

DEATH

Clement Dore

1

In the final chapter of his book, *The View from Nowhere*, the American philosopher, Thomas Nagel, writes as follows about death:

We do not regard the period before we were born in the same way we regard the prospect of death, yet most of the things that can be said about death are equally true of the former. Lucretius thought this showed that it was a mistake to regard death as an evil. But I believe it is an example of a more general future-past asymmetry... [Derek] Parfit has explored the asymmetry in connection with other values such as... pain. The fact that a pain (of ours) is in prospect rather than in the past has a very great effect on our attitude toward it, and this effect cannot be regarded as irrational... [the former asymmetry] can't be accounted for in terms of some other difference between past and future nonexistence, any more than the asymmetry in the case of pain can be accounted for in terms of some other differences between past and future pains, which makes the latter worse than the former.¹

Nagel is maintaining in this quote that it is rational for a person to view pains which he is apt to experience in the future in a manner different from the way in which he views pains which he has experienced in the past. Nagel is saying that it is rational for a person to think of his future pains as more undesirable than his past ones. And Nagel claims that

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there is a similar asymmetry between a rational person's attitude towards a past in which he did not exist and a time in the future when he will not exist. In Nagel's view, just as a rational person will think of pains which he *will* experience as more undesirable than pains which he had in the past, he will think of his not existing in the future as much more undesirable than his not having existed in the past.

What Nagel says about pain stands in need of qualification. If a pain which I experienced in the past was prolonged and intense, and a pain which I anticipate experiencing in the future will be fleeting and slight, then I might well regret the former pain more than I regret the fact that I will be experiencing the latter one. We need to compare past and future pains which have roughly the same duration and intensity in order to be able to maintain that they are asymmetrical in the way Nagel says they are.² But Parfit and Nagel are essentially right. The qualified claim that the contemplated asymmetry obtains is clearly correct (though this is a contingent fact about human psychology, not a necessary truth).

2

But Nagel is subject to a more serious objection. I did not exist before 1930 and (almost certainly) I will not exist after the year 2030. And, if the asymmetry which Nagel in effect ascribes to my not existing before 1930 and to my not existing after 2030 really does obtain, then at least it differs from the asymmetry which obtains between my attitude toward past and future pains of mine. For my past pains did in fact exist and were in fact undesirable while I experienced them. And pains which I will experience in the future will in fact exist and will be undesirable. In comparing future pains of mine to past ones, I am comparing two existent things. And that is not true of my comparing myself at a time when I won't exist any longer to an individual (namely, me) at a time before I existed. The reply that

Nagel is comparing a *state or condition* which I was in before 1930, and which I will be in after 2030, is obviously mistaken. For I cannot have been in a state or condition in the past unless I existed then. And I cannot be going to be in a state or condition in the future unless I will exist at that time.

It may look, however, as if it is open to Nagel to reply that, though my not having existed before 1930 and my not existing after 2030 are not states or conditions which I have been, and will be, in, there is a (timeless) *state of affairs* which consists of my not existing before the year 1930 and a (timeless) state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030. And it may look as if it is open to Nagel to claim that the envisaged asymmetry obtains with respect to those states of affairs – that, though the state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930 was not at all undesirable, the state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030 is very undesirable – a state of affairs which is much to be deplored.

3

There is, however, a serious objection to this claim. Since the state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930 is obviously not undesirable, then, if that state of affairs has a *degree* of undesirability, the best candidate for that degree is zero. But if it has zero degrees of undesirability, then it must not be logically impossible – in the sense of the word ‘impossible’ in which it is impossible that the principles of logic, the principle of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle, are false – that it has a *higher* degree of undesirability. And that entails that it must be logically possible that that state of affairs is, to some extent, undesirable. But Lucretius was surely right just to this extent: the state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930 is not undesirable even to the

slightest extent. We are confronted, then, with the following question: 'How could Lucretius have been right about the state of affairs in question even though it is false that that state of affairs has zero degrees of undesirability?' The answer must be that we ought to view the sentence, 'The state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930 is not undesirable', not as an *evaluation* of that state of affairs, but as a denial of what the Oxford philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, would have called 'a category mistake'. We ought to interpret it as being the assertion that the contemplated state of affairs does not belong to the category of things which are proper objects of evaluation – just as, say, butter does not belong to the category of things which have a square root. Since butter does not belong to that category, it is neither true nor false that butter has a square root. And, by the same token, since my not existing before the year 1930 does not belong to the category of things which are proper objects of evaluation, the sentence, 'That state of affairs is not undesirable', is not the denial of the evaluative sentence, 'That state of affairs is undesirable', but, rather, the assertion that that the quoted (evaluative) sentence is neither true nor false. (I am assuming here that there are *some* states of affairs which are such that there are sentences which truly or falsely evaluate them. But that is a safe assumption. Consider, for example, the sentence, 'The state of affairs which consists of a good woman's living long and prospering is desirable'. That sentence is very obviously true, and its denial is obviously false.)

