10 that there is a puzzle about the morality of killing, I try in Chapter 11 to solve that puzzle by developing a novel form of act utilitarianism. In Chapter 12 I extend my solution to a most perplexing sort of killing—the sort that occurs when an abortion is performed. And then in Chapter 13, I turn to moral problems concerning the killing of oneself. I claim that it is sometimes rational to welcome the Reaper.

Let us begin, then, by considering the ancient Epicurean argument for the notion that death cannot be a misfortune for the one who dies.

8

Epicurus and the Evil of Death

Let us begin our reflections on the axiology of death by asking an interesting (if somewhat grim) question: "What are the greatest misfortunes that can befall a person?" I suppose that most of us would list, among the great misfortunes, such things as these: suffering enormous pain, as for example if one is tortured or if one endures some terrible illness; suffering enormous injustice, as for example if one is imprisoned for years for a crime one did not commit or if one is subjected to racial or other unjustifiable discrimination; suffering great humiliation, as for example if one is discovered to be a worthless fraud, or if one is exposed as morally corrupt. There might be some disagreement about these claims, but I think there would be very widespread agreement that I have left out something I surely should have mentioned: death, especially premature death, is almost universally agreed to be one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a person. Of all the great misfortunes mentioned so far, it is the only one each of us is sure to suffer.

In myth, literature, and art, death is represented as an ugly, menacing figure—the Grim Reaper. The Reaper has been feared and hated for as long as people have recognized his existence. Indeed, we think of the Reaper and what he represents as an especially mysterious, creepy evil—not something merely unpleasant. We find death so horrible that we avert our eyes in its presence; we rush to find a suitable blanket or coat to cover the body so that passersby will not see. In the case of a particularly unusual death, we may be at once fascinated and curious to learn more; but at the same time we are repelled and perhaps ashamed of ourselves for being interested in something so awful. Nothing, it would

seem, is more natural than to think that death is one of the worst misfortunes that can befall a person.

Yet there is a long-standing and respected philosophical tradition—Epicureanism—according to which all such attitudes are utterly irrational. Epicureanism was founded by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived from 341 to 270 B.C. and taught in his school, the Garden, in Athens. Epicureans claim that they do not fear or hate death, and they tell us that they do not think that death is a misfortune for the one who dies. They think that ordinary people, who view death as one of the greatest of misfortunes, are in this wholly irrational. This is not just a matter of opinion with Epicureans. They think they can *prove* that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies. Let us look into this strange view.

Epicurus's Argument Against the Evil of Death

One version of one of the most famous arguments for this conclusion was presented by Epicurus in his "Letter to Menoeceus." The relevant passage is as follows:

> Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. . . . 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.
>
> . . . the wise man neither seeks to escape life nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. . . .[1]

In a passage that comes down to us as a mere fragment, Epicurus seems to present a highly compressed version of his argument about the evil of death. In that passage, he says:

> Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.[2]

Lucretius (99–55 B.C.) was a later advocate of Epicureanism and the author of a famous work, *De Rerum Natura* (or *On the Nature of Things*), in which he presents a somewhat inflated poetical statement of the main Epicurean doctrines. He offers what seems to be a slightly windy version of the same argument. It appears in this passage:

> Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, . . . For he whom evil is to befall, must in his own person exist at the very time it comes, if the misery and suffering are haply to have any place at all; but since death precludes this, and forbids him to be, upon whom the ills can be brought, you may be sure that we have nothing to fear after death, and that he who exists not, cannot become miserable, and that it matters not a whit whether he has been born into life at any other time, when immortal death has taken away his mortal life.[3]

While there are obviously important differences among these passages, and it might even be claimed that each of the longer passages contains several different arguments, it seems to me that there is one central argument that is pretty clearly present in all these passages. It is an interesting and puzzling argument. The general drift of the argument is fairly clear. It is based on the idea that once we are dead, we will feel no pain. From this, together with some subsidiary premises, Epicurus seems to derive the conclusion that death is no misfortune for the one who dies. I think that this argument provides the central backing for the Epicurean view about the evil of death.[4]

Let us begin by considering what the argument is supposed to prove. The conclusion of the argument is not entirely clear. It is stated in several different ways. Each is fairly vague: "Death is nothing to us"; "[death] does not concern [us]"; "[to the wise man] the absence of life does not seem to be any evil." In other passages, it appears that the point is that it is irrational to fear death; that the fear of death is empty and "vain." I shall provisionally understand the conclusion to be this:

5. Being dead is not bad for one who is dead.

Two preliminary points of clarification concerning the conclusion: First, let us distinguish between the process—sometimes long and painful—that leads up to death, and the state of being dead itself. As I tried to show in Chapter 5, it is not easy to define dying as a process (or, to avoid confusion, "dying2"). However, everyone will agree that while dying2, people always exist and are often in pain. On the other hand, once they are dead, people are never in pain, and perhaps they do not exist at all. In the passages I have cited, Epicurus does not attempt to show that there is nothing bad about *dying2*—the often painful terminal process that sometimes takes up the final days of life. Dying2 clearly can be a horrible experience, and the victim exists and sometimes suffers throughout. Rather, Epicurus seems to be talking about the state of being dead—the state one enters (if we can call it a state) after the process of dying2 has concluded; the state that takes place when we finally cease to be alive. This, he seems to be saying, is not bad for the one who undergoes it. Let us so understand the conclusion of his argument.

A second preliminary point is that the Epicureans surely do not mean to say that a person's death cannot be bad *for others*. One's friends may of course suffer as a result of one's death. I might suffer because my old friend is now dead. The Epicureans have nothing remarkable to say about this. The argument under consideration here is designed to show only that however bad it may be for others, being dead cannot be bad for the person who is dead. It must be admitted, of course, that if we were all convinced that death is not bad for those who are dead, then the burden of our own grief might be reduced a bit. I would be somewhat relieved if I came to believe that nothing bad has happened to my recently deceased friend. But this is a digression: the main point is that the argument purports to show that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies. With these points about the conclusion out of the way, let us turn to the premises of the Epicurean argument.

One premise in Epicurus's argument seems to be what I have called "the termination thesis." This is the doctrine that when a person dies, then he or she ceases to exist. This doctrine was the central topic of Chapter 6 above. I there tried to explain why I think it is false. However, it seems clear that Epicurus accepted this doctrine and used it as a premise in his argument, for he says

near the end of the first quoted passage: "when death comes, then we do not exist." And he also says, in the same context, that the dead ". . . are no more."

Another of the premises is implicit in the claim that "that which is dissolved is without sensation." I take this to mean that once we have gone out of existence (become "dissolved") we have no sensations. Since pain and pleasure are types of sensation, Epicurus undoubtedly means to imply that the nonexistent do not suffer any pain or enjoy any pleasure. In the context of the argument under consideration, the relevant point is that if a person does not exist at a certain time, then he or she does not suffer pain at that time. Although Epicurus does not explicitly assert this premise in the "Letter to Menoeceus," he does state it elsewhere in corresponding passages, and in any case it seems implicit in the Letter. Lucretius seems to be appealing to this premise when he says that "he who exists not, cannot become miserable." Furthermore, it seems an obvious truth. Thus, I have no compunctions about considering it a suppressed premise here.

Another of the premises seems to be a form of *hedonism*, the doctrine that pleasure is the only thing that is good in itself for a person, pain the only thing that is bad in itself for a person. According to this view, other things, such as money or health, are good for a person only insofar as they are connected to his or her pleasure. Similarly, other things, such as poverty or illness, are bad for a person only insofar as they are connected to his or her pain. If these things were stripped of their connections to pleasure and pain, they would be value-neutral. Epicurus's hedonism comes out fairly clearly in his claim that "all good and evil consist in sensation." Remarks Epicurus makes elsewhere confirm that he was indeed a hedonist and that he was inclined to express his hedonism with statements like the one cited. It is not an accident that we describe delicious meals as "Epicurean delights."

I suspect that we naturally take hedonism to be a doctrine about pleasure—the doctrine that the only things that are good in themselves for a person are his or her own pleasurable experiences. But hedonists typically endorse the other side of the coin as well. They also accept the view that the only things that are bad in themselves for a person are his or her own painful experiences. Maybe the Epicurean point is that since being dead is not a painful experi-

ence, it therefore cannot be bad for a person. While I have some doubts about attributing this premise to Epicurus, I think it is suggested by his remarks, and in any case it may be instructive to consider a version of the argument in which it appears. So let us consider a preliminary version of the argument:

Epicurus against the evil of death—I

1. Each person stops existing at the moment of death.
2. If (1), then no one feels any pain while dead.
3. If no one feels any pain while dead, then being dead is not a painful experience.
4. If being dead is not a painful experience, then being dead is not bad for the one who is dead.
5. Therefore, being dead is not bad for the one who is dead.

Before turning to evaluation, let us briefly review the premises of the argument. The first premise is based directly on the termination thesis. There can be little doubt that Epicurus relied on it, since he explicitly says that "when death comes, then we do not exist."

The second premise is one that Epicurus does not explicitly state in the Letter but which he does state elsewhere. It seems in any case to be implicit in the Letter. Furthermore, it seems to me to be clearly true. It merely says that if we stop existing at the moment of death, then we don't feel pain while dead. Surely, no one will want to claim that nonexistent persons can feel pain!

The third premise is not explicitly stated in any of the passages but seems in any case to be true. Since the dead experience no pain, being dead cannot be a painful experience for those who are dead.

The fourth premise may seem to be a direct consequence of Epicurus's hedonism. If we assume (with Epicurus and Lucretius) that pain is the only thing that is bad in itself for a person, then we seem to be committed to the conclusion that since being dead is not a painful experience, it is not bad for the one who is dead. (I will consider an objection to this premise momentarily.)

When formulated as I have here formulated it, Epicurus's argument is logically valid. That is, in virtue of the logical form of the argument, if all the premises are true, then the conclusion must be

true as well. Anyone who accepts all these premises but denies the conclusion contradicts him- or herself. So anyone who accepts all of these premises is committed to the Epicurean conclusion that being dead is not bad for the one who is dead. But, of course, we have yet to determine whether the premises are in fact true. Let us now turn to that project.

Difficulties for the First Version of the Argument

While I might want to raise various quibbles about various other premises, I want at the outset to focus on line (4), since it seems to me that this premise depends on a fundamental confusion. A central component of hedonism, as I formulated it above, is the view that painful experiences are the only things that are *intrinsically* bad for a person. That is, only pains are bad "in themselves" for a person. This view is consistent with the view that many other things can be bad for a person—so long as these other things are not *intrinsically* bad. Other bad things will be said to be *extrinsically* bad for a person. Thus, a hedonist surely can say that illness, poverty, injustice, and ignorance (to mention just a few obvious evils) are great evils for a person. But these things are not *intrinsic* evils according to hedonism. Their evil is derivative. They are evil only because they happen to be connected to pain.

To see the importance of the distinction, it may be instructive to recall some other Epicurean doctrines. Epicurus frequently insists that overindulgence in food or drink is on the whole a bad thing.[5] He realizes that such overindulgence might be quite pleasant. But since it inevitably leads to later pains, and these pains outweigh the immediate pleasures, the overindulgence is judged to be bad for the glutton—not intrinsically of course, since it is admitted to be pleasant. But extrinsically.

To sharpen this point, let us consider a case in which someone eats some tasty candy that has been contaminated with a slow-acting poison. Eating the candy is a pleasant experience. But it will cause serious pain later. A hedonist would not say that eating the candy is *intrinsically* bad for the person (because it is not a painful experience). Indeed, the hedonist will say that eating the candy is associated with many intrinsically good states. But the hedonist

can give sense to the statement that it would be bad for someone to eat the candy; he can say that eating the candy is *extrinsically* bad for the person. It is extrinsically bad for the person by virtue of the fact that it is connected with later painful experiences—and these painful experiences will be intrinsically bad for the person.

So there is an important distinction between intrinsic badness and extrinsic badness. Now we must attempt to draw out the relevance of this distinction to the argument. Notice that line (4) says that since being dead is not a painful experience, it is not *bad* for the one who is dead. But what does this 'bad' in line (4) mean? We might take line (4) as a whole to mean that since being dead is not a painful experience, being dead is not *intrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. But then, to maintain the validity of the argument, we would have to take the conclusion to mean that being dead is not *intrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. But this is no news. Most of us who think that death is bad for the one who is dead do not think that death is bad in itself. We think that death is bad for a person because of what it does to him or her; death is bad somehow indirectly by virtue of what it does to us. Surely, no one who accepts hedonism would be inclined to say that death is intrinsically bad.

Furthermore, the claim that death is not intrinsically bad seems to have no bearing on the claim that we shouldn't fear death; or that death is "nothing to us"; since obviously lots of things that are not intrinsically bad are nevertheless worthy of being feared and are "something" to us. Consider eating poison, for example, or living in a country in which seething racial hatred is about to emerge. All of these things are bad for us, and worthy of our fear, but none of them is intrinsically bad. Once we are clear about the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic badness, we will be happy to grant that death is not intrinsically bad. Our view all along has been that death is extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

The second option is to take (4) to mean that since being dead is not a painful experience, being dead is not *extrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. If we understand (4) in this way, then we can understand the conclusion, (5), to be the claim that death is not extrinsically bad for the one who dies. That would be genuinely

interesting and controversial, and it would support the further conclusion that death is not bad in any way for the one who dies. However, if we interpret (4) in this second way, it seems obviously false. Lots of things that are not painful experiences are nevertheless extrinsically bad for the one who undergoes them. Consider eating tasty but poisoned candy. Maybe death is like that. Maybe death, while not itself a painful experience, is connected to pain in such a way as to make it extrinsically bad.

My point, then, is this: 'bad' in line (4) of the argument is ambiguous. It might mean 'intrinsically bad'. But in this case the conclusion of the argument is uncontroversial. Most of us are willing to grant that death is not intrinsically bad. On the other hand, 'bad' in (4) might mean 'extrinsically bad'. In this case, (4) is clearly false. So the argument has to be revised.[6]

A New Version of the Argument

A natural reinterpretation of the argument might proceed by appeal to considerations such as these: Eating poisoned candy is bad for a person because it leads to, or causes, later pains. The same is true of gluttony or overindulgence. We might suppose that all extrinsic evils are like this. We might maintain that whenever something is extrinsically bad for a person, it is extrinsically bad for him or her because it leads to later pains. Since it will play an important role in the discussion to follow, let us take special note of this principle, which we can call "the causal hypothesis":

> CP: If something is extrinsically bad for a person, then it is bad for him or her because it leads to later intrinsic bads for him or her.

If CP is correct, then we can readily formulate a new version of the Epicurean argument for the conclusion that death cannot be extrinsically bad for anyone. Anything caused by someone's death must occur later than his or her death. But once he or she is dead, a person can never again suffer pains. Thus, a person's death cannot be the cause of any of his or her pains. Given CP, our new principle about the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic evil, it

follows that death cannot be extrinsically bad for anyone. Let us attempt to reformulate the argument, making use of this line of thought.

Epicurus on the evil of death—II

1. Each person stops existing at the moment of death.[7]
2. If (1), then no one feels any pain while dead.
3. If no one feels any pain while dead, then death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who dies.
4. If death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who is dead, then death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.
5. Therefore, death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

Once again, let us review the premises. Line (1) is just the termination thesis. It will not be debated here.

Line (2) seems obvious. If you do not exist at a time, you do not feel pain then. I will not debate (2) either.

Line (3) is a new premise. It is based directly on Epicurus's hedonistic thesis that pain is the only intrinsic evil for a person. Since pains are alleged to be the only intrinsic evils, and these cannot occur once a person is dead, death does not lead to any intrinsic evils for the one who dies. This seems plausible, once we grant the hedonistic assumption (and the assumption that we never live again after death). For present purposes, I grant both assumptions.

Line (4) is based on the causal principle, CP. According to that view, something is extrinsically bad for a person only if it leads to, or causes, things that are intrinsically bad for that person. So if death does not lead to, or cause, anything intrinsically bad for the one who dies, it cannot be extrinsically bad for the one who dies. That is what (4) says. It seems to make sense.

The conclusion of the argument is now the controversial and interesting claim that death is not extrinsically bad for the one who dies. Since I have already granted that death is not intrinsically bad for the one who dies, this conclusion is important. If it is established, we will be forced to agree that death is not bad in any way for the one who dies. I find that further conclusion unacceptable.

The Fallacy in the New Version

My own view is that this version of the argument is also fallacious. The fallacy is in line (4). As I see it, line (4) is based on a faulty conception of the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic evil. That faulty conception is embodied in the causal hypothesis itself, which says that in order to be extrinsically bad for a person, something must *cause* intrinsic evils for that person. I think this is an overly narrow view. Things can be extrinsically bad for a person for other reasons. Let us consider an example.

Suppose a young man is accepted by two colleges. We can call them College A and College B. After some reflection, he decides to attend College A. Suppose he spends four happy years at College A, but never studies any philosophy—because they do not offer any courses in philosophy at College A. Suppose he never learns anything about philosophy. Suppose, however, that he has outstanding aptitude for philosophy and that he would have enjoyed it enormously if he had been given the opportunity. He goes to his grave never realizing how much enjoyment he missed. If he had not gone to College A, he would have gone to College B, which offers many excellent philosophy courses. He would have become a philosophy major, and his life would have been much happier. In such a case, I would want to say that the fact that he went to College A was a misfortune for this young man. It's a pity; too bad for him. He would have been much happier if he had gone to College B.

For present purposes, one fact about this example is of crucial importance. It is this: although attending College A was bad for this young man, it was not in itself a painful experience, and it did not cause him any pain. Thus, the causal hypothesis is false. Some things are extrinsically bad even though they cause no pain.

Let us consider another example to illustrate the same point. Suppose a girl is born in a strange country—call it Country A. In Country A, they do not permit girls to learn to read and write. In this strange country, girls are taught to do laundry and raise children. Suppose this girl goes through life bearing children and washing laundry. Suppose she is reasonably satisfied, thinking that she has lived as a woman ought to live. She goes to her grave never

realizing what she has missed. Suppose also that she had very considerable native talent for poetry—that she would have been a marvelously successful and happy poet if only she had been given the chance. I would want to say that it is a great pity that this woman had not been born in another country. I would say that something very bad happened to her, even though she never suffered any pain as a result.

These two examples illustrate the same point. Some things are bad for us even though they are not themselves painful experiences, and they do not lead to any painful experiences. In each case, as I see it, the thing that is bad for the person is bad for him or her because it deprives the person of pleasures he or she otherwise would have experienced. In the first example, going to College A did not cause our young man any pain. It was bad for him because he would have been happier if he had gone to College B. Similarly in the second example: being born in Country A did not cause the woman any pain. Still, it was very bad for her. She would have been much better off if she had been born elsewhere. Thus, we must reject the causal principle, CP. It is too restrictive.

