

Is Death a Misfortune?

I. Is life itself valuable? Is it always good to have more life?

Suppose death is a complete extinction and we in no sense survive our deaths. Consider someone who is living a good life and is healthy. Death comes suddenly and painlessly. The question arises, is death a misfortune for the one who dies? The Epicureans—Lucretius being one—thought that death is not a misfortune. Here are some themes that can be found in their writings:

1. Being dead is no worse than not having been (or not yet being) born. (Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe* (ONU), lines 865 and 970)
2. No prolongation of life can reduce the amount of time spent dead. (ONU, line 1085)
3. An infinite life-span would be no more pleasant than a finite one (maybe worse?). (ONU, lines 978-1038)
4. We will not be around to "experience" being dead; one who does not exist cannot be unhappy, cannot be harmed. (You will not be there to mourn your own passing or to yearn for life.) (ONU, approx line 860, E, p. 29)

The Epicureans believe that nothing be bad for someone without being positively unpleasant for him/her. They are hedonists. However how might we evaluate the misfortune of death if we reject hedonism and accept one of the other accounts of the good life, e.g., desire satisfaction or objective list.

Williams contrasts:

Conditional desires: desires I have for something, if some condition or other holds.

Categorical desires: desires for things that I want unconditionally.

I have some categorical desires for my life: I want to travel to Africa. It is not the case that I want to travel to Africa, if I'm alive. Rather, I want to be alive so I can travel to Africa. Williams argues that part of what is wrong with death is that it prevents my unconditional desires of this sort from being fulfilled. And life itself is not worth living unless I have some categorical desires beyond the mere desire to live.

However,

a) Notice with Lucretius that we are deprived of possible experiences, opportunities, etc. that might have occurred had we lived *earlier*, in addition to ones that might occur if we could live longer than in fact we will. Is there any reasonable basis for caring more about the possibilities we will miss after death rather than the ones we have already missed before birth?

b) Is every deprivation of opportunities a misfortune? Does it matter how remote the possibilities are? Suppose someone has many wild and unrealistic desires. Is death worse for him or her than for someone whose desires are more modest?

Re (4): If death is a misfortune for the one who dies, then who suffers it? And when? If the subject goes out of existence upon death, then there is no one around who can be the proper subject of the supposed misfortune.

II. What's so good about immortality?

Consider Elina Makropulos (a character in a play by Karel Capek). Williams suggests that EM's case shows that "it can be a good thing not to live too long" (83), even if one is not suffering.

In considering the good of immortality, Williams points out two conditions that must be satisfied (91):

- i) It should clearly be *me* who lives forever.
- ii) The state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to just those aims which I now have in wanting to survive at all.

In his discussion, Williams considers several models for understanding what an immortal life might be like:

- a) I continue indefinitely with the same character.
- b) I continue with changing character—a series of characters.
 - How is this different from reincarnation?
 - Are the sequential persons all *me*?
- d) I continue with changing character but continuous memory (Teiresias model, p. 94)
- d) I continue with the same character in a better—perhaps ideal—world.

Re (a): Williams argues that the result would be, as in EM's case, boredom, alienation, detachment.

- Doesn't it depend on one's character? Would some characters do better than others?
- How are we to take into account the failings of memory? Suppose I can never remember, except in the most vague way, what happened more than 75 years ago. Would I get bored?

Re (b): What degree of continuity of character is required for the future parts of the life to be *mine*...for the person to be *me*?

- If it doesn't matter how my future states/experiences look to me now—because I will have undergone so much change—then condition (ii) above isn't satisfied.
- But don't many of us disregard the impact of our current actions on our future selves? Do we *really* care about what our future selves will feel?

Re (c): "Teiresias cannot have a character, either continuously through these proceedings, or cumulatively at the end (if there were to be an end) of them: he is not, eventually, a person but a phenomenon."

(94) ...???

Re (d): Nothing is so engaging that it couldn't become boring. "...it seems quite unreasonable to suppose that [the imagined ideal activities] would have the fulfilling or liberating character that they do have for him, if they were in fact all he could do or conceive of doing." (96)

Williams' conclusion (quoted from the essay):

Suppose then, that categorical desire does sustain the desire to live. So long as it remains so, I shall not want to die. Yet I also know, if what has gone before is right, that an eternal life would be unlivable. In part, as EM's case originally suggested, that is because categorical desire will go away from it: in those versions, such as hers, in which I am recognizably myself, I would eventually have had altogether too much of myself. There are good reasons, surely, for dying before that happens. But equally, at times earlier than that there are reasons for not dying. (100)

If you were given the option of drinking EM's elixir, would you do it?