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Isabelle O. Riddle

University of Georgia, [ior66447@uga.edu](mailto:ior66447@uga.edu)

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# Nagel's Harm Thesis as the Optimal Way to Approach Death

Isabelle Riddle

*University of Georgia*

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## **Abstract**

*Should one fear her own death?, or, more precisely,*

*Does death harm the individual who dies?*

These are important questions because how a person views death is one of the greatest determinants of how they will carry out their existence and form a conception of life's meaning. Further, although death ultimately consumed all people in history and will consume all people in the future, a comprehensive understanding of death is still lacking for philosophers and laymen alike. This research utilizes a comparison of three contrasting historical viewpoints of death to answer the above questions. Epicurus, the founder of Epicurean philosophy, believed that we have no reason to fear death. Thomas Nagel, on the other hand, prescribed a deprivationist/harm theory, arguing that death is bad because it denies us of life's goods. Finally, the existentialist Heidegger thought that we ought to experience a sort of weighty anxiety, but not fear, when anticipating our own death. This report argues that Nagel's account of death is superior because it most seamlessly accounts for humans' personal relationship with their demise without neglecting a strict objective framework of logic. Nagel's theory is most attractive because it approaches the question of death at the root, and confidently justifies the predisposition to fear death which most people possess.

*Keywords:* death, Epicureanism, harm theory, Heidegger, Nagel, philosophy

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## Analysis of Historical Frameworks

Epicurus, in *Letter to Menoeceus*, seeks to justify why one should not fear his own death but instead be ambivalent towards it. Epicurus held two foundational beliefs which contributed to his viewpoint of death as a non-evil. First, Epicureanism is a form of hedonism insofar as it claims that “an event harms us only if it causes in us the presence of some condition we find unpleasant...we can call all such conditions pain” (Luper). Second, as Epicurus explains in his “Letter to Herodotus,” he prescribes to a form of atomism, believing that (1) nothing comes from nothing, and (2) nothing exists except atoms moving in a void (Barry 72; Long 46-48). Through this materialistic lens, Epicurus saw what some call the “soul” as a mere collection of atoms. Therefore, he defined death as “a natural dispersion of the particular combination of atoms that comprise a human soul” (Barry 72). Death is not a sensation, so pain is necessarily absent for the one who dies. Through application of the first foundational belief of hedonism, Epicurus arrives at the conclusion that death cannot be bad for the one who dies. He writes, “Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us” (Epicurus 30).

Epicurus’s conclusion is underpinned by two crucial assumptions. The first syllogism links the nature of harm (i.e. bad, according to Epicurus) with the nature of death. He states that for something to be bad for a human being, it must be experienced by that human being. Second, death is annihilation, an “experiential blank.” Therefore, death cannot be bad for a person because for something to be bad for an individual it must be experienced by that individual, but death is a non-experience. The second assumption is found in this: “So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it

is not, and the latter are no more” (Epicurus 31). In this argument, Epicurus again arrives at the conclusion that death cannot be bad for the person who dies because a person must exist to be the subject of harm, but when death occurs there is no longer a subject to which harm can be ascribed.

In summary, Epicurus claims that if death harms the one who dies, there must exist a clear *harm* that is received, a *subject* who is harmed, and a *time* when that harm occurs (Luper). If we specify that the *time* death harms its victims is while they are alive, we can pinpoint a *subject* but no real *harm*, as death does not directly negatively affect people while they are still living. However, claiming that the *time* death harms its victims is after death leads to more pitfalls; no *subject* is left to suffer the harm (if death equals nonexistence), and it appears impossible to specify a *harm* that a nonexistent person could collect. Epicurus rejects the claim that death is bad because he sees no way to reconcile these three subjects.

Alternatively, Thomas Nagel is a contemporary philosopher who, in his essay “Death,” uses what has come to be called a deprivation theory or harm thesis to prove that death is bad. He states, “...life is a good and death is the corresponding deprivation or loss, bad not because of any positive feature but because of the desirability of what it removes” (Nagel 641). Nagel draws a crucial distinction between two different ways in which something can be bad for someone. On the one hand, something can be bad for a person in an intrinsic, absolute sense, such as pain. There is a less conspicuous alternate way that a thing can be bad for someone: it can be comparatively bad. Economists refer to these bads using the term *opportunity cost*. Although not intrinsically bad, these things are bad because participating in them prohibits one from doing something better. Continuing with this logic, Nagel claims that even if a life has an excess of miserable conditions and too few pleasant ones to outweigh the bad on their own, “the additional

positive weight is supplied by experience itself” (Nagel 640). There is always enough good in the experience of a life itself that losing it would constitute a deprivation.

Nagel provides proof for his claim by defending it from anticipated objections. He addresses some concerns directly paralleling Epicurus’s, namely the identity of the one being harmed and the timing of said harm. First, Nagel verifies that there are in fact evils which consist merely in the deprivation of possible goods, not on someone’s *minding* that deprivation. Nagel proves this with two models. First, he alludes to the common saying “What you don’t know can’t hurt you,” which claims that even if a person is betrayed by her friends or despised by people who treat her kindly in her presence, it is only a misfortune if she finds out and suffers as a result. Nagel digs deeper, suggesting that “the discovery of betrayal makes us unhappy because it is bad to be betrayed—not that betrayal is bad because its discovery makes us unhappy” (Nagel 642). Extending this logic, death is bad, because simply, *death is bad*, not because a certain deceased actor recognizes and minds his death at a specific moment. Nagel further raises the hypothetical scenario of an intelligent adult suffering a brain injury which leaves him in the mental state of a cared-for but nevertheless ignorant infant. Nagel points out that one would most definitely view this man’s state as a misfortune for the man himself. He asks from where this pity stems, as the man was in this same condition when he was truly a baby, and we did not pity him then. The answer: we think of the injured man as more than an infant; we “consider the person he was, and the person he *could* be now...[so]...the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute[s] a perfectly intelligible tragedy” (Nagel 643). The harm must originate from the deprivation itself, regardless of the experiential state of the victim. Nagel also attempts to quell concerns about the impossibility of precisely pinpointing the location of death’s evil within a life by arguing that what everyone already considers a person’s “life” extends beyond the boundaries

of his body, mind, or corporeal duration. This is why discounting a person's will after her death is almost universally deemed immoral (Nagel 643).

Martin Heidegger, a German existentialist philosopher, also believed that to view death as "nothing to us," like Epicurus recommends, is misguided. Heidegger lays out his unique justification for this claim in his seminal work, *Being and Time*, in which he principally explores the term "Dasein," roughly translated as *presence, existence, or, simply, a human being*. Heidegger argues that any complete understanding of our existence as a whole must encompass an understanding of the relationship between existence and death, for death finalizes a human being's existence. However, Heidegger points out that a puzzle exists in how we are to come to this true understanding of death. He states: "The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just 'there alongside'" (Heidegger 282). Since someone cannot experience his own death, a meaningful analysis of it may be impossible at first glance. However, Heidegger proposes a theory of how and why we should come to grips with the nature of our demise.

Heidegger tacitly considers the fact that other philosophers (Epicurus and Nagel included) so flippantly view death in terms of the death of another or even the death of an unspecified human a fatal flaw. He says, "Dasein's public way of interpreting, it is said that 'one dies' because everyone else and oneself can talk himself into saying that 'in no case is it I myself', for this 'one' is the 'nobody'" (Heidegger 297). One's incredibly personal awareness of their own death as a ubiquitous probability is the key to discovering their true self. This is difficult, as we see our own death as both a nebulous thing (if death becomes actual, we no longer are) and an inevitable thing (we all must die, of course). However, it is crucially important. In *Being and Time*, death is explicitly defined as the "possibility of the impossibility

of any existence at all” (Heidegger 307). As Hinman puts it, a person’s whole existence is found within the possibility of him *not* existing (Hinman 201).

Further, Heidegger argues that humans can confront this fact authentically or inauthentically. Referring to the first mode, he says the “state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being, is anxiety” (Heidegger 310). When people authentically anticipate death and realize that the world can and will exist without them, anxiety is inescapable. Anxiety, though, is thoroughly distinct from fear according to Heidegger. Fear is associated with the inauthentic self, a self which views his death as merely a typical case of the abstract idea of death. Wheeler states, “Expecting death is to wait for a case of death [inauthentically], whereas to anticipate death [authentically] is to own it” (Wheeler). In summary, to Heidegger, death is not a future event which puts an end to life, but death exists within us, affecting every act in which existence is realized. We *should* care about death and it *should* arouse emotion within us, but this emotion ought not to be fear, but a form of existential anxiety.

### **Derived Arguments**

Now, having explained the arguments underpinning Epicurus, Nagel, and Heidegger’s views of what the correct relationship with death should entail, I will attempt to prove why Nagel’s theory most accurately answers the question. In short, I consider Nagel’s account of death to be superior because it both recognizes the many nuances of personal death and sidesteps several strong counterclaims raised against it. For simplicity in subsequent arguments, we will focus only on one’s own personal death, forego any potentially murky instances of death (artificial sustenance, suspended animation, etc.), and adopt a physicalist definition of death, which links physical death to the cessation of existence. Death can be sub-defined as either

*process death*, a life being gradually extinguished until completely gone, or *denouement death*, the point at which one loses the very last trace of life (Luper).