How Death Can Be Bad for the One Who Dies

It is reasonable to suppose that there is some connection between intrinsic value and extrinsic value. We have seen that the connection cannot be the simple causal connection expressed by CP. My own view is that the connection is more accurately expressed by this principle:

> EI: Something is extrinsically bad for a person if and only if he or she would have been intrinsically better off if it had not taken place.

It should be obvious that EI generates much more plausible results in the two cases I have mentioned. Going to College A is extrinsically bad for the young man in the first example, according to EI, because his life would have contained more pleasure if he had gone elsewhere. The same holds true in the second example. Being born in Country A did not lead to any pain for the woman in that

example. But she would have experienced more pleasure if she had been born elsewhere. So CP is false. EI is a more plausible view about the connection between intrinsic and extrinsic evil.

Now let us consider the application of my proposal to the case of death. Suppose a boy is undergoing minor surgery, and as a result of some foul-up with the anesthesia, he dies while unconscious on the table. His death is utterly painless, since it occurs while he is unconscious. Nevertheless, we might think his death is a terrible misfortune for him. My proposal (unlike CP) permits us to say this. We may imagine that he would have been quite happy on the whole for another fifty years if he had not died when he did. Then this boy's life contains less intrinsic value for him, measured hedonistically, than it would have contained if he had not died when he did. Therefore, according to my view (which is summarized in EI), this person's death is extrinsically bad for him even though it is not itself a painful experience, and it causes him no pain.

Notice what I am *not* saying. I am not saying that the boy's death is bad for him because it is a painful experience. That would be absurd. Death is not a sort of pain. Furthermore, I am not saying that his death is bad for him because it leads to, or causes, something intrinsically bad for the boy. I am assuming that pain is the only thing that is intrinsically bad for a person and that this boy cannot possibly suffer any pain while he is dead. So the evil of death cannot be explained in that way. What I am saying is that his death is extrinsically bad for him because his life is on the whole intrinsically less valuable for him than it would have been if he had not died when he in fact died. The evil of death is a matter of *deprivation;* it is bad for a person when it deprives him or her of intrinsic value; if he or she would have been better off if it had not happened.

Now let us return to the second version of Epicurus's argument. Take another look at line (4). It says:

> 4. If death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who is dead, then death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

In my view, this is where Epicurus went wrong. I think Epicurus has shown (given his hedonism) that nothing intrinsically bad happens to a person while he is dead. And I think it is also correct to

say that death does not lead to, or cause, any painful experiences for the one who dies. But it is a mistake to conclude that death is not bad for the one who is dead. Death might be very bad for the one who is dead. If death deprives him of a lot of pleasure—the pleasure he would have enjoyed if he had not died—then death might be a huge misfortune for someone. More explicitly, death might be extrinsically bad for the one who is dead even though nothing intrinsically bad happens to him as a result. In my view, death would be extrinsically bad for him if his life would have contained more intrinsic value if he had not died then.

So my view is that Epicurus went wrong in thinking that all he had to prove was that nothing intrinsically bad happens to us once we are dead. He thought that it would follow that "death is nothing to us." Given the traditional causal conception of the connection between intrinsic and extrinsic evil, he would be right. But the traditional conception is mistaken. Things can be extrinsically bad even though they do not cause any intrinsic evil. Depriving us of intrinsic good can make something extrinsically bad as well. And that is why death is extrinsically bad. It is bad (when it is bad) because it deprives us of the intrinsic value we would have enjoyed if it had not taken place.

I would like to conclude this chapter by emphasizing some points of clarification.

1. It may appear that I am claiming that death is always bad for the one who dies. This is in fact not my view, and it is not entailed by my view. My view is that the badness of a given death depends on what would have taken place if that death had not taken place. Consider the case of some very old and unhappy person. Suppose that further life for this person will inevitably contain more pain than pleasure. Suppose he dies peacefully in his sleep. Then his death is not extrinsically bad for him. In fact, it is good for him. Such a death is extrinsically good for the one who dies, according to EI, because he would have been worse off if it had not taken place. His life, as a whole, would have contained more pain if he had lived longer. In such a case, as I see it, death is a blessing. I will consider this issue and its implications further in Chapter 13.

2. Since Epicurus tried to convince us that it is irrational to fear death, and I am denying some Epicurean views, it may appear that I am claiming that we should fear death, or that it is rational for us

to think of death as the Grim Reaper. This is not entailed by my view. Epicurus claimed that death is not bad for the one who dies. He also claimed that we should not fear death. I have debated the first point. I have argued that Epicurus was wrong about the evil of death. According to me, death is sometimes bad for the one who dies. So far as I can tell, nothing follows about whether we should fear death. Perhaps Epicurus was right about the fear of death. Maybe it is never rational to fear death, even though it is sometimes a great misfortune. Nothing I have said here commits me to any view on that topic.

But I am inclined to say this: if the fear of death makes your life worse for you than it would have been if you had not feared death, then the fear of death is also bad for you. You would be better off if you did not fear death. I would recommend, then, that if possible, you stop fearing death. No matter how bad death may be for you, you will be better off if you don't fear it.

3. I have claimed that in many cases, death is very bad for the one who dies. I have also been working within the framework of a hedonistic theory of value. Thus, it might seem that I am committed to the view that being dead is painful for the one who is dead.

Once again, nothing I have said here commits me to any such view. I agree with Epicurus that the dead suffer no pain. Being dead is not painful. Death itself does not lead to any pain. Nevertheless, in my view, death may be bad for the one who dies. It is bad, to repeat, precisely when it deprives the decedent of intrinsic value.

Perhaps there is something useful to be gleaned from Epicurus's remarks. There may be some people who fear death because they suspect that it will be a painful experience. Epicurus convincingly showed that any such person has an utterly irrational fear. Death—genuine death, that is, and not some other event that has been confused with death—will not be painful. If you fear death because you think it will hurt, then your fear is irrational. If possible, you should stop worrying about death. On the other hand, if you fear death and think it will be bad for you because you think it will deprive you of happiness, you might be right. In this case, I think, the fear of death has a perfectly rational basis.

I am by no means the first to have claimed that death can be bad for the one who dies. Nor am I the first to have claimed that

the badness of death is primarily a matter of deprivation. The approach is well known.[8] However, many philosophers have claimed that the deprivation approach is unacceptable. They have presented a variety of arguments designed to show that it fails. These objections to the deprivation approach are the subject of Chapter 9.

9

More Puzzles About the Evil of Death

The Puzzles

Death is nothing to Epicureans. They do not fear or hate death. They do not view death as a misfortune for the one who dies. They think death is no worse for the one who dies than is not yet being born for the one who is not yet born. They say that ordinary people who look forward to their deaths with dismay are in this irrational. As we saw in Chapter 8, Epicureans think they can prove their views on these matters to be correct.

In his central argument for these conclusions, Epicurus says:

> 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.[1]

As I understand it, the argument is based on several principles. One is the termination thesis, according to which we cease existing when we die. Another is the doctrine that we cannot experience pain when we don't exist. And a final relevant principle is the hedonistic claim that "all good and evil consist in sensation"—pleasures and pains are the only intrinsic goods and evils that can befall a person.

When these principles are combined, we seem to be driven to the conclusion that neither the event of death nor the state of being dead is an evil for the person who dies and then is dead. Roughly,

the reasoning is this: when we are in the state of being dead, we no longer exist and so cannot experience pain; a state is bad for a person only if it is painful for him or her; therefore, being dead is not bad for the one who is dead. Similarly, since we will cease to exist when we die, we will not experience any pain after death; an event is bad for a person only if it causes him or her to experience later pain; therefore, the event of a person's death is not bad for that person.

In Chapter 8, I attempted to show that these arguments are unsuccessful. I claimed that each argument is based on a failure to take due account of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic badness. I granted that being dead is not a painful experience. Perhaps this shows that being dead is not *intrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. Nevertheless, being dead still might be *extrinsically* bad for him or her. Suppose the one who is dead would have been happy if he or she had been alive. Then being dead deprives him or her of happiness and so is an evil. I also granted that the event of death does not cause, or lead to, later pains for the one who dies. Perhaps this shows that death does not *cause* evil for the decedent. Nevertheless, death might still be extrinsically bad for us because it *deprives* us of the goods we would have experienced if it had not taken place when it did.

This so-called deprivation approach is based on a novel conception of the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic value. According to this conception, something is extrinsically bad for a person to the extent that the person would have been intrinsically better off if it had not taken place. Many who have died would have been intrinsically better off if they had not died when they did. In all such cases, death was extrinsically bad for the one who died; being dead is extrinsically bad for them. Epicureans, I suggested, feel otherwise because they have a faulty conception of the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic evil.

The deprivation approach is not a novelty. Philosophers have been aware of it at least since the time of Epicurus.[2] However, many philosophers find it to be unacceptable. They think that there is something paradoxical, or incoherent, about the deprivation approach. One objection is this: if the deprivation approach is correct, then in many cases being dead is a misfortune for the one who is dead. This seems to imply that a misfortune can happen to a

person at a time when the person no longer exists. But this seems impossible. Surely, someone has to be "present" at a time in order to suffer a misfortune then? The complaint seems reasonable. So we have our first puzzle: how can being dead be a misfortune for a person, if she doesn't exist during the time when it takes place?

According to the view proposed in Chapter 8, a person's death is bad for him to the extent that he is thereby deprived of goods. This seems to suggest that in order to find the precise degree of badness of a given death, we have to determine the amount of good and evil the decedent would have experienced if he had lived and compare this with the amount of good and evil he in fact does experience while dead. The badness of the death is the difference between these two values. So the proposed conception of extrinsic value seems to require that we make a certain comparison—a comparison between (a) how well off a person would be if he were to go on living and (b) how well off he would be if he were to die.

The second puzzle about the deprivation approach is that it appears that any such comparison is incoherent.[3] It seems to be, after all, a comparison between (a) the benefits and harms that would come to a person if he were to live; and (b) those that would come to him if he were to die. However, if he doesn't exist after his death, he cannot enjoy or suffer any benefits or harms after death. So there apparently is no second term for the comparison. There is no number that indicates the amount of pleasure minus pain that the dead person experiences while dead. So the required calculation cannot be performed.

Suppose we find some coherent way to formulate the view that a person's death is a misfortune for him because it deprives him of goods. Then we face another Epicurean question: *when* is it a misfortune for him? It seems wrong to say that it is a misfortune for him while he is still alive—for at such times he is not yet dead and death has not yet deprived him of anything. It seems equally wrong to say that it is a misfortune for him after he is dead—for at such times he does not exist. How can he suffer misfortunes then? As Epicurus said, death "does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more."[4]

Another problem confronts the anti-Epicurean. If we can find a way to say that early death is bad for us because it deprives us of certain goods, then (whether we intended to or not), we probably

will have found a coherent way to say that "late birth" also deprives us of certain goods—the goods we would have enjoyed if only we had been born earlier. Yet virtually nobody laments his late birth, or thinks it a misfortune that he wasn't born years or decades earlier. Lucretius presented a forceful statement of this puzzle. He said:

> Think too how the bygone antiquity of everlasting time before our birth was nothing to us. Nature therefore holds this up to us as a mirror of the time yet to come after our death. Is there aught in this that looks appalling, aught that wears an aspect of gloom? Is it not more untroubled than any sleep?[5]

So another puzzle that must be confronted is this: if early death is bad for us because it deprives us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had died later, then why isn't late birth just as bad for us? After all, it seems to deprive us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had been born earlier.

Axiological Preliminaries

These questions are troubling. Nevertheless, I think I can answer them. In order to make my proposed answers as clear and useful as possible, I will have to refine the fairly sketchy view presented in Chapter 8. It will be necessary to introduce some distinctions and some terminology. The first concept I must introduce is the concept of the intrinsic value for a person of a life.

There are several different ways in which a person's life might be evaluated. For example, we might want to know the extent to which someone's life benefitted others—how much better off are *we* in virtue of the fact that *he* lived? Thus, even if Mother Theresa does not get much out of life, we may want to evaluate her life by saying that it has been *good for us*.

A different sort of evaluation takes place when we ask how good someone's life is *for him*. When we ask this question, we seem to be asking, roughly, how much intrinsic value did this person receive throughout his life? How much of the things that are good in themselves fell to him? So, for example, if we think that hedonism

is true, we may be asking, in effect, how much pleasure and pain this person experienced throughout his life.

It is important to note that when I speak of the value of a life for a person, I am *not* speaking of the amount of value that the person *thinks* he would get from that life; I am speaking of a certain objective value-theoretic fact about the life—a fact about which even the person himself might be mistaken. Thus, someone might think, near the end of his life, that his life had been full of things of great intrinsic value. He might be wrong.

If hedonism is true, then the value of a life for a person is determined in this way: first consider how much pleasure the person experienced throughout her life. Add it up. Then consider how much pain the person experienced throughout her life. Add it up. Then subtract the pain from the pleasure. The hedonic value of the life is the result. If hedonism is true, then the intrinsic value of the life for the person is equal to the hedonic value of the life.

In fact, I do not think that the value of a life should be determined in the simpleminded hedonistic way I have sketched. I am inclined to think that several other factors may contribute to determining how good a life is for a person. Later, in Chapters 10 and 11, I will present the outlines of my view. For now, however, I prefer to proceed on the pretense that hedonism is true. I have several reasons.

First and foremost, there is the historical reason. I am engaged in a debate with Epicurus about the evil of death. Epicurus was a hedonist. Some commentators have suggested that in order to answer Epicurus, we must reject his axiology—that his view about the evil of death is inextricably tied to his hedonism. I think this is a mistake. I want to show that even if we accept the Epicurean axiology, we can still reject his paradoxical conclusion about the evil of death.

A second reason for assuming hedonism is strategic. The central intrinsic value-bearing properties associated with hedonism are ones that a person can have at a time only if he is alive and conscious then. A person cannot experience pleasure or pain at a time if he or she is not alive then. I want to show how death can be an evil for the deceased even if this hedonistic axiology is assumed. Thus, I take myself to be trying to show that death may be an evil for a person even according to an axiology maximally hostile to this

notion. If I succeed, it will be fairly easy to see how to extend the solution in the direction of more plausible axiologies.

A final advantage of the hedonistic axiology is its simplicity. If we assume that intrinsic value attaches only to experiences of pleasure and experiences of pain, and we assume that these are in principle subject to unproblematic quantification, then the determination of the value of a life for a person becomes quite straightforwardly a matter of simple arithmetic. To find the value of a person's life, just subtract the amount of pain that person suffers throughout her life from the amount of pleasure she enjoys throughout her life. Although the axiology is admittedly quite crude, its simplicity makes it especially useful for present purposes.

I should also point out that although I think the termination thesis is false (as I tried to show in Chapter 6), I am not going to debate it again here. I acknowledge that some people go out of existence when they die. (For example, consider a person standing at ground zero at the moment of a nuclear blast.) For present purposes, I will make the (for me incredible) assumption that everyone does the same. Once again, I do this in part for historical reasons—Epicurus seems to have accepted this view about death and nonexistence—and in part for strategic reasons. I want to make things hard on myself. I want to try to show how death can be bad for the deceased even on the assumptions (a) that things that affect the value of a person's life can happen to that person only at times when he exists; and (b) that death marks the end of existence for the deceased.

Things That Are Bad for People

The central question here is how a person's death can be bad for him. The claim that someone's death is bad for him is an instance of a more general sort of claim: the claim that something is bad for some person. It would be surprising if it were to turn out that we need two independent accounts of what is meant by statements to the effect that something is bad for someone: one account of the meaning of such a statement when the relevant object is something other than the person's death, and another account of the meaning of such a statement when the relevant object is the person's death.

Surely the statement about death ought to be nothing more than an interesting instance of the general sort of statement. So let us consider the more general question first, and then focus more narrowly on the specific case concerning death. What do we mean when we say that something would be bad for someone?

It seems to me that when we say that something would be bad for someone, we might mean either of two main things. One possibility is that we mean that the thing would be *intrinsically* bad for him. So if someone says that a state of affairs, p, is intrinsically bad for a person, s, he presumably means that p is intrinsically bad, and s is the subject or "recipient" of p. Given our assumed hedonistic axiology, the only things that could be intrinsically bad for someone would be his own pains. Thus, *Dolores suffering pain of intensity 10 from t1 to t3* would be intrinsically bad for Dolores.[6]

On the other hand, when we say that something would be bad for someone, we might mean that it would be *extrinsically* bad for him. At least in some instances, this seems to mean that he would be intrinsically worse off if it were to occur than he would be if it were not to occur; in other words, it means that the life he would lead if it were to happen is intrinsically worse for him than the life he would lead if it were not to happen. In this case, the thing itself might be intrinsically neutral. The relevant consideration would be the extent to which it would lead to or prevent or otherwise be connected with things that are intrinsically bad for the person. Consider an example. Suppose we are interested in the question whether moving to Bolivia would be bad for Dolores. Intuitively, this question seems to be equivalent to the question whether Dolores would be worse off if she were to move to Bolivia than she would be if she were to refrain from moving to Bolivia. Letting 'B' indicate the state of affairs *Dolores moves to Bolivia,* we can say this: B would be extrinsically bad for Dolores if and only if she would be intrinsically worse off if B were true than she would be if B were false. And this, in turn, seems to amount simply to the claim that B would be extrinsically bad for Dolores if and only if the value for Dolores of the life she would lead if she were to go to Bolivia is lower than the value for her of the life she would lead if she were not to go to Bolivia.[7]

Correspondingly, to say that a state of affairs would be extrinsically good for a person is to say that she would be intrinsically

better off if it were to occur than she would be if it were to fail to occur. More exactly, it is to say that the intrinsic value for her of the life she would lead if it is true is higher than the intrinsic value for her of the life she would lead if it is false.

If we make use of our assumption that lives have numerical intrinsic values for individuals, then we can say precisely *how bad* or *how good* something would be for someone. Suppose that if Dolores were to move to Bolivia, the rest of her life would be a nightmare. Considering all the pleasures and pains she would ever experience, her life as a whole would have a hedonic rating of +100 points. Thus, the value-for-Dolores of the life she would lead if she were to move to Bolivia is +100. Suppose on the other hand that the value-for-her of the life she would lead if she does not move to Bolivia is +1000. Then she would be 900 units worse off if she were to move to Bolivia. That tells us precisely how bad it would be for her to move to Bolivia. The value-for-her of moving to Bolivia is −900. So the general principle says that to find the extrinsic value for a person of a state of affairs, subtract the value for him of the life he would lead if it is false from the value for him of the life he would lead if it is true.

In its most general form, then, the principle may be formulated as a principle about the extrinsic value (good, bad, or neutral) of states of affairs for persons. The extrinsic value of a state of affairs for a person is the result of subtracting the value-for-him of the life he leads if it does not occur from the value-for-him of the life he leads if it does occur. In other words:

D: The extrinsic value for *S* of *P* = the difference between the intrinsic value for *S* of the life *S* would lead if *P* is true and the intrinsic value for *S* of the life *S* would lead if *P* is false.

The Evil of Death

The application of these ideas to the case of death is straightforward. Recall the case of the boy who died while unconscious on the operating table (discussed in Chapter 8). Suppose we are wondering whether his death was bad for this boy. To find the answer, we must ask about the value for him of the life he leads if he dies when

he in fact dies; and we must compare that value to the value for him of the life he would have led if he had not died then. If the life terminated by that death is worse for the boy than the life not terminated by that death, then his death on that operating table was extrinsically bad for him; otherwise, not.

Let's consider another typical example to see how this works in the case of one's own death. Suppose I am thinking of taking an airplane trip to Europe. Suppose I'm worried about accidents, hijackings, sabotage, etc. I think I might die en route. I think this would be bad for me. D directs us to consider the life I would lead if I do die en route to Europe on this trip, and to consider the value for me of this life. I see no reason to suppose that interesting parts of my past would be any different in that life from what they are in my actual life. So I assume that all my past pleasures and pains would be unaffected. The main difference (from my perspective) is that in that life I suffer some terminal pain and then a premature death and never live to enjoy my retirement. Let's suppose that that life is worth +500 to me—+500 is the result of subtracting the pain I suffer in that life from the pleasure I enjoy in it. Next, D directs us to consider the life I would lead if I do not die en route to Europe on this trip. The relevant feature of this life is that I do not die a painful and premature death in an airplane accident. Suppose in that life I do live to enjoy the fruits of my retirement. Let's suppose the intrinsic value for me of that life is +1100. Fairly simple calculations then yield the result that my death on this trip would be bad for me. More precisely, the result is that such a death would have a value of −600 for me. It would be a terrible misfortune.

We can see, then, that principle D calculates the extrinsic value of a state of affairs for a person by considering the sort of life he would lead if that state of affairs were to happen and comparing this to the sort of life he would lead if that state of affairs were to fail to happen. Thus, according to D, my death would be bad for me not because it would cause me to suffer pain, and not because it would itself be intrinsically bad for me. Rather, it would be bad for me because it would deprive me of 600 units of pleasure that I would have had if it had not happened when it did. More precisely, it would be extrinsically bad for me because the intrinsic value for me of the life I would lead if were to occur is much lower than the intrinsic value for me of the life I would lead if it were to fail to occur.

Some Proposed Answers

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned four puzzles about the evil of death. These were prompted by the Epicurean challenge. I will now attempt to answer those questions.

The first question was the question how, given that he doesn't exist after he dies, a person's being dead can be a misfortune for him. The simple answer is this: a state of affairs can be extrinsically bad for a person whether it occurs before he exists, while he exists, or after he exists. The only requirement is that the value of the life he leads if it occurs is lower than the value of the life he leads if it does not occur. It may be interesting to consider an example in which something bad for a person occurs *before* the person exists. Suppose my father lost his job shortly before I was conceived. Suppose that as a result of the loss of his job, my parents had to move to another town, and that I was therefore raised in a bad neighborhood and had to attend worse schools. I would have been happier if he had not lost his job when he did. In this case, the fact that my father lost his job was bad for me, even though I did not yet exist when it occurred. It was bad for me because the value-for-me of the life I would have led if he had not lost his job is greater than the value-for-me of my actual life (which, on the assumption, is the life I would have led if he did lose his job). The same may be true of cases involving things that will happen after I cease to exist (although, of course, such cases will illustrate *deprivation* of happiness, rather than *causation* of unhappiness).

It should be clear, then, that a person does not have to exist at a time when something extrinsically bad for him occurs. Given our hedonistic axiology, it would be correct to say that nothing *intrinsically* bad can happen to a person at a time unless he exists at that time. You cannot suffer pains at a time unless you exist then. However, even on the same axiology, the *extrinsic* value version of the thesis is not true. That is, it would not be correct to say that nothing *extrinsically* bad for a person can happen at a time unless he exists at that time. Perhaps some Epicureans have been misled because they failed to recognize the importance of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value.[8]

The second puzzle concerns an allegedly illegitimate comparison. It may seem that I am maintaining that when a person's death

is bad for him, it is bad for him because he is worse off being dead than he would have been if he had stayed alive. Yet this suggests that there is some degree of "bad-offness" that he endures while dead. However, since he doesn't exist while he is dead, he can have no degress of "bad-offness" then. The question, then, is this: does my answer presuppose an illegitimate comparison?

My answer presupposes no such comparison. I am not proposing that we compare the amount of intrinsic value a person receives during life to the amount of intrinsic value he receives while dead. I have assumed that the value for a person of a life is determined entirely by pleasures and pains that he feels during that life. Thus, the comparison is a comparison between the value for a person of one possible life (calculated entirely by appeal to what happens to him during that life) and the value for the person of some other possible life (also calculated entirely by appeal to what happens to that person during that life). I have provisionally agreed that nothing intrinsically good or bad can happen to a person at times when he does not exist.

In effect, then, my proposal is based on what has been called a "life-life comparison."[9] So, for example, consider the example concerning my imagined death en route to Europe. My proposal requires us to compare the value for me of two lives—the life I would lead if I were to die on the plane trip and the life I would lead if I were not to die on the plane trip. Since (according to our assumptions) the shorter life is less good for me, my death on that trip would be correspondingly bad for me.

The third puzzle was a puzzle about dates. I have claimed that a person's death may be bad for her because it deprives her of the pleasures she would have enjoyed if she had lived. One may be puzzled about just *when* this misfortune occurs. The problem is that we may not want to say that her death is bad for her during her life, for she is not yet dead. Equally, we may not want to say that it is bad for her after her death, for she does not exist then.

In order to understand my answer to this question, we must look more closely into the question. Suppose a certain girl died in her youth. We are not concerned here about any puzzle about the date of her death. We may suppose we know that. Thus, in one sense, we know precisely when the misfortune occurred. Nor are we concerned about the dates of any pains she suffered as a result of that

death. We assume that there are none. The present question is rather a question about when her death is a misfortune for her. If Lindsay is the girl, and E is the state of affairs of *Lindsay dying at 4:00 A.M. on December 7, 1987,* then the question is this: "precisely when is E bad for Lindsay?" I have proposed an account of the evil of death. According to that account, when we say that E is bad for Lindsay, we mean that the value-for-her of the life she leads where E occurs is lower than the value-for-her of the life she would have led if E had not taken place. So our question comes to this: "Precisely *when* is it the case that the value-for-Lindsay of the life she leads in which E occurs is lower than the value-for-her of the life she leads if E does not occur?"

It seems clear to me that the answer to this question must be "eternally." For when we say that her death is bad for her, we are really expressing a complex fact about the relative values of two possible lives. It seems clear that if these possible lives stand in a certain value relation, then (given that they stand in this relation at any time) they stand in that relation not only when Lindsay exists, but at times when she doesn't. If there were a God, and it had been thinking about which possible life to give to Lindsay, it would have seen prior to creation that E would be bad for Lindsay. In other words, it would have seen that the value-for-Lindsay of the life in which E occurs is significantly lower than the value-for-Lindsay of the relevant life in which E does not occur. And it would have seen this even though Lindsay did not yet exist at that pre-creation moment.

A final puzzle concerns the fact that we feel that early death is a greater misfortune for the prematurely deceased than is "late birth" for the late born. Why is this?

Suppose Claudette was born in 1950 and will die somewhat prematurely in 2000 as a result of an accident. We may want to say that her premature death will be a misfortune for her. Consider the life she would lead (call it L2) in which she does not die prematurely. Suppose that in L2 she lives happily until 2035. Since she has thirty-five extra years of happiness in L2, the value for her of that life is higher than the value for her of her actual life (or L1). D yields the result that her premature death is extrinsically bad for her. But now consider the claim that Claudette suffered an equal misfortune in not having been born in 1915. This fact seems to

deprive her of thirty-five happy years too—the years from 1915 to 1950 when she was in fact born. Yet we feel uncomfortable with the idea that her late birth is as great a misfortune for Claudette as her premature death. Why is this?

Consider the state of affairs of *Claudette being born in 1915.* Call it "B." In Claudette's actual life B is false. Consider the life she would lead if B were true. (In other words, consider what would have happened if Claudette had been born 35 years earlier.) Call this life L3. I see no reason to suppose that Claudette lives any longer in L3 than she does in her actual life. Any such change in life span strikes me as being superfluous. I am inclined to suppose that the value for Claudette of L3 is slightly lower than the value for her of her actual life—after all, in L3 she probably endures hard times during the Great Depression, and maybe even catches measles, whooping cough, and other diseases that were rampant in those days. The twenties and thirties were not such fabulous decades for children. If she has just fifty years to live, she's better off living them in the second half of the twentieth century, rather than thirty-five years earlier.

I think the reply to Lucretius's challenge is thus based on an asymmetry between past and future. When we are asked to consider what would happen if Claudette were to die later, we hold her birth date constant. It has already occurred, and we tend to think that unnecessary differences in past history are big differences between lives. Thus, it is more natural to suppose that if she were to die later, it would be because she lives longer. On the other hand, when we are asked to consider what would have happened if she had been born earlier, we do not hold her death date constant. Instead, we hold her life span constant, and adjust the death date so as to accommodate itself to the earlier birth date.[10]

Someone might claim that I have made an unfair comparison. They might want to insist on holding life spans constant. They might say that Claudette would be better off living longer if the extra time is tacked on to the end of her life. They might say that Claudette would not be any better off if the extra time were tacked on to the beginning of her life. (That is, if she were born in 1915 instead of 1950 but lived until 2000 anyway.) The question is vexed, since it is hard to discern values for Claudette of the relevant possible lives. My own inclination is to say that if she lives

eighty-five happy years in each life, then the value for her of the one is equal to the value for her of the other. In this case, I can't see why anyone would think it would be better for her to have the thirty-five years tacked on at the end of her life rather than at the beginning. When the comparison is fair, principle D generates the correct results.

Conclusions

I have claimed that there is nothing paradoxical or incoherent about the idea that death may be bad for the one who dies. My explanation of the evil of death is a version of the traditional view that death is bad for the decedent (when it is bad for him) primarily because it deprives him of the goods he would have enjoyed if he had lived. But the deprivation approach generates further puzzles. In this chapter I have attempted to formulate coherent answers to four such puzzles. I have attempted to provide my answers within a fundamentally Epicurean framework. I have assumed that hedonism is true, and I have assumed that people go out of existence when they die. I have attempted to show that even if we grant these implausible assumptions, we can still answer these objections to the deprivation approach. There is nothing incoherent about the naive view that death can be an evil for the deceased.

Thus, I have attempted to show that if we formulate our account properly, we can provide satisfactory answers to these puzzling questions: "How can death be bad for the deceased if she doesn't exist when it takes place?", "When is death bad for the deceased?", "Is there an illegitimate comparison between values accruing to the living and values accruing to the dead?", and "Why is early death worse than late birth?"

Since I have claimed that death can be bad for the one who dies, it may seem that I am now in a position to explain why it is wrong to kill people. But that too turns out to be a bit of a puzzle. It is the topic of Chapter 10.

10

Utilitarianism, Victimism, and the Morality of Killing

"Thou Shalt not Kill"

One of the most widely accepted and intuitively plausible moral principles is "Thou shalt not kill." I take this to mean (or to imply) that it is morally wrong to kill people. It is hard to think of a moral principle with greater immediate credibility. Surely, if any moral principle is true, some version of this one is. Nevertheless, moral philosophers seem to stumble when they attempt to explain or justify this most obvious of moral truths. Utilitarians in particular are in this matter embarrassed, but they are not alone. There is plenty of embarrassment for moral philosophers of all persuasions. This, as I see it, is one of the most notorious scandals of moral philosophy. Moral philosophers have not managed to explain why it is wrong to kill people.

In this chapter, I first devote a little attention to the formulation of the puzzle, and then I attempt to explain why some traditional normative theories apparently fail to account for the wrongness of killing. The first of these theories is a standard version of hedonic act utilitarianism. The second is a theory according to which the wrongness of killing is explained by appeal to the harm it does to its victim. Before turning to the answers, let us consider the question a bit more closely.

It might appear at the outset that we could formulate our question straightforwardly as follows:

Q1: Why is it wrong to kill people?