Nagel, comments & questions on article: "Death"

PHIL 102, Jan 2018

If you want to be anonymous as you edit this document, make sure you're not logged into your Google account while you write here.

Left side of room when facing front

Question: Isn't the premise that if something happens to someone that does not affect them, is negative, not pointless to consider? If it directly affects them, that's another matter, but otherwise is it not a mute point to consider?

Christina: I think I see your point--if they don't experience it, what difference does it make to say it's a bad thing for them? Partly the answer is that Nagel is addressing a philosophical debate brought on by arguments such as Epicurus', which say that death is not bad for the person who dies because the only things that can be good and bad are things we can actually experience. Nagel's point actually brings up something more general than the issue of death: he claims that things like being deceived or betrayed, even if we never know about them, are bad for us. Philosophically, this means that we can say deception and betrayal are wrong to do, not just if the person hears about them, but even if they don't. So there is a wider philosophical implication here too.

Regarding death, one could say (though Nagel doesn't) that this means there is something for a person to be upset about regarding the prospect of their own death, which is in direct contrast to an argument like that of Epicurus.

Middle of the room

Right side of room when facing front

Question: Could another argument for why the time before birth isn't bad be that before you're born you don't know what life is, so we can't lose what we don't know exists?

Christina: This might work *if* one were starting with a premise that suggests there is some entity before birth to "know" something or not. Nagel, like Epicurus, is starting with the assumption that after life ends, and also before life begins, there is no consciousness, no being that exists at all. So this idea wouldn't work for Nagel's argument, but it might be something one could say if one assumed some kind of knowledge or consciousness were possible before birth. I haven't thought that idea through fully!

Question: I take issue with the idea that deception and betrayal as being "intrinsically bad", as Nagel argues. Granted, I would agree that it these actions are immoral, but saying that they are bad not because *we suffer* would imply that deception and betrayal aren't causing harm. Essentially, what I mean by that is if someone betrays you without your knowledge, we can acknowledge that one remains blissfully ignorant; however, the next day, you lose your job because of this betrayal. Can we really say that these factors are not bad because of the suffering they cause, and that one does not experience this? And by extension, as Nagel's first premise touches upon how the cause of "bad" in one's life is separated from the actual harm, can we not say that in some way, people suffer even if they are not able to attribute it to the cause?

Christina: Good questions here. Even if the person themselves never knows about the deception or betrayal they could cause harm in other ways, ways that one might experience (even if one doesn't know the reasons for these harms, let's say, so never knows about the deception/betrayal). I think Nagel is trying to focus on a situation where deception/betrayal would not cause any perceptible harm at all to the person, though his article isn't as clear as I would like about this. My sense is that he wants to argue that, even if the person isn't harmed at all and doesn't know about the betrayal or deception, it is still bad for them that that happened, and it is therefore wrong. That's the outlier case, because it may rarely happen, but philosphers often discuss that sort of example to isolate philosphical points like that it could still be wrong if it doesn't cause any harm.

This actually connects with what we'll be talking about with Mill and Kant--Mill argues that things can't be morally wrong unless they have bad consequences (such as harm to a person), and Kant argues that some things can be morally wrong even if they don't lead to bad consequences.

Does this answer all your questions? If not, please raise your questions on the Q&A discussion part of the website because I don't get notifications if people add more here and I might forget to return to this document to check! (note that you can add questions there anonymously if you want, by using a fake name and fake email address)

Question: With the fourth premise, could one not argue that "future experiences" could be very bad? For example, if someone dies of a disease and complications in surgery, and had they survived they would only spend their days in the hospital on life support slowly wasting away from disease, this could be regarded as a very painful and "bad" experience. Therefore, if they could only look forward to such horrid experiences for the rest of their lives, is that still truly a loss?

Christina: Yes, I can see the point here. It relates to a similar point we were discussing in class, I think--if one's life is mostly or wholly bad experiences, such as intense and continual pain, is the loss of

that kind of life and its future possibilities really a bad thing? Nagel seems to argue that life in itself, experience in itself, is a good thing and losing it is bad. This comes from the quote I read in class from the first paragraph on p. 2. But I do think this, if I have interpreted his argument correctly, is at least debatable.

Question: I feel as though Nagel is really reaching with his arguments. The first reply to the objection of "who loses out" tries to assign the loss to someone who frankly, if the Epicurean premise is used, no longer exists. Taking the example of a broken deathbed promise, one can see that situation is "bad" for the person who died, but if they no longer experience it, then they can't be affected. If we go with his second reply and state that a person continues after death in the form of…..their possibilities? (I feel like this is *quite* a reach) then the Epicurean premise has been broken, because that means the person is still present in some form after death, which Epicurus says is impossible as everything ends at death. So if Nagel's replies are true, he ends up breaking the Epicurean premise he seeks to operate on and disprove.

Christina: Thought-provoking points here! I can see what Nagel is doing, even if I'm not entirely sure it works. He is trying to say that there are things that can happen *to a person* even outside the confines of their life (well, only after death...nothing can happen to *that person* before they are born b/c they wouldn't be that same person if they existed earlier than their historical birth).

So, for example, if a person "B" breaks a deathbed promise they made to person "A" after A dies, then that broken promise is something bad that has happened, in some sense, to A. (One could perhaps also argue that it is bad to B as well, because it's bad for them to have broken a promise even if they don't see it that way, but that's not Nagel's focus here.) I can see the idea here: I do feel like in some way it makes sense to say breaking a promise to A is bad *for A*, even if A never knows about it, never suffers any harm (see my answer to the question in the middle of the previous page), and even if A doesn't physically exist anymore (nor mentally--no consciousness). I guess I can just philosophically see that in some way it's a bad thing for the person who was promised, even if that person doesn't exist anymore. Perhaps that person exists conceptually, just like a fictional character might be said to have some conceptual existence, and bad or good things can happen *to* him or her?

As I've noted in answer to a previous question, if this doesn't fully answer your question or if you'd like to comment further, please raise your questions on the Q&A discussion part of the website because I don't get notifications if people add more here and I might forget to return to this document to check! (note that you can add questions there anonymously if you want, by using a fake name and fake email address)