

## The Epicurean View of Death

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### **abstract**

The Epicurean view is that there is nothing bad about death, and we are wrong to loathe it. This paper distinguishes several different such views, and shows that while some of them really would undermine our loathing of death, others would not. It then argues that any version that did so could be at best vacuously true: if there is nothing bad about death, that can only be because there is nothing bad about anything.

### **1. The Evil of Death**

One of the big questions about death is what makes it bad. There is a busy industry devoted to this question, turning out answers and debating their merits. But the most famous response to it is that there is nothing bad about death. This view is traditionally associated with Epicurus, though whether he actually held it is doubtful. In any event, I will be concerned with the view and not the man.

The Epicurean view (if I may so call it) threatens to put the Industry out of business: if there is nothing bad about death, there is no account of what makes it bad, and thus no point in searching for one. But it is not merely of academic interest. Most of us have a profound loathing of death. We go to no end of trouble to postpone it, and nearly always wish we had longer to live. When loved ones die, especially if they are young and full of promise, we feel sorry for them, and not merely for ourselves at losing them. This attitude is not based merely on the fear that death might be followed by a nasty time in the hereafter: we have an aversion not only to the fires of hell, but to annihilation itself. Presumably this is because we think there is something bad about annihilation. The Epicurean view is that this belief is mistaken, and our hatred of death--assuming that there is no hereafter--is founded on an illusion.

Those in the Industry typically deal with the Epicurean view by pointing out that it is implausible, and by attacking the arguments for it. But because they have not actually shown that it is false, and the task of explaining what makes death bad is a hard one, suspicion lingers that there might perhaps be nothing bad about death after all.

I will attempt to lay this suspicion to rest. I will first distinguish a number of different views according to which in some way or other death is never a bad thing. It will emerge that while some of these views really do threaten the Industry and undermine our aversion to death, others, including the one most often defended, do not. I will then argue that none of the potent Epicurean views could be true.

## 2. Preliminaries

First a few points of clarification.

I will follow custom and call permanent annihilation 'death'. This should be understood as a technical term: I don't want to quarrel with those who think we may exist after we die.

The Epicurean view is that death in this sense can never be bad for the one who dies. It may still be bad for others: if I died today, my colleagues would have to mark my students' exams. (I will argue later, however, that if my dying cannot be bad for me then it cannot be bad for anyone else either.)

The view is not merely that it isn't bad to be mortal--to die at some time or other--but that it is never bad to die, no matter what the circumstances. Even if I am just setting out on the most fabulous holiday, marriage, or what have you, it is not in any way bad for me to die right now.

The view is about the value of death, not about a certain sort of life or set of attitudes. It is not an account of what someone who was entirely indifferent towards her own death, as Epicurus apparently believed we ought to be, would have to be like--related though the two themes may be.<sup>1</sup> (I will argue briefly in §9, however,

that it is impossible for anyone to be a consistent Epicurean.)

Nor does the view merely deny that death can be bad for certain people: for Epicureans, perhaps, who have arranged their lives in such a way as to minimize death's evils. Perhaps you could render yourself entirely immune to the evil of death by giving up all plans and desires whose fulfilment required you to continue living. Even so, death might be a great calamity for the rest of us. The view that threatens the Industry and undermines our ordinary attitudes is that death can never be bad for anyone.

Finally, I will not address the difficult question of what emotional attitude we ought to have towards death. There are some very bad things--states of affairs far worse for us than the alternative--that it would be foolish to feel upset about: not winning the lottery jackpot, for instance, or not finding Aladdin's lamp (Draper 1999). But even if death were always like this (something that we have no reason to believe), it may still often be a terrible thing, warranting a fierce preference for the alternative. This preference is at least a large part of our ordinary loathing of death.

### 3. Varieties of Epicureanism

Let me now distinguish some different Epicurean views. First there is the claim that there is nothing bad about being dead. Being dead (in our technical sense) is a property that a thing can have only at times when it does not exist. It contrasts with being asleep, which is a property a thing can have only when it exists, and being famous, which a thing can have either when it exists or when it doesn't. There is nothing mysterious about a thing's having a property at a time when it doesn't exist. There is, timelessly speaking, such a thing as Socrates, located at an earlier time but not at this one.<sup>2</sup> Because of this we can refer to him and say truly of

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<sup>1</sup>Luper-Foy 1987 and Warren 2004: ch. 5 are primarily discussions of the Epicurean life.

<sup>2</sup>'Presentists', who deny the reality of the past and future, disagree. They find it difficult to explain how we can now refer to Socrates and say true things about him,

him that he is dead. But on the current proposal his being dead cannot be a bad thing for him.

One version of this view is that it is not intrinsically bad to be dead. Being dead is not a condition we have a reason to avoid because of the way it is in itself, like being in pain. This view--call it weak Epicureanism--is true, uncontroversial, and uninteresting. If it sounds profound, that is because we are thinking of death in the ordinary sense rather than in the technical sense of permanent annihilation. That nothing intrinsically bad awaits us in the hereafter--no hellfire--is an important truth, if indeed it is true; but no one thinks that it could be intrinsically bad no longer to exist. Nor does the view in any way undermine our aversion to death. If there is anything bad about being dead, it is likely to be that it deprives us of good things, not that it is bad in itself. Because Socrates is dead, he can't do philosophy, and that might be bad for him. So even if his being dead is not bad for him in itself, it may be bad extrinsically or derivatively, owing to its consequences.

Another view is that it cannot be in any way bad to be dead, intrinsically or extrinsically. So the fact that Socrates' being dead prevents him from doing philosophy does not make it in any way bad for him to be dead. Call this moderate Epicureanism. It may be the only Epicurean view that is both defensible and controversial, and it seems to be the one most favored by philosophers attracted to Epicureanism<sup>3</sup> (though it is not always clear which they have in mind). Yet it does not appear to undermine our hatred of death or to threaten the Industry any more than weak Epicureanism does. Even if there is nothing bad about being dead, it may still be bad to die--where by dying I mean not the process of declining health that causes one's life to come to an end, but the end itself. That is, the event of one's life ending, or the fact or state of affairs of one's life ending in certain conditions, may be bad for one. (For present purposes we needn't choose among

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and how his activities can influence current events. There may be a connection between presentism and certain versions of Epicureanism (Bradley 2009: 81-83).

<sup>3</sup>E.g. Rosenbaum 1986, Hershenov 2007.

these alternatives--event, fact, or state of affairs.) This is consistent with moderate Epicureanism. And it would vindicate our loathing of death.

So any version of Epicureanism that is of more than academic interest must deny that it could ever be bad to die.<sup>4</sup> No matter when or in what circumstances I die, there can never be anything at all bad for me about it. Call this strong Epicureanism. It really does seem to imply that there is nothing bad for us about death and that our hatred of it is unwarranted. It looks desperately implausible, though it would be a great comfort if we could believe it. If it were true it would be one of the most important of all philosophical discoveries.

Stronger still is the view is it can never be either good or bad to die. Dying is beyond good and evil, free of all value--even neutral or 'zero' value. Call this extreme Epicureanism. Although it is not a formal consequence of strong Epicureanism, it would be pretty surprising if it could be good to die but never bad. If someone's dying in ordinary circumstances could have any value for her at all, surely it could have negative value as well as positive. So anything that could prevent death from ever being bad ought to prevent it from ever being good either. That said, the view looks, if anything, even more outrageous than strong Epicureanism. If it can never be in any way good to die, then it can presumably never be better to die than to continue living. Faced with a choice between dying now and living the most dreadful life imaginable for another twenty years and then dying, the only correct attitude would be complete indifference. Euthanasia--death sought for the benefit of the one to die--would be impossible. That is a hard philosophy indeed.

