

Precis, our stories: essays on life, death, and free will

John Martin Fischer

Published online: 23 November 2010

© The Author(s) 2010. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

I defend the “deprivation theory” of death’s badness: death is bad for an individual insofar as it deprives him or her or what would be, on balance, a good continuation of life. (Of course, an on-balance good continuation of life need not be analyzed purely in terms of experiential features of the possible continuation.) I go on to defend various contentious elements of the deprivation view of death’s badness.

I offer a sustained defense of the notion that some things can be bad for an individual, even though they involve no unpleasant or negative experiences for that individual. On my view, death is just such a bad, when it is indeed a bad thing for the individual who dies. Of course, it is not merely the case that an individual does not have any negative experiences due to his or her own death; indeed, the individual *cannot* experience anything (bad or good) during the period after he or she has died. Thus, I defend the contention that some things can be bad for an individual, even though he or she *cannot* experience anything as a result of the thing in question. In order to defend this claim, I modify a famous example offered by Thomas Nagel by adding elements from the equally famous (or perhaps infamous) Frankfurt-Cases (examples offered by Harry Frankfurt to impugn the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, according to which moral responsibility requires freedom to do otherwise). I thus seek to forge a connection between the literature on the metaphysics of death and the literature on moral responsibility.

In his famous essay on death, Nagel says that a man may be harmed by others who betray him behind his back, even though he never finds out about the betrayal and, let us suppose, does not experience anything unpleasant or negative as a result of the betrayal. Of course, this example cannot in itself establish that death can be bad for the individual who dies, since in Nagel’s example, but not in the case of death, the individual in question at least *can* have bad experiences (as a result of the

J. M. Fischer (✉)

Department of Philosophy, University of California, 900 University Avenue,
1605 HMNSS Building, Riverside, CA 92521, USA
e-mail: John.Fischer@ucr.edu

betrayal). In order to address this incompleteness in Nagel's argument, I add elements of Frankfurt Cases.

Here is a version of a Frankfurt Case:

Black is a neurosurgeon. He has secretly inserted a chip in Jones's brain which enables Black to monitor and control Jones's brain activities. Black can exercise this control through a sophisticated computer that he has programmed so that, among other things, it monitors Jones's voting behavior. Black is a committed Democrat, and he has yet again signed up with the Democratic Party to be of service. If Jones were to show any inclination to vote for McCain (or, let us say, anyone other than Obama), then the computer, through the chip in Jones's brain, would intervene to assure that he actually decides to vote for Obama and does so vote. But if Jones decides on his own to vote for Obama (as Black, the old progressive, would prefer), the computer does nothing but continue to monitor—without affecting—the goings-on in Jones's head.

Supposing that Jones decides on his own to vote for Obama, it seems to me that Jones is morally responsible for his choice and act of voting for Obama, although he could not have chosen otherwise and he could not have done otherwise.

Suppose now that we add to Nagel's betrayal-behind-one's back example a Frankfurt-style "counterfactual intervener"—call him "White". White is, like Frankfurt's Black, a strictly *counterfactual* intervener. White plays no role in how the story actually unfolds, because, as it turns out, he doesn't need to; but we can imagine that he can effectively prevent the individual from ever finding out about the betrayal. So, for example, if someone were about to tell the individual about the betrayal, White would prevent him from getting in contact with the individual, and so forth. Here it seems to me that the person is indeed harmed by the betrayal, even though he or she *cannot* experience anything as a result of it.

Although I believe that we thereby make progress toward defending the deprivation theory of death's badness, there is still a gap in the argument. Death robs the purported harm of a subject, whereas the individual who is betrayed behind his back still exists. Although I concede this point, I argue that it is most plausible to suppose that the problem with the fact that the subject has gone out of existence is precisely that this renders it impossible for the subject to have bad experiences; given that the possibility of bad experiences is not required for harm, I suggest that we can conclude that it is also not necessary that there be a persisting subject. I grant that none of the examples that have been invoked—including my "Frankfurt-style" version of Nagel's betrayal case—in itself shows decisively that death can be bad for the individual who dies. Nevertheless, I argue that such examples provide a strong plausibility argument for this thesis. Here I show how the debates about death can be conceptualized in terms of my analytical device, "Dialectical Stalemates"; this is yet another way in which the literature on Free Will (broadly construed) and the literature on death can be linked.

If death is indeed bad, when it is bad, for an individual insofar as it is an experiential blank that counts as a deprivation of what would have been, on balance, good, then it would seem that prenatal nonexistence could similarly be bad for an

individual. Prenatal nonexistence, as Lucretius pointed out, appears to be the mirror-image of posthumous nonexistence. But we typically do *not* think of prenatal nonexistence as bad for us. So perhaps we should take a different view about death, or perhaps the deprivation theory of death's badness is incorrect.

Nagel suggested a reply to the Lucretian Mirror-Image Argument. On this strategy, although it is metaphysically possible that I die later than I actually die, it is not metaphysically possible that I have been born considerably earlier than I was actually born. This asymmetry of possibility could be an ingredient in a justification of our asymmetric attitudes. But even Nagel distances himself from this explanation, and I (along with my co-authors, Anthony Brueckner and also Dan Speak) argue against various attempts to defend this reply to Lucretius. In contrast, Brueckner and I propose a "Parfitian" reply to Lucretius. On the Brueckner/Fischer approach, the commonsense asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence can be seen to be a special case of a general asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future good experiences. We care about future good experiences in a way in which we do not care about past good experiences, all other things equal. Since death deprives us of something we care especially about, whereas prenatal nonexistence does not, one can potentially defend the rationality of the commonsense asymmetry in our attitudes.

More specifically, Brueckner and I do not deny that prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence are equally deprivations of what is arguably good; our point is that our asymmetric attitudes toward these apparently similar periods can be seen as a special case of a general symmetry in attitudes. Further, I have argued that this general asymmetry can be seen to be rationally defensible. A specific instance of an unjustified bias is also unjustified; but our preference for good experiences in the future can be justified—or at least so I argue.

If death can be a bad thing for an individual, might immortality be a good thing? My answer is, "Yes." I seek to address the Immortality Curmudgeons, such as Bernard Williams and Heidegger and their followers, who argue that immortal life would be *necessarily* undesirable for creatures like us. I believe that a careful consideration of these issues about immortality can lead to insights about the value and meaning of our own, finite lives.

In a cluster of essays on free will and moral responsibility, I build on and extend my contention in my previous essay, "Responsibility and Self-Expression," that the value of acting so as to be morally responsible is the value of a certain sort of artistic self-expression. In these essays I argue that in acting freely, we transform our lives in such a way that the chronicles of our lives become genuine *stories* or *narratives*. That is, I argue that acting freely is the ingredient which, when added to others, makes it the case that our lives admit of distinctively *narrative* explanations, and have irreducibly narrative dimensions of evaluation. Thus acting freely—that is, exhibiting the signature freedom-relevant control, guidance control—makes us the authors of our narratives. As such, we are artists, and I contend that the value of acting freely is thus the value of artistic self-expression. When we act freely, we do not necessarily make a difference—but we do make a statement.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.