To begin, I believe that Heidegger's stance on how one should view death is ultimately incorrect because it draws distinctions which, although semantically compelling, are not concretely meaningful. As Sartre points out, what allows us to grasp even the *possibility* of our death (i.e. our existence, according to Heidegger) when we cannot grasp the actual *event* of our death? (Sartre 537). The realization of the possibility of death is not itself even a possibility, and so a person existing in Heidegger's universe is behind an infinite number of doors separating his existence from his understanding of death. We do not have the key to the door granting direct access to death, but Heidegger gives no real proof for why we can claim to have the key for any other, more-distant door.

One could also claim that Heidegger, as well as Epicurus to some degree, falters in maintaining the true definition of death given previously. As Edwards notes, he constantly confuses the actual thing which is death with humans' thoughts and emotions about death. Yes, my thoughts and emotions about death are mine, but they are not "more mine" than my thoughts and emotions about any other subject (Edwards 167). Therefore, Heidegger's argument fails to recognize the nuances of actual death. I believe that Epicurus acknowledges them but fails to properly comprehend them, but Nagel both recognizes and most-ably processes humanity's true relationship with death, as I will now attempt to show.

The most obvious objection to Nagel asks, "How can nonexistence be bad for me?" The crux of Nagel's argument, as explained earlier, is that nonexistence is bad for a person because he is being deprived of the goods which could have been offered in continued life. Epicureanism challenges this argument in several ways, but I believe these objections do not invalidate the



deprivation theory of death's harm to which Nagel subscribes. Epicurus's first objection concerns time—if something is true, there must surely be a time when that thing is true. This assertion seems to be a standard metaphysical principle we all take for granted (*Fact: The alumna attended UGA. When was that true? From 2010 to 2014*). This objection is brought to light in one of Epicurus's most famous lines: "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more" (Epicurus). Here, he claims that because one is alive in the present, death is not bad for her in that moment. When one has perished, though, they have ceased to exist, and so death cannot be bad for them then either. If any fact must have a time when it is true, and there is no time at which death is bad for a person, one is forced to conclude that it is not really a fact that death is bad.

The strongest refutation of Epicureanism's time objection is to show the error in claiming that all facts must be dateable, so even if death does not have a particular time in which it is bad, it can be bad, nonetheless. Kagan illustrates this point astutely in the following hypothetical scenario. *Suppose that on Monday Kevin shoots John, but instead of dying instantly he just begins slowly bleeding out. On Tuesday, Kevin has a heart attack and dies. On Wednesday, John finally dies of the blood loss.* It is undeniable that Kevin killed John, but when did Kevin kill him? It seems incorrect that Kevin killed John on Monday—the day he shot him—because John is not even dead on Monday. However, how could Kevin have killed John on Wednesday if Kevin was not even alive (i.e. existing) then? If, as the scenario suggests, a date cannot be ascribed to the murder, then there are indeed facts that cannot be dated, and Epicurus's objection is empty.

Although Epicurean thinkers are usually the ones criticizing deprivation theorists like Nagel for not focusing closely enough on the timing of events near death, I believe that the Epicureans themselves are more guilty of this error. Quite logically, Epicureans establish that death cannot affect one after it occurs, nor can it affect one before it occurs. Therefore, death can affect us, if at all, only *when* it occurs. I think Epicureans too quickly discredit this time in which death occurs. If one adopts a process sense of death, it is clear that moving from being wholly alive to wholly dead is very likely to introduce some bad condition in us, like pain. Epicureans therefore understandably gravitate towards the denouement sense of death since, from this stance, they can more easily argue that the extinguishing of life's final spark occurs too quickly to be responsible for any unpleasant condition in a person. But there is no proof as to why this is actually the case, and the harm thesis stands. Perhaps Epicurus only means that the state of *being dead* is nothing to us, but that dying is often a misfortune. If this is all he proved, though, his conclusion is unsatisfactory at achieving his own goal of empowering people to find complete tranquility. This state is not realized until a person is free from all concern about the dying process (Luper).

Another approach one who accepts an Epicurean view of death could use to cast skepticism on Nagel's theory makes use of the same seminal argument of Epicurus as above: *A thing can only be bad for a person if that person exists. When a person is dead, he or she does not exist. Therefore, death cannot be bad for a person.* By the adopted definition of death, the second premise must be accepted. Therefore, to avoid accepting the conclusion, the first premise must be proven invalid. Prima facie, it appears that the deprivationists are safe in their rejection of this premise, as a crucial point about deprivations is that one does not need to exist in order to lack something. In fact, nonexistence *guarantees* that one is deprived of something, namely

life/existence. However, an Epicurean counterclaim could point out a troubling implication of rejecting the first premise. If death can be bad for a person who no longer exists, then death (nonexistence, in other words) could also be bad for people who have never existed. It would be morally rational to mourn for the billions and billions of people who could have possibly existed by any other of the infinite potential occurrences in the universe. Are deprivationists justified in not doing so, and, if not, shouldn't the theory be rejected?