In any event, strong Epicureanism is the central claim. It entails moderate Epicureanism: if it is never bad to die, then it cannot be bad to be dead--otherwise

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<sup>4</sup>An exception might be the view that, although it can be bad to die, it is never appropriate to feel sad or disappointed or otherwise upset about it. Again, I set this aside because it is not a view about the value of death: it is Epicureanism in a different sense of the term.

dying would be bad by virtue of having a bad consequence. And if neither dying nor being dead can be in any way bad for one, it is hard to see how there could be anything bad for one about one's own death. If strong Epicureanism is false, by contrast--if it is somehow bad to die--then the ordinary view of death is all too appropriate. Extreme Epicureanism would then also be false. Moderate Epicureanism may still be true: it may be a dreadful thing to die, yet never bad to be dead. But this would be of little interest or comfort. So it looks as if our loathing of death and the industry of explaining what makes it bad are undermined if and only if strong Epicureanism is true. The idea that there is nothing bad about death stands or falls with that view. It is the one we need to examine.

#### 4. Corollaries

Here are five corollaries of strong Epicureanism, or at any rate things it must entail if it is to be the central Epicurean claim it appears to be.

1. It can never be in any way worse to die than to go on living.

I don't know whether this is a consequence of the claim that it can never be bad to die. It would seem that if dying now would be worse for me than not dying, that would be something bad about it. If there is nothing at all bad about something's being the case, how can that be any worse than its not being the case? But someone might say that even though there can never be anything either good or bad about dying, not dying--continuing to live--can be a very good thing. That might make it worse to die than to go on living.

Even if this is a possible view, though, it is not a practically interesting one. If it were typically far worse to die than to survive, our hatred of death would be justified. The Industry could stay in business, accounts of what makes it bad to die serving as accounts of what makes dying worse than the alternative. The claim

would differ only in a subtle and inconsequential way from the ordinary anti-Epicurean view that death is a great evil. But Epicureanism was not supposed to differ only in a subtle and inconsequential way from the usual view of death. It was supposed to be radically at odds with ordinary thinking. If it is to be an important view, then, strong Epicureanism must entail that it is never worse to die than to survive.

2. It can never be in any way better to survive than to die.

This follows from the first corollary by the logic of comparatives.

3. It can never be better to have a longer life than a shorter one.

Suppose that Alf dies today aged 40, and that had he not died he would have lived happily for another 40 years. And suppose that in the circumstances it would have been better for him to have a life of 80 years than one of 40. Then it would have been better for him not to die today, as in that case he would have lived longer and that would have been better for him. So if it cannot be better for him to survive than to die, it cannot be better for him to have a longer life than a shorter one. If it were better to have a longer life than a shorter one, that would once again vindicate our loathing of death.

Someone may object that this reasoning shows only that according to strong Epicureanism it cannot be better to have a longer life by dying later. Yet it is possible to have a longer life without dying later, namely by being born earlier. But it is hard to see how it could be better to have a longer life by being born earlier but never better to have a longer life by dying later. If anything, the opposite seems more likely: given the choice now between having a longer life by dying later and having a longer life by having been born earlier (other things being equal),

wouldn't you prefer the first?

4. It can never be in any way good to go on living.

If there is nothing bad about dying, then there is nothing good about not dying. Suppose someone said that although it can never be in any way bad to die, it can still be good to go on living--that is, not to die. There's nothing wrong with dying. It's not even any worse than not dying. But it's jolly good if you can avoid it. Such a view--call it asymmetric Epicureanism--is barely intelligible. What could be the benefit in avoiding something that is not only completely harmless but no worse than the alternative?

Intelligible or not, the view is of no practical interest. If it were good to survive, death's capacity to deprive us of that good would be a reason to loathe it. And the Industry's accounts of what makes it bad to die would do just as well as accounts of what makes it good not to die. This proposal too would differ only in a subtle and inconsequential way from ordinary anti-Epicureanism.

Those who find asymmetric Epicureanism attractive are probably thinking of the view that being dead is not bad, though it can be good to be alive--a version of moderate Epicureanism. To be dead at a certain time is no longer to exist then, and that might not be a property that it can be of any value to have; yet that would not prevent the property of being alive from having value. But as we have seen, moderate Epicureanism by itself is of only academic interest.

5. No one can ever have an egoistic reason to go on living, or to avoid or postpone death.

If I had a powerful reason not to die, for my own sake and not merely for that of others, it would justify my hatred of death. It would also keep the Industry in

business: any account of what makes it bad to die could be transformed easily enough into an account of what gives us a reason to avoid it. So any Epicurean view that would undermine our ordinary aversion to death or the industry of explaining what makes it bad must imply that I could never have an egoistic reason to go on living or to avoid death. Faced with the choice between painless death right now and continuing to live, and setting aside the interests of others, the only rational attitude would be indifference. Or perhaps (if extreme Epicureanism is false) I could have a reason to prefer death. But it could never be rational to prefer life.

We can reach the same conclusion in another way if we suppose that what is good or bad or better or worse connects with what we have a reason to do. If something is good for me in some way, then perhaps I have a reason to promote it if I am able to do so, and if something is bad for me I have a reason to avoid it. Likewise, if something is not in any way good for me or better than the alternative, then there is a sense in which I have no reason to promote it, or at least no reason grounded in my own self-interest. And if something is in no way bad for me or worse than the alternative, then I have no such reason to avoid it. In that case it follows from strong Epicureanism that I could never have an egoistic reason to avoid death.

Now I may want to go on living; and maybe wanting something, all by itself, gives me a reason to promote it (if I can), and wanting something not to happen gives me a reason to prevent it from happening. This would sit uneasily with strong Epicureanism. If most of us have an egoistic reason not to die, how could there be nothing bad about dying? If there is any such reason, it must be a consequence of Epicureanism that it is somehow defective: it could never be a good reason. Presumably it would be based on the mistaken judgment that there is something bad about dying. So an ideally informed and rational being who accepted strong Epicureanism could never have an egoistic reason not to die or to continue living.

I will henceforth take strong Epicureanism to be the conjunction of the view that it can never be in any way bad to die with these five corollaries.

## 5. Desire

As I see it, strong Epicureanism--'Epicureanism' for short--not only clashes violently with our ordinary thinking, but could not possibly be true. If anything can ever be bad for anyone, then it can be bad to die.

It might seem generally good to get what you want and bad not to get it. If anything has any value at all, is it not a good thing to have one's desires fulfilled and a bad thing to have them thwarted? (Preference utilitarianism is based on this thought, though of course it does not entail preference utilitarianism.) There may be exceptions. Entirely altruistic desires, for instance: if I briefly encounter a miserable person and want her to be happy, and unbeknownst to me she eventually does become happy, that might not be in any way good for me (Parfit 1984: 494). Maybe pointless desires or wicked ones are also exceptions. Even so, most desires would appear to be good to have satisfied and bad to have thwarted. And this seems to be good or bad in itself.

But this cannot be so according to Epicureanism. The fact that a desire of mine remains forever unfulfilled cannot be intrinsically bad for me, or any worse than the alternative. And the fact that a desire of mine is fulfilled, by itself, cannot be good for me, or any better than having it thwarted.

I want to have a holiday this summer. I want to finish writing this paper. I want to see my son grow up. But death has a tendency to spoil our plans: if I were to die today, these desires would be forever unfulfilled. If it can never be bad for me to die, however, then it can never be bad no matter what desires it would thwart. In that case it cannot be in any way bad for me to have my desires thwarted by death. Otherwise it would be bad, in a way at least, for me to die, as that would have a bad consequence for me. Likewise, if it could be worse for me to have my desires

thwarted by death than to have them satisfied, then dying could be worse for me, in a way at least, than surviving. So Epicureanism implies that the thwarting of one's desires is not in general a bad thing: the mere fact that a desire of mine remains forever unfulfilled is in no way bad for me, or any worse than the alternative. In fact my not achieving my desire to finish this paper owing to my untimely death could not be bad for me either intrinsically or extrinsically.

