

Thoughts and Questions about Death

Suppose death is a complete extinction and we in no sense survive our deaths. The question arises, is death a misfortune (for the one who dies)? The Epicureans 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.
(L, ONU, approx line 865 and line 970)
2. No prolongation of life can reduce the amount of time spent dead. (L, ONU, approx. line 1085)
3. An infinite life-span would be no more pleasant than a finite one (maybe worse?).
(L, ONU, approx 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.) (L, ONU, approx line 860, E, p. 29)

Questions:

1. Can anything be bad for someone without being positively unpleasant for him? Could something be bad for someone if he or she wasn't around to care about it?

--Consider an analogy: Is it true that "what you don't know can't hurt you"? If someone is betrayed, but never learns of the betrayal, is it he/she harmed? When one learns of betrayal, is one upset because it is bad to be betrayed, even if one doesn't know of it? Or is it just the discovery of the betrayal which is harmful?

--Can one be harmed by being deprived of possibilities that were never realized? Can one be harmed in this way, even if one never experiences sadness or pain from this deprivation?

--We are deprived of possible experiences, opportunities, etc. that might have occurred had we lived earlier, and 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?

--Is every deprivation of opportunities a misfortune? Does it matter how remote the possibilities are?

2. 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.