It is of note that the same argument which shows that the state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930 is neither desirable nor undesirable shows that the indefinitely large number of states of affairs which consists of my not existing before any one of the indefinitely large number of years in the distant past are neither desirable nor undesirable. The degree of undesirability of those states of affairs can be zero only if it is logically possible that it is greater than zero. And that is

intuitively false. It is not logically possible that my not existing before any given year in the distant past should be even slightly undesirable. It follows that it is true of any one of the indefinitely large number of years in the distant past that my not existing before that year was neither desirable nor undesirable.

4

It follows from what I have said that, *pace* Nagel, the state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030 cannot be more undesirable than the state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930. Since the latter state of affairs is neither desirable nor undesirable, it cannot be true that the state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030 is more undesirable than is the former state of affairs. For one thing can be more undesirable than another only if the latter thing has some degree of undesirability or other.

5

There is another argument for the same conclusion. By claiming that the state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030 is more undesirable than the state of affairs which consists of my not existing before the year 1930, Nagel has committed himself to the simpler conclusion that the former state of affairs is, to some extent, undesirable. But let us consider some other, very obviously undesirable kinds of things – painful sensations, for example. We can answer the question, ‘How undesirable are painful sensations?’ by referring to their intensity and duration. The more intense and prolonged a painful sensation is, the more undesirable it is. Vices such as ignorance and cowardice are also undesirable. And we can answer the question, ‘How undesirable are those things?’

by referring to their degree. A greater degree of cowardice is more undesirable than a lesser degree, and a greater degree of ignorance is more undesirable than a lesser degree. But the state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030 is not intense, and it does not have degrees. And unless there are other clearly undesirable things which are also not intense and which also do not have degrees, then we are entitled to conclude that the state of affairs in question is not a proper object of evaluation. It is fair to say, moreover, that there is an onus on Nagel to provide us with examples of undesirable things of that kind. If he cannot, then we are warranted in concluding that it is not even in principle possible to answer the question, 'How undesirable is the state of affairs in question?' – and we ought to conclude that the state of affairs of my not existing after the year 2030 does not belong to the category of things which are either desirable or undesirable. The degree of undesirability of a thing is also, of course, correlated with its duration. Thus, the longer a pain lasts, the more undesirable it is, all other things being equal. But if there were a correlation between the duration of the state of affairs which consists of my not existing after the year 2030 and some degree of undesirability, then, since that state of affairs is eternal, it would be infinitely undesirable. And it is very likely that even Nagel would agree that death is not *that* bad.

6

I do not want to deny that dying young is frequently more undesirable than dying at the end of a normal life span. But, when the latter is true, it is not true because the person who died young will be worse off because of his early death. A person must exist in order to be worse off than he was before; and, since a person who dies young does not exist after his death, there is no one who fits the description 'worse off'. (I am assuming, as Nagel does, that a person's death marks the end of his existence.)

Someone may object at this point that the fact that my dying at some future time will cause people who love me to grieve for a while, while that is not true of my not having existed before 1930, shows that my dying at a future time will be more undesirable than my not having existed before 1930. But the reply is that, while other people may well be grieved by my death, I will not – and cannot – be similarly affected. I may in present time, while I am still alive, be concerned about how my dying will affect people who are close to me. But, unless I am confused, I will not be concerned about how my being dead will affect me.

Another objection is that my not existing after the year 2030 might be deplorable because if I had lived on, then I would have discovered a cure for some hitherto incurable disease. But the fact – if it is a fact – that some other people who will be alive after the year 2030 will be worse off because of my death does not entail that I will be worse off. And that is true not only of a person's dying before he realizes his promise, but of a person's dying young. If the death of a young person puts an end to a life which would have been full of happiness, then though the world will be a lesser place because it will contain less happiness than it would otherwise have contained, he will not be worse off. Only someone who is alive can have a diminished degree of happiness.

Though I am not sure that this is true of Nagel, I think that many pessimists regarding death are prepared to argue that death is a loss of life and that losses are frequently undesirable. But, while it is true that a person who loses his wealth or his sanity has suffered a misfortune, and that a person who loses his wristwatch may have lost something which is of value to him, a person cannot lose his life in the same sense of 'lose' in which he can lose his health or his sanity or his watch. For he can lose the latter things only if there was a time at which he had them in his possession, and a later time at which, though he is still alive then, that is no longer true. It follows that if a person could, strictly speaking, lose his life, then *per impossible*

there would have been a time at which, though still alive, he was not alive. It is highly misleading then, to use the metaphorical expression 'loss of life' to refer to death.

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Notes

¹ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 228–229. Following Parfit, Nagel discusses pleasures as well as pains. He says that, though future pains are more undesirable than past pains, future pleasures are more desirable than past ones. For simplicity, I have limited my discussion to what Nagel says about pain.

² What Nagel says about past and future pleasures needs a similar qualification. If a pleasure which I experienced in the past was much more intense and prolonged than a future pleasure of mine will be, then it will be rational for me to view that past pleasure is more desirable than the pleasure which is yet to come.