Nor can it be good to have most desires fulfilled. If it were good for me to fulfil the desire to finish this paper, then it would be good for me to remain alive long enough to do so: that would be good insofar as it makes something good possible. That would give me a reason to loathe death and to do what I can to avoid it, contrary to Epicureanism. So the fulfilment of desires cannot by itself be in any way a good thing. In fact the fulfilment of most desires cannot be either intrinsically or extrinsically good.

This does not yet show that according to Epicureanism it is never bad to have a desire thwarted. If I don't finish my paper because I have too many exams to mark, that might be bad for me. I have shown only that it is never bad when a desire is thwarted by death. Nor have I yet shown that according to Epicureanism it is never good to have a desire fulfilled, but only that there is nothing good about the fulfilment of most desires--specifically, those whose fulfilment requires one to continue living. Not all desires are like this: my preference not to be poked in the eye with a sharp stick could be satisfied no matter when I died. It gives me no reason to continue living. The same goes for my conditional desire to finish this paper if I can.

Those attracted to Epicurean views like to point out that death extinguishes our desires. If I die before I can finish this paper, then by the time I am definitely not going to finish it I shall no longer want to, just as if I had lost interest and become indifferent. And it isn't normally a bad thing to have a desire thwarted after one has ceased to have it. I once wanted to be a rock musician. I don't any longer. That I

am never going to be one doesn't seem a bad thing for me--or at least not by virtue of conflicting with my adolescent desire. So why should it be any worse to have desires thwarted by death? The thought, then, is that it can never be bad for one to have a desire thwarted by events that occur when one no longer holds that desire, or good to have a desire fulfilled by such events.

The most likely explanation for all this would seem to be that having desires thwarted is bad only by causing one to feel unhappy or frustrated, which is bad in itself. My failing to finish this paper owing to too much other work would make me unhappy. But failing to finish it owing to my untimely death would not: I can't be unhappy when I'm dead. Death prevents us from being in any mental state at all, good, bad, or indifferent. Likewise, it can be good to have desires fulfilled only insofar as it causes one to feel pleased or satisfied or happy. Fulfilling the desire to finish this paper would certainly please me--but not if I no longer wished to finish it. Call this the instrumentalist view of desire.

The instrumentalist view has the well-known implication that it can never be good to have a desire fulfilled if one never learns that it is. If my long-held desire to publish in the Journal of Comparative Esoteric Marginalia is achieved while I am off sailing and my ship goes down before anyone can tell me the glad news, then the fulfilment of that desire would be in no way a good thing for me. Nor can it ever be good to have a desire fulfilled by events occurring after one's death, or by death itself. If I want my work to be read after my death, or if I want to die in order to save myself from dishonour, the fulfilment of this desire can never be in any way good for me. It would be a mistake to want such things in the first place, for my own sake at least, since I ought to know that getting them could never give me any pleasure. An ideally rational person could have such preferences only for the sake of others.

The instrumentalist view also fails to explain why those desires that cannot be thwarted by death are good to have fulfilled. I don't know about you, but I get no pleasure from the fact that I have not yet been poked in the eye with a sharp stick--

nor will this change when death finally ensures that my wish to avoid it is fulfilled.

But whatever its merits, the instrumentalist view is incompatible with Epicureanism. If attaining my desire to finish this paper would give me pleasure, which would be good for me, then it would be good for me to have that desire fulfilled. But that would make it good for me to continue living until the paper is done. It would be good for me not to die. Death would deprive me of something good, giving me a reason to loathe it.

## 6. Pleasure

In fact Epicureanism implies that pleasure can never be good for anyone. Whatever exactly pleasure is, I can't have it if I'm dead. So if pleasure were good for me, it would be good for me to remain alive and not to die. My surviving would be good insofar as it makes it possible for me to have pleasure. And it would be bad for me to die, insofar as that would deprive me of pleasure. It would be better for me, at least as far as pleasure goes, to live than to die. Our aversion to death would be entirely appropriate.

