anyway). This assumes, of course, that the existence of a particular species constitutes a positive (overall) value *for* members of that species. Each of us is fortunate that our species, the biological type of thing that we are, came into existence. It might not have. We are all, therefore, fortunate that the wildly improbable appearance of the human species has actually, against all odds, occurred.^v

In addition to this good fortune, however, there is the additional stroke of (apparently monumental) luck, for each individual member of the species, that *that particular* individual came to exist. This assumes, of course, that the existence of each individual member, H_i , of the human species, constitutes a positive (overall) value *for* H_i . That is, I am assuming that (for example) my existence constitutes a positive (overall) value *for me*.

It is as if each of us has won two separate lotteries. The initial prize is shared with every other member of the species. The second “winning ticket” (so to speak) is the event of the particular individual’s birth (or conception). Millions of distinct individuals, or no individuals at all, could result from any particular instance of human sexual union. On each such fertile occasion, millions of would-be individuals are *not* conceived. If conception occurs, only one (or, at most, a few) of those many potential individuals is afforded an opportunity at life. For any particular individual member of the human species, H_i , it is, therefore, a tremendous statistical improbability that H_i (as opposed to some other individual or none at all) comes to exist. Couple this with the improbability of the unguided evolution of the human species as a whole, and each particular one of us is revealed to be an astronomical improbability.

One might point out that some individuals, because their lives are (overall) negatively valuable to themselves, are not at all fortunate for having come to exist. Consider, for example, persons who live predominantly painful lives. One could, perhaps, make a plausible case that such persons experience lives that are not worth living. Such individuals may exist, but then it is not at all clear how their deaths could be misfortunes for them. When they die, they are released from suffering and “deprived” only of a future that is not worth having (or so one might argue). The same claim could be generalized to the human species as a whole (by a sufficiently Schopenhauerian type of philosopher). Perhaps all human life is predominantly misery. But again, if that is so, then it is difficult to see the misfortune in the mortality of the species as a whole, or of any particular individual. The point is this: one’s death can be a misfortune only if one’s life is (on balance) *a good*. An existence worth having is an unearned good (no one *earns* existence) and, in the absence of a designer, constitutes a propitious phenomenon or accident.

The Creation Lottery^{vi}

If, on the other hand, there is a God who designed the Universe, brought it into being, and guides its progress, then we (as a species and as individuals) exist only by leave of the divine will. Death is then part of the same design that permits each life. Presumably, there are indefinitely many possible design plans that could have been actualized by the creator. It seems likely that, of all possible worlds, most lack human life altogether. It also seems likely that, of all possible worlds containing human life in general, most lack any particular individual who appears in the actual world. In other words, most possible worlds do not have “us” (either collectively or individually) in them. Therefore, each of us is tremendously fortunate that: (1) the evolution of the human species is part of the creator’s chosen design plan, and (2) we, as particular individuals, are part of the human species within the chosen design plan. If there is a divine creator, then all the world is “God’s stage,” and each of us “actors” is providentially conjured into existence and afforded an (unearned) opportunity to perform a role in the master’s play.

Unfortunately, however, God has scripted a play in which each performer runs out of lines before the final curtain.

Perhaps it is, in some sense, true that one suffers a misfortune when one's time on stage is ended. Perhaps the misfortune is still greater if one "gets the hook" unexpectedly or after only a few moments in the production. In any case, only those fortunate enough to have been scripted into the great play must suffer the misfortune in question. Many would-be actors never get their chance at all, but instead remain mere character sketches forever confined to God's "unpublished works." Only those who have been fortunate enough to "fit the script" ever get cast as living, breathing characters. Eventually, these characters live and breathe no more, but we must remember that God might have written any of (presumably) infinitely many other scripts in which we never would have appeared. In fact, it may not be necessary that God produces any script at all. We are fortunate that there is something rather than nothing, and that we are part of the something that exists.

Perhaps, as Leibniz suggests, God necessarily creates precisely this world because it is the best of all possibilities. If so, then each of us is very fortunate that the best of all possible worlds requires our existence (collectively as well as individually). It should also be noted that if this is the case, then the best of all possible worlds comes complete with our death (collectively as well as individually) scripted into it. The persons (or potential persons) in all other than the best of all possible worlds never have to die, but neither do they ever get the chance to live.

Again, the point is that death can be a suffered misfortune (if at all) only for those fortunate enough to have been given a chance at life in the first place. Life—mine, yours, and "ours" collectively—is either a propitious accident on the grandest order of improbability, or it is a gift of supernatural proportion for which we owe immeasurable gratitude. We either receive life as a gift from on high, or our astoundingly unlikely phylogeny emerges out of a primordial ooze, and then this improbable event

is (more or less) recapitulated in the ontogeny of each individual one of us. The whole of life is either miraculous, or it is a stroke (or series of strokes) of almost unimaginable good fortune. And then we drop dead.

Death and Taxes: Some Analogies

One might argue that even a lottery winner can suffer a misfortune and does so when the tax is levied against her winnings. We can even imagine a system of taxation in which that misfortune is magnified. Imagine a world in which lottery winners are allowed to enjoy their winnings for an unspecified amount of time, but are then forced to return, without warning, the entire unused portion to the state. Having one's winnings forcibly taken away arguably constitutes a misfortune even if the windfall is neither earned nor deserved. A lottery winner is deprived of the positive value derived from her winnings when the state takes it back. As Feldman might put it, the possible world in which a lottery winner is taxed has a welfare level lower than the nearest possible world in which that lottery winner is not taxed. Granted. But we miss something crucial when we fail to note that *only lottery winners* have to suffer this particular misfortune. It is, therefore, a *propitious misfortune*. The prerequisite for suffering this particular type of misfortune is the prior receipt of a benefit that is, itself, unearned. Those who do not win the lottery do not suffer the added tax, but they also do not win the lottery!

Perhaps a better analogy could be drawn to a lottery among a very large population of prisoners. Suppose that there are billions and billions of them. Suppose further that a small subgroup of these prisoners will be chosen, either at random or by the warden's whim (not on the basis of merit), to be freed for an unspecified length of time. When their time on the outside is up, they will be (infallibly) recaptured and sent back to prison. There will be no warning as to this impending end to their freedom. Recapture is, at least arguably, a misfortune, but only those fortunate enough to have been freed in the first place are ever subjected to recapture. Such recapture is a propitious

misfortune insofar as it is suffered by only a select, fortunate few.

Similarly, if death is a misfortune at all, it can be so only for those who have previously claimed the wildly improbable benefit of existence against all odds. Only those who win the “birth lottery” (not to mention the prior “evolutionary lottery” that allowed the species to exist) are “saddled” with the misfortune of death. So, lamenting the fact that one is not immortal is a bit like lamenting the fact that one must eventually give back the remainder of one’s lottery winnings. It is, perhaps, even more like a freed prisoner, who has done nothing to earn his liberty, lamenting the fact that his freedom will not last forever.

One should, I suggest, have the attitude toward one’s impending death that one would deem appropriate toward the impending return of one’s lottery winnings, or toward the impending return to incarceration while one enjoys the freedman’s sojourn outside the prison walls. Assuming that there is no afterlife, we shall eventually return to nothingness (we know not when). This misfortune (if it is one) is substantially more palatable when it is balanced against the weight of the good fortune that is its prerequisite. This is the character of a propitious misfortune. Paradoxical as it may seem, we all have the good fortune to be in a position to die some day. To parody Tennyson, ‘tis (at least in most cases) better to have lived and lost, than never to have lived at all.

ENDNOTES

-
- i Thomas Nagel, "Death," *Nous* 4 (1970): 73.
- ii Don Marquis, "Why Abortion Is Immoral," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXVI, no. 4 (April 1989): 183-202.
- iii Fred Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death," *The Philosophical Review*, 100, no. 2 (April 1991): 205-27.
- iv *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- v For a well-crafted account of the improbability of the evolution of human life in the absence of a designer, see William L. Craig, "The Teleological Argument and the Anthropic Principle," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. William L. Craig and M. McLeod, *Problems in Contemporary Philosophy* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1990), pp. 127-53.
- vi If the existence of a divine creator has any particular implications for the existence of eternal human souls, an afterlife, etc., arguments concerning these matters will be left aside here. If biological death does not coincide with the cessation of the existence of the individual, or of that individual's consciousness or unique first-person perspective, then biological death does not constitute *death* (perhaps with a capital "D") in the sense herein considered.