Stoic Reflections on Thomas Nagel's Account of Death

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> *Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome.*
> —Isaac Asimov

> *Thus that which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist.*
> —Epicurus

> *Not to live as if you had endless years ahead of you. Death overshadows you. While you're alive and able—be good.*
> —Marcus Aurelius

INTRODUCTION

Is death the greatest of all the evils that man can experience, or can one perceive the end of her existence in a neutral way? For Thomas Nagel, death is an evil because it brings to an end not only the goods of life but also the future possibilities of an individual. He attempts to prove this thesis by responding to three main criticisms of his position. First, how can anything be bad if it is not

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experienced as bad? If something is bad doesn't there have to be a subject of experience? Secondly, if death is bad who is it bad for—that is, who is the subject who experiences death? Finally, if we don't find the billions of years of non-existence before our birth disturbing, why do we find the billions of years after our death worrying? This paper will briefly summarize Nagel's argument that death is the greatest of evils, while also arguing that his position is implausible because the responses he proposes to the above-mentioned criticisms do not satisfactorily answer the critiques. This paper will also advocate the stoic view that the nature of our reality is such that everything decays with time; nothing lasts forever, and therefore death is a natural part of life with no essentially good or bad qualities.

NAGEL'S ACCOUNT OF THE NATURE OF DEATH

To begin, let us first examine Nagel's argument that death is the worst thing that can happen to an individual. He begins by stating that if death is an evil, it is not because of its positive features; instead, death is a bad because of what it deprives us of. The truth of this rests on his claim that despite whether the conditions of an individual's life are positive or negative, baseline existence is itself positive:

> There are elements, which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one's experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral*: it is emphatically positive. Therefore life is worth living even when the

> bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its contents.[1]

Similarly, for a life to be considered valuable it must consist of more than just organic survival for Nagel. He feels that there is little difference between immediate death and death following a coma, which might last years. Likewise, more is better than less when considering existence.

Nagel continues by asserting that "if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable." [2] He points to the fact that most people would not regard a temporary suspension of their life (as long as it did not mean of reduction of conscious life) as bad and the fact that we do not feel that it is a misfortune that we did not exist before we were born as evidence that we do not object to death because of its positive features.[3] In addition, he argues that it is logically impossible to imagine oneself as dead and that those who fear death because they attempt to visualize themselves in such a state are acting irrationally.

If the argument that death is evil because of the desirability of what it removes (desire, action, thought) is true, then it must be able to withstand criticism. Thus, Nagel considers three questions that present a problem to

1. Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *Mortal Questions.* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.
2. Ibid., 3.
3. Ibid.

his thesis. The first of these questions is how can anything be bad if it is not experienced as bad? If something is bad doesn't there have to be a subject of experience? Essentially, this objection questions whether misfortune can befall an individual who is unaware that he or she has been wronged. In this case, how can death be a misfortune if the individual it has apparently wronged is unable to experience its consequence?

In response, Nagel first observes that all three of these questions are based on particular relations with time. He points out that there are simple goods and evils that an individual may possess at a given time in her life; however, this is not the case with all the goods and evils that can be attributed to her. He believes that in order to identify whether a person has suffered a misfortune we must first assess this person's history. He states:

> Most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment—and that while this subject can be exactly located in a sequence of places and times, the same is not necessarily true of the goods and ills that befall him.[4]

To prove this claim, he points to the example of an intelligent person who is the victim of an accident which leaves her severely brain-damaged to the point where she has been reduced to having the mental capacity of a contented infant. He points out that as long as this

4. Ibid., 5.

individual's needs are met in terms of care, we should not pity her, for if we didn't pity the victim when she was actually an infant, why pity her now? The fully functioning adult as she was before the accident no longer exists. All the goods and evils in the former adult's life no longer apply.

Yet we do pity this individual, Nagel argues, despite the fact that she no longer exists. He argues that if "instead of concentrating exclusively on the oversized baby before us, we consider the person he was, and the person he *could* be now, then his reduction to this state and the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute a perfectly intelligible catastrophe."[5] Nagel points to this example as proof that we should not solely view the goods and evils that can befall an individual in terms of a particular time. With regard to this argument, he concludes:

> There are goods and evils, which are irreducibly relational; they are features of the relations between a person, with spatial and temporal boundaries of the usual sort, and circumstances, which may not coincide with him either in space or time. A man's life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind, and what happens to him can include much that does not take place with the boundaries of his life.[6]

5. Ibid., 6.
6. Ibid.

Moving on, Nagel argues that a similar answer can dissolve the third question that challenges his thesis, namely, if we don't perceive the billions of years of non-existence before our birth as a misfortune, why do we view the billions of years after our death in such a way? He contends that there is a difference between the time before we come to exist and the time after we cease to exist. The difference is that the time after our life is time that death has robbed us of experiencing, whereas the time prior to our birth is different because had we been born earlier than we were, we would not be the same person. Nagel infers:

> The direction of time is crucial in assigning possibilities to people or other individuals. Distinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings. (The latter would represent not a set of different possible lives of on individual, but a set of distinct possible individuals, whose lives have identical conclusions).[7]

These criticisms aside, Nagel now sets out to answer the second and final major objection to his thesis: If death is bad who is it bad for? Who is the subject who experiences death? He first makes the observation that we generally view the death of individuals who pass away at a younger age as more tragic than those who die much later in life. He responds, "Perhaps we record an objection only to evils

7. Ibid., 7.

which are gratuitously added to the inevitable; the fact that it is worse to die at 24 than at 82 does not imply that it is not a terrible thing to die at 82, or even at 806."[8] The main problem that this question poses is how can we regard mortality as a misfortune if it is a natural condition of the human race? He points out that "blindness or near-blindness is not a misfortune for a mole, nor would it be for a man, if that were the natural condition of the human race."[9]

Despite this, however, Nagel argues that death is different in that it robs us of aspects of life which we have become familiar with. We may have a natural lifespan, but "A man's sense of his own experience, on the other hand, does not embody this idea of a natural limit."[10] In this sense, we view our existence as a set of open-ended possibilities. We do not experience ourselves as having a finite span; instead, we view life as indeterminate and not bounded; we do not perceive our future as something that shrinks with time. With this in mind, Nagel concludes, "If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all."[11]

Response to Nagel's Account of Death

To continue, let us now consider some responses to Nagel's argument that death is the greatest of evils that can befall an individual. One apparent response to Nagel's argument is to take issue with his claim that baseline

8. Ibid., 9.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 10.

existence is a good in and of itself. He seems to state this argument as a given and yet it is open to various counterexamples which provide evidence to the contrary. For instance, one can imagine a set of particular circumstances in which it would be better not to exist—for example, a life full of torture and physical and mental deprivation. Similarly, one can take issue with the value of the "possibilities" granted to individuals whose mental and physical capacities are such that they deteriorate rapidly over time due to age or illness—think of cancer patients who when faced with long drawn out pain and suffering view death as a release.

Nagel may respond to these objections in different ways. In the case of the first example, he may argue that, although a life filled with torture and deprivation would be undesirable, we must acknowledge that a person's future (as long as the person exists) is open to infinite "possibilities."[12] This being the case, it is possible that an individual leading such a life would have the opportunity to escape this misfortune and lead a better life (however unlikely this may be). Also, even if this person were not able to escape the mere fact of her existence is positive enough to outweigh any evils she may experience during the course of her life. In regard to the second example, Nagel may argue that, although it is true that individuals who experience drawn out pain and suffering view death as a release, this is only a psychological way for them to deal with and accept the inevitability of their impending death. If they thought about their situation more thoroughly and rationally, he may argue, they would

12. Although it is possible to refute this claim by acknowledging the very real threat deterministic doctrines pose, in the interest of space, this paper will assume a libertarian approach.

realize that it is better to exist than to not exist. Despite these replies, however, Nagel's claim that existence is in and of itself sufficient to justify the positivity of existence over nonexistence is unsubstantiated. Likewise, the nature of these responses is such that they illustrate why nonexistence may be negative; however, they do not explicitly show that existence itself is positive.

A second way in which one may refute Nagel's thesis is to take issue with his responses to the criticisms he poses. In the case of his response to the first and third objections, I would argue that he makes the mistake of valuing an individual's death in relation to others. He makes the claim early in his paper, "I shall not discuss the value that one person's life or death may have for others, or its objective value, but only the value it has for the person who is its subject."[13] Yet is this really the case? It may be argued that as long as I am alive, I have infinite future possibilities (if we accept Nagel's argument). However, the moment I die these possibilities disappear, as I am neither able to actualize these possibilities into being nor can I comprehend them. Only someone other than myself can feel sorrow for my inability to pursue future possibilities.

With regard to his example of an intelligent individual who, because of an unfortunate accident, is left in the same condition as a contented infant, he acknowledges that the person as she existed before the accident is no longer present. Yet, he makes the claim that the person can still be a subject of misfortune independent of what anyone else may say. The flaw in his argument comes in his inability to illustrate this claim outside of reference to another individual's perceiving the loss. I reiterate from above,

13. Ibid., 2.

"[If] instead of concentrating exclusively on the oversized baby before us, ***we*** consider the person he was, and the person he *could* be now, then his reduction to this state and the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute a perfectly intelligible catastrophe."[14] Nagel fails to show how the individual, who no longer exists by his own admission, suffers a loss. As illustrated, only by appeal to how others perceive this situation can Nagel argue that the victim of this accident has suffered a misfortune.

Similarly, it can be shown that the response to the third problem, in regard to the temporal asymmetry between the time before our birth and the time after our death, falls short for the same reason. I may perceive it as a great loss that a friend of mine is no longer around to experience the joys and sorrows of life; however, my friend independently of my judgments is no longer a subject of experience. Without reference to an outside body, it is difficult to illustrate how death is evil, especially when one acknowledges that the nature of possibilities is such that they are only present when they can be actualized.