Or again: if pleasure were in any way good for me, I should have an egoistic reason to seek it. And if I have an egoistic reason to seek something, then I have an egoistic reason to promote any condition necessary for that something. Or at least this is so if it is within my power to promote it. (My having a reason to eat lunch does not give me a reason to bring it about that I have ever existed, for although that is necessary for me to have lunch, I can do nothing to promote it.) Since remaining alive is necessary for me to have pleasure, and I can promote it, then if pleasure were a good thing for me I should have an egoistic reason to continue living and not to die. That reason may of course be outweighed by reasons not to remain alive; but then again it may not be. In that case--presumably the usual one--it is a mistake for me to be indifferent towards death.

Epicureanism is often said to presuppose hedonism, that pleasure is the only

intrinsic good. But strong Epicureanism is actually incompatible with hedonism.

Nor does Epicureanism allow that there could be anything good about happiness, if it is a state that one can be in at some time. I can't be happy if I'm dead. If it were in any way good to be happy, there would be something good about remaining alive, as that makes it possible to be happy. And dying would be bad by preventing me from being happy. Or again, if it were in any way good for me to be happy, I should have an egoistic reason to promote it. And because my remaining alive is necessary for me to be happy, that would give me an egoistic reason not to die, contrary to Epicureanism.

More generally, Epicureanism implies that there can be nothing good about any mental state. So the satisfaction of our desires cannot be good because of the pleasure or happiness or satisfaction that it gives us. And if fulfilling one's desires is neither intrinsically good nor good by causing happiness or pleasure or some other mental state, it is hard to see how it could be good in any other way.

If there can be nothing good about any mental state, then presumably there can be nothing bad about one either. If there is nothing good about pleasure, how could there be anything bad about pain? That no mental state can be either good or bad is a consequence of extreme Epicureanism, the view that it can never be either good or bad to die. If it were bad to be in pain, for instance, then it could be bad, in a way at least, to remain alive, since being alive makes pain possible. In that case there could be something good about dying. So one could argue from strong to extreme Epicureanism like this: if it can never be bad to die, there can be nothing good about any mental state. In that case there can be nothing bad about any mental state either. But it could be good to die only if death would enable one to avoid mental states that it is bad to be in. Thus, if it can never be bad to die, it can never be good either. Whether or not this reasoning is conclusive, it has enough merit to reinforce the affinity between the two views.

## 7. Negative and Conditional States

That no mental state can be in any way good to be in, so that there is nothing at all good about happiness or pleasure, is just about incredible. We have also seen that according to Epicureanism it can never be good to have one's desires satisfied. But it must be possible for something to be good for us. Otherwise nothing could be bad for us: surely it couldn't turn out that good was impossible but evil was all too real. Of course, if nothing can ever be bad for anyone, then it cannot be bad to die, just as Epicureanism says. But this would deprive the view of any interest, as it would tell us nothing about death in particular. Epicureanism is an important view only if it contrasts death with things that really are bad.

Is Epicureanism compatible with anything's being good or bad? Perhaps negative conditions might be good to be in: not being poked in the eye, for instance. But if the absence of evil can be good, surely the absence of good things can be evil. In that case it would be bad for me not to have the satisfaction of finishing this paper. And that would make it bad for me to die today, as it would have a bad consequence.

Here is another suggestion: even if it is in no way good to be happy, and being happy is never better than being dead, it might still be better to be happy than unhappy. That is, it might be good to be happy as opposed to being unhappy. And that might make it good to be happy if you are alive. The conditional state of being happy-if-alive might be good to be in, even if the categorical state of being happy is not.