I believe this response can be negated by a closer analysis of the statement "A thing can only be bad for a person if that person exists." There are two ways this premise can be interpreted: (1) that a thing can be bad for you only if you exist *at the same time as the bad thing*; (2) that a thing can be bad for you only if you exist *at some point*. The first meaning is unnecessarily strict, as accepting it proves that death cannot be bad for you because you do not exist when you are dead. However, the second, looser interpretation is just as valid but sidesteps the issue, getting at the heart of what Nagel truly means: nonexistence *cannot* be bad for the infinitude of imaginary unborn people, but death *can* be bad for my mother, my best friend, myself. Further, Heidegger highlights another possible flaw of the Epicurean mindset that prevents a true understanding; Epicurus fails to achieve an adequately inclusive view of death by thinking about it as an external fact and not a subjective experience.

Another critique of Nagel is posed by Lucretius, a Roman philosopher who agreed with Epicurus that one's death cannot be bad for him. Lucretius posits that by thinking about the state before birth, death can be proven unharmed. This is referred to as the *symmetry argument*, and it is best illustrated by the following excerpt from Lucretius's writings: "Look back at time...before our birth. In this way Nature holds before our eyes the mirror of our future after death. Is this so grim, so gloomy?" (Lucretius). The answer is of course no, so why is it so

distressing to consider the infinite time after our death? Even when looking at the situation from a deprivationist's account of harm, there seems to be an incongruity, as one did in fact miss out on enjoying the goodness of life before birth. Lucretius's paradox is actually not a cancellation of Nagel's theory at all if deprivationists home in on a better delineation of their original claim.

First, a definition of deprivation must involve some loss, and one cannot lose something she has never before possessed (Nagel). Therefore, "what's worse about the period after death is the fact that death involves loss, whereas prenatal nonexistence does not involve loss" (Kagan).

Furthermore, it can be argued that nonexistence before birth is not dreaded because it is followed by life, whereas nonexistence at death is distressing because it is final and infinite. If death as we know it was followed by more life then at least for some people nonexistence at death would become dramatically less onerous, viewed possibly as a needed rest or as an anesthetic state is.

What is upsetting about nonexistence at death is its permanence, not the nonexistence itself.

Derek Parfit suggests an additional way that Lucretius's criticism can be dispelled.

According to Parfit, humans have a tendency to prefer good things to happen to them in the future and bad things, if they must happen at all, to be in the past. This bias extends much wider than in considering one's existence (or lack thereof) and can fully explain the symmetry argument (Parfit). Brueckner and Fischer illustrate said point with this example: you participate in a medical trial in which you take a drug which induces intense pleasure for one hour but is followed by amnesia of the event, and are either told (1) you took the drug yesterday, experienced the pleasure, and have forgotten, or (2) you will take the drug tomorrow. It is clear that one would prefer the second option; this fact illustrates humans' innate tendency to be indifferent to past goods and bads, while we actively look forward to future goods and fear future bads (Brueckner and Fischer). Thus, a fear of death would likewise be rational to us.

Circling back to Heidegger, it is interesting to explore one question often raised against Nagel of whether all deaths, or only some, are misfortunes through a Heideggerian lens. Nagel argues that death is always an evil, while his counterpart, Bernard Williams, thinks that although *premature* death is a misfortune, “it is a good thing that we are not immortal, since we cannot continue to be who we are now and remain meaningfully attached to life forever” (Luper). Williams’s take is similar in many ways to Heidegger’s opinion that the meaning of existence is rooted in death, and the two theories play off of each other synergistically.

Additionally, it is possible for one to reject Nagel’s claim that death is always the worse option, either in the personal sense or in reference to humanity en masse. The rejection could stem either from arguing that the good of simply experiencing life does not always outweigh life’s hardships, or by asserting that the only worthwhile projects in life are endless in duration. If the deprivation is, in effect, reversed, so that it exists in life more so than in death, one is at risk of convincing themselves that the only life available is not worth living (Unamuno). Again, at this point adopting some of Heidegger’s beliefs about death seems to smooth over some of the deprivationist theory’s rougher edges. Heidegger’s viewpoint may prohibit Nagel’s theory from being spun into an outright condemnation of the human condition, as it helps maintain meaning despite mortality. This softer approach could allow Nagel’s arguments, which I believe to be most correct, to gain more popularity by diminishing this concern.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe, as Nagel does, that death should be feared because it deprives us of the goodness of life. Nagel’s theory is most attractive because it approaches the question of death at the root, and confidently justifies the predisposition to fear death which most people possess. The question of whether to fear one’s death and the rationale behind the decision have

wider implications: death not only creates meaning in a person's own life but determines how much meaning he assigns to the lives of those around him. When an individual conducts a calculated exploration of death, a more balanced and gentler view of humanity is cultivated within him.

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