

"death is nothing to us": epicurus' blunder



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In his Letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus outlines his philosophy of attaining happiness and details the proper attitude that Epicureans should have toward the gods and toward death. In reference to the latter, following his Sense-Experience Argument and Unnecessary Pain Argument, Epicurus famously states that, "...death is nothing to us" (125). Epicurus' arguments regarding death are formulated on the principle that death is "...the absence of life" (125), as in a permanent state of death, rather than a momentary act of dying. However, it is impossible to attain the permanent state of death without experiencing a dying moment and Epicurus seems to overlook this inextricable link between state (permanent death) and cause for state (momentary act of dying). Thus, it is necessary to evaluate Epicurus' arguments based on a complete definition of 'death,' which is comprised of both a momentary act of dying and a subsequent, permanent state of death. Both arguments are deductively valid, but will be proven unsound. Note that Epicurus' hedonist value system will be accepted for the purposes of this paper; pain will be considered bad and pleasure, defined as the absence of pain, will be considered good.

Epicurus' hedonist value system is derived from his teleological views of the gods, of which a thorough evaluation would exceed the scope of this paper. Through the evaluation of Epicurus' Sense-Experience Argument and Unnecessary Pain Argument, it will be concluded that death cannot be 'nothing' and that death should be feared in particular instances. Death is bad only if the momentary act of dying is painful and should be feared only if this pain is greater than the mental pain associated with anticipating and fearing death. On the other hand, death is good and should not be feared

only if the momentary act of dying is pleasurable due to a net decrease in pain, as this is made possible through the absence of previously existing pain. First, Epicurus' Sense-Experience Argument and Unnecessary Pain Argument will be reconstructed, clarified with additional textual references, and briefly evaluated in overview. A thorough evaluation will follow and the conclusion of the previous paragraph will be demonstrated.

Sense-Experience Argument 1) All "...good and bad consists in sense-experience" (124). 2) " Death is the privation of sense-experience" (124). 3) Death is neither good nor bad This Sense-Experience Argument is deductively valid. Premise 1 can be further clarified with reference to his later comments on pleasure and pain. Pain is bad and pleasure - which Epicurus defines as the absence of pain - is good (128). Because it is through sense-experience that we perceive pleasure and pain, which are good and bad, respectively, the good and bad consist in sense-experience. Epicurus then also clarifies that pain refers to "...pain in the body or disturbance in the soul" (131). All people strive for pleasure as the chief good, as Epicurus defines pleasure as the "...first innate good" (129). Premise 2 may also be clarified by noting Epicurus' definition of death: "...absence of life" (125). Absence of life represents a permanent state of death, rather than a momentary act of dying. While Premise 1 will be proven true, Premise 2 will be proven untrue and, thus, the Sense-Experience Argument will be determined unsound. Premise 2 can only be true if the permanent state of death is completely separated from the momentary act of dying, which Epicurus seems to suggest is the case, but this is impossible. Because these are inextricably linked, and it is impossible to attain the permanent state of

death without experiencing either pleasure or pain at the moment of dying, death necessitates either a pleasurable sensory experience or a painful sensory experience. Thus, Premise 2 is untrue and the Sense-Experience Argument is unsound.

Epicurus extends his Sense-Experience Argument to his Unnecessary Pain Argument in order to persuade fellow Epicureans not to fear death, based on the notion that death is void of pain: Unnecessary Pain Argument A) While present, death is painless and causes no distress (125). B) That which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when anticipated (125). C) Death creates unnecessary pain when anticipated (125). The Unnecessary Pain Argument is also deductively valid but unsound. Because Premise A is dependent on Premise 2 from Epicurus' Sense-Experience Argument, which was already labeled untrue, Premise A is also erroneous. Because it is not always true that death is the privation of sense-experience (Premise 2) due to the necessity of a momentary act of dying in which sense-experience is present, it is also untrue that death is always painless and causes no distress (Premise A). Premise B will be refuted for the same reason: because the anticipation of death could lead an individual to avoid death and, thus, to avoid a painful act of dying, it could actually prevent unnecessary pain. Therefore, Premise 2 of the Sense-Experience Argument and Premise A and Premise B of the Unnecessary Pain Argument will be refuted and both arguments will be proven unsound, leading to the conclusion that death may be either good or bad depending on an individual's situation (refuting Conclusion 3), and that it may be advantageous for an individual to anticipate death (refuting Conclusion C). First, it can be demonstrated that

Premise 1 of the Sense-Experience Argument is true by considering it in light of its strongest counterarguments, leading to the conclusion that the good and the bad do consist in sense experience. It is arguable that the removal of pain through death is good and the removal of pleasure through death is bad. If an individual suffered a life of constant pain, perhaps due to the mental and emotional pain of a life sentence of solitary confinement or the physical pain of excruciating chronic health issues, the removal of their life's pain may be considered good. Because it is bad to be in pain, remaining alive could also be bad because it allows the pain to continue. Therefore, remaining alive in this scenario is bad due to the presence of pain.

Epicurus also writes that the wise man "...savours not the longest time [of life] but the most pleasant" (126). If a life were destined to be absolutely painful and devoid of pleasure, the most pleasant (least painful) option would seemingly be death, assuming the momentary act of dying was not exceedingly painful. This counterargument is unsound. Because the permanent state of death prohibits an individual from perceiving the absence of pain (pleasure), death is worse than even the most painful life, which would certainly have a finite number of pleasurable moments to supplement the pain. Therefore, the good would exist only in life, where sense experience is possible and at least some amount of pleasure can be experienced. Although, the opposite is true, as well: because the permanent state of death prohibits an individual from perceiving pain, death is better than even the most pleasurable life, which would certainly have a finite number of painful moments alongside the abundant pleasurable moments. In this scenario, the bad would exist only through the sensory experience of

life, where the sensation of pain will be felt. Therefore, Premise 1 is demonstrated to be true. Premise 2 of the Sense-Experience Argument, on the other hand, is untrue because one cannot enter the permanent state of death without experiencing the momentary act of dying, which is necessarily either painful or pleasurable. Given that the momentary act of dying is necessarily painful or pleasurable, which is possible only through sense-experience, death (the moment of dying plus the permanent state of death) is not the privation of sense experience. Some individuals' moments of death would be expected to be painful in some regard. If this moment was painful, the act of dying would be bad, by Epicurus' definition of bad, and so it should be feared. On the contrary, an individual's dying moment could instead be pleasurable. If an individual suffered through an excruciating "...pain in the body [or] disturbance in the soul" (131), the lesser pain of the dying moment could distract from the other greater physical pain or greater pain of the soul.

Given that Epicurus considers absence of pain pleasure, the absence of a certain portion of net pain in the body or soul, due to the distraction of lesser pain, could be pleasurable. Therefore, the dying moment of an individual could be either pleasurable or painful. Once this dying moment has continued to completion, though, and the permanent state of death has begun, sense-experience would cease. The permanent state of death is the privation of sense-experience, but its obligatory companion, the momentary act of dying, is not the privation of sense-experience, and so Premise 2 is untrue. Because Premise A of the Unnecessary Pain Argument is derived from Premise 2 of the Sense-Experience Argument, Premise A is also untrue.

Thus far, it appears that death is bad and should be feared only if the momentary act of dying is painful and that death is good and should not be feared only if the momentary act of dying is pleasurable due to a net decrease in pain. Premise B of the Unnecessary Pain Argument is untrue, as well, because in fearing the permanent state of death (which causes no distress when present) an individual may be prompted to avoid a painful act of dying. Epicurus seems to concede that it may be appropriate to fear the momentary act of dying, but not the permanent state of death, when he writes, "...he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come" (125). Although, if the anticipation and fear of the permanent state of death - which Epicurus considers foolish - leads an individual to act in such a way that they avoid a momentarily painful act of dying, the individual would avoid physical pain through their anticipation. Given that there will never be pain in the permanent state of death, the only pain that this individual avoids is precisely this cursory pain of dying. It cannot be refuted that this anticipation will create some form of mental pain or a "...disturbance in the soul" (131), and so the pain created through the anticipation of death is only unnecessary and damaging if it is greater than the physical pain of the momentary act of dying that the anticipation allows the individual to avoid.

While the anticipation of death does not guarantee an individual to avoid a painful act of dying, the mere possibility that it could allow for this is sufficient reasoning to refute the accuracy of Premise B. Therefore, it may be concluded that death is bad and should be feared only if the momentary act of dying is painful and only if this pain is greater than the mental pain

associated with anticipating and fearing death. On the other hand, death is good and should not be feared only if the momentary act of dying is pleasurable due to a net decrease in pain, as this is made possible through the absence of previously existing pain. Epicurus wishes to define death as "...the absence of life" (125), as he specifies immediately after his Sense-Experience Argument, but this ignores the inextricable link between the absence of life (a permanent state of death) and the specific moment in which death occurs (momentary act of dying). If this definition is accepted, both Epicurus' Sense-Experience Argument and Unnecessary Pain Argument are deductively valid and sound.

Because it is impossible to attain the permanent state of death without experiencing a dying moment, however, both arguments are unsound. As the dying moment immediately precedes death while an individual is still alive and sentient, it is perceived through sense-experience as either pleasure or pain. This pleasurable or painful dying experience is why it is impossible that "...death is nothing to us" (124). Once the permanent state of death is achieved, and after either pleasure or pain is endured in the dying moment, Epicurus is certainly justified in claiming that death is nothing to us.