But what is it to be happy-if-alive? The simplest answer is that it is to be not both alive and not happy--or, equivalently, to be either not alive or happy. For me to be happy-if-alive is for the state of affairs that I am happy if I am alive to obtain, where the word 'if' expresses the material conditional of elementary logic. In that case there are two ways of being happy-if-alive: by not being alive, or by being happy. But neither of these conditions could be good to be in according to Epicureanism.

We have already seen that Epicureanism rules out its being good to be happy. And no Epicurean will accept that it could be good not to be alive. If not being alive can be good, then surely it can also be bad. And if it can be bad not to be alive--that is, to be dead--then it can be bad to die, as dying would give us a property that it's bad to have.

Perhaps being happy-if-alive is being such that if one were alive, one would be happy. More precisely, to be happy-if-alive at a certain time is to be such that if one were alive at that time, one would be happy then. Again, there are two cases. One is where I actually am alive tomorrow. In that case I am happy-if-alive tomorrow just if I am happy then. If that were a good thing for me, then it would be good for me to be happy tomorrow, or at least to be both happy and alive, contrary to Epicureanism. The other case is where I am not alive tomorrow, but I should be happy if I were. It is certainly possible for me to die today in such a way that had I not died in those circumstances I should have been happy tomorrow. But would it be good for me to be such that had I not died I should have been happy? Does the mere fact that I should be happy tomorrow, if only I were going to live that long, benefit me in any way? It certainly seems not. We might as well say that it's a good thing for the destitute that, if only they were rich, they would be happy. If anything, the fact that I should otherwise have been happy tomorrow ought to make it worse for me to die today, not better.

## **8. The Vacuity Problem**

As far as I can see, Epicureanism entails that there can never be anything good about the satisfaction of desires, about pleasure or happiness, about negative states such as not being poked in the eye, or about conditional states such as being happy if alive. No other candidates for goodness suggest themselves. And if nothing could ever be good, nothing could ever be bad either. In that case Epicureanism can be at best vacuously true: if it cannot be bad to die, that can only

be because nothing could ever be bad for anyone. Though this may be an interesting view, it is not interesting as a view about death. (For that matter, if nothing can ever be bad for anyone, then my dying can never be bad for anyone, even for the colleagues who would then have to mark my students' exams. So if my death could be bad for others, it could be bad for me too.) Call this the vacuity problem.

Someone might try to defend Epicureanism against the vacuity problem like this: Pleasure and happiness are indeed good, and surviving is good insofar as it makes them possible. But although death can prevent us from having those good things, that does not make it bad, for there is nothing bad about being deprived of something good. Likewise, pain is a bad thing, but there is nothing good about the mere absence of it. In general, positive states can be good or bad, but privations alone have no value, positive or negative.<sup>5</sup> So some things are bad for us, but death, being a privation, is not. In that case Epicureanism need not be only vacuously true.

The claim that privations have no value is absurd. It implies that it cannot be bad to miss the most wonderful experience imaginable by sleeping through it. Of course, the discovery might cause you to feel unhappy afterwards, and that might be bad. But your discontent would be unwarranted, as there would be nothing bad about the state of affairs you are unhappy about. Nor would there be any point in taking care with wasps and electric fences, as the only result would be a worthless absence of pain. Anaesthetics would be worse than useless, being costly and bringing no benefit.

In any event, the proposal is little help in defending Epicureanism. If it can be good to continue living (as that can enable one to have pleasure), then even if it is never bad to die (as that can never cause one any pain), it can be better to survive than to die, vindicating our loathing of death and the industry of accounting for its

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<sup>5</sup>This resembles what Luper (2009: 103-107) calls 'bifurcated comparativism'.

basis.

Someone might suggest that if privations have no value, they cannot be compared in value and thus can never be better or worse than anything else. So death cannot be worse than surviving. Pleasure may be better than pain, and more intense pleasure may be better than less intense, but having pleasure can never be better than not having it. And more pleasure cannot be better than less: enjoying an hour of pleasure can never be better than enjoying five seconds of the same pleasure, as otherwise it could be better to survive for another hour than to die in five seconds' time. Similar principles would presumably hold for states with negative value: intense pain may be worse than mild twinges, but pain is never worse than no sensation at all, and a longer period of pain cannot be worse than a shorter period of otherwise-identical pain. For that matter, it could never be better to be in a condition that necessarily takes a fair amount of time--climbing a mountain, say, or being happily married--than in a condition that takes little if any time, such as having a headache. If it could be better to be happily married than to have a headache, then it could be better to survive for long enough to enjoy being married than to survive only for enough time to feel the headache, making immediate death worse, in a way at least, than surviving.

But if we know anything at all about what is better or worse than anything else, we know that an hour of pleasure is better (in itself, anyway) than five seconds of otherwise-identical pleasure, that more pain is typically worse than less, and that being happily married is better than having a headache. If we don't know any of those things, we can only conclude that our capacity for making value judgments is hopelessly unreliable, undermining Epicureanism as well as any other view about the evil of death. Otherwise, it can be better to survive for an hour than to die in five seconds, contrary to Epicureanism.

## 9. Reasons

Here is another version of the vacuity problem. Epicureanism is incompatible with the existence of egoistic reasons to act. No action is instantaneous: anything you can do, and thus anything you can have any reason to do, will take some time. And for at least some of that time, if not all of it, you have to exist. Now if you have an egoistic reason to do something, then you have an egoistic reason to promote any state of affairs that is necessary for you to do it, if you can. And it's a safe bet that if you are reading this, it is within your power to promote your continued existence--by eating, drinking, and looking both ways, for instance. It is also a safe bet, I suppose, that you sometimes have a reason to do something for your own sake. It follows that you at least sometimes have an egoistic reason to survive and not to die, at least for long enough to do that thing.

But if you have an egoistic reason to avoid something, that thing must somehow be bad for you, or at least worse than the alternative. It follows that there must be something bad for you about dying, or at least that it would be worse in some way for you to die than to continue living, contrary to Epicureanism.

I may be wrong about the connection between reasons and values: maybe you could have an egoistic reason to avoid something that was in no way bad for you or worse than the alternative. Even so, no Epicurean can accept that most of us have an egoistic reason not to die. That would keep the Industry in business: working out what reasons we have not to die will be much the same as working out what makes it bad to die. And if most of us have a powerful reason to avoid death, we are right to loathe it.

This is another way in which Epicureanism could be at most vacuously true: if we can never have any egoistic reason to avoid death, that is only because egoistic reasons in general are impossible. If it were true, the Epicurean view would tell us nothing about death in particular--or at least nothing to do with reasons.

We can also see that Epicureanism is, in a way, literally impossible to believe. If you thought that there was nothing bad for you about death, and you accepted the

immediate consequences of this, you would conclude that you had no reason to do anything for your own sake. You would also infer that nothing could ever be good or bad for anyone, leaving you with no reason to act for anyone else's sake either. So you would take yourself to have absolutely no reason to do anything. I doubt whether that is a psychologically possible state. No one could ever be a consistent Epicurean. As I noted earlier, however, my main concern has been not what it would be like to hold the Epicurean view, but whether it could be true.

## 10. Conclusion

I have argued that the central Epicurean claim--the one that must be true if and only if there is anything bad about death--is strong Epicureanism. As far as I can see, it follows from this view that neither pleasure nor happiness nor the satisfaction of desires could be in any way good for us. That makes it look as if nothing at all could be good. The view also appears to rule out anyone's having an egoistic reason to do anything. So it can be bad to die if anything can be bad, and we can have an egoistic reason to avoid death if there can be any egoistic reasons. If any of this is right, the Epicurean view is neither a threat to the Industry nor any comfort to mortals. Death remains as dreadful as ever.

I have not tried to offer any account of what makes death bad. I am defending the Industry's existence, not engaging in it. It may follow from what I have said that it can be bad to die because death can frustrate our desires or prevent us from having good things. But that would be at best a first step towards a full account of the evil of death.<sup>6</sup>

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