Nagel may respond to this objection by maintaining that death is an evil that is perceived by others and has no exact location in space and time in the subject's life. His argument is not necessarily dependent on the fact that an individual's death may not be experienced subjectively as evil. However, it is not clear how this argument could be maintained.

Nagel's response to the second criticism that our experience is such that we do not experience the idea of a limit to human lifespan is also open to refutation. I would

14. Ibid., 6. (Bold italics mine.)

argue that anyone who does not experience her life as finite and shrinking is in denial or lacks perspective. A person may cope with the idea of death by not acknowledging that it is ever present, but attitude says more about the individual than it does about death, and it flies in the face of reality.

Nagel's response is also inadequate because of the negative consequences that would hold and confront our everyday experience if it were true. To be specific, if we don't consider the temporal limit of lives and if our sense of mortality is not part of the nature of our existence, then we would believe that time is not a factor in our lives. It would become increasingly easy to justify a life of severe laziness and inaction, to put off our daily projects because they will still be waiting for us tomorrow. My experience has led me to believe that human beings want to make an impact on the world; we take on various projects and develop skills in the hope of making a difference. Death reminds us all that our time on this earth is precious and so we should not squander the time we have. If Nagel's view holds true in regard to this criticism, then our lives would lack the motivation which death inspires.

A Stoic Account of the Nature of Death

My account of the character of death adopts the stoic position that the nature of our reality is such that everything decays with time; nothing lasts forever; and death is a natural part of life. Because of these observations, I perceive death as neither good nor bad. I find that Nagel's insistence on the loss of future "possibilities" as evil is inconsistent. As I have mentioned above, I feel that a necessary condition of a possibility is

that it has the opportunity to be actualized. It is impossible for an individual to continue to actualize possibilities when she has died; therefore, the only loss one can sustain is in the present. As the stoic thinker Marcus Aurelius so eloquently puts it:

> Even if you're going to live three thousand more years, or ten times that, remember: you cannot lose another life than the one you're living now, or live another one than the one you're losing. The longest amounts to the same as the shortest. The present is the same for everyone; its loss is the same for everyone; and it should be clear that a brief instant is all that is lost. For you can't lose either the past or the future; how could you lose what you don't have?[15]

One cannot help feel a sense of wonder at the clarity and simplicity of Aurelius's ideas. If one adopts the view that death is neither good nor evil, then, upon a careful reading of his *Meditations,* one can find a response to all three of the problems posed by Nagel.

In response to the first and third problems Nagel proposes, one only needs examine Aurelius's claim, "When we cease from activity, or follow a thought to its conclusion, it's a kind of death. And it doesn't harm us. Think about your life: childhood, boyhood, youth, old age. Every transformation is a kind of dying. Was that so terrible?"[16] In other words, the nature of life is such that an

15. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* trans. Gregory Hays. (New York: Random House, 2002), 21.
16. Ibid., 122.

individual experiences many transformations; therefore, it is irrational to fear the last of these transformations—death. One may point to Nagel's response to the second problem he poses as a counterexample to this claim; however, I believe that Aurelius's argument is closer to the truth of the matter:

> What humans experience is part of human experience. The experience of the ox is part of the experience of oxen, as the vine's is of the vine, and the stone's what is proper to stones…Nothing that can happen is unusual or unnatural, and there's no sense in complaining. Nature does not make us endure the unendurable.[17]

I find the stoic approach appealing because it acknowledges that death is a natural process and, therefore, cannot be evil, despite our independent perceptions or judgments.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to examine Nagel's account of death, to critically respond to his account, and finally to advocate the stoic position that death is a natural process that is neither good nor bad. I have argued that Nagel's thesis fails because it does not adequately answer the charges brought against it and because the claim that existence itself is positive remains unsubstantiated. In dismissing Nagel's account of death, I have advocated my

17. Ibid., 110.

own position, which is part of a larger stoic tradition. I have argued that stoic thought provides one with the best account of death, which is that of a natural process, which is essentially neither good nor evil. I have cited the work of stoic thinker Marcus Aurelius not only as evidence of this argument but also as a source of possible responses to the questions posed by Nagel. I close with a final thought of Aurelius's on death, which I believe to be of the highest importance:

> You've lived as a citizen in a great city. Five years or a hundred—what's the difference? The laws make no distinction. And to be sent away from it, not by a tyrant or a dishonest judge, but by Nature, who first invited you in—why is that so terrible? Like the impresario ringing down the curtain on an actor: "But I've only gotten through three acts…!" Yes. This will be a drama in three acts, the length fixed by the power that directed your creation, and now directs your dissolution. Neither was yours to determine. So make your exit with grace—the same that was shown to you.[18]

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18. Ibid., 170.

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