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The connection between philosophy and death has a long and distinguished history. From the pre-Socratics Epicurus and Lucretius to the better known ancients Plato and Aristotle, philosophers have considered death a subject worthy of our attention. Philosophy, it is said, is the practise of the free mind, and death, according to Socrates, is the end of the imprisonment of the mind in the body.

Are there any gendered aspects to thinking about the relationship between death and philosophy? While we often teach the death of Socrates as a noble and brave death, feminist critics of the ancient philosophers note that in the famous painting of his death, there are no women among those sitting at Socrates' side. Socrates, we are told, sent the women away because they dared to express emotion at his coming death. When the men too started to weep, Socrates said, "What is this you strange fellows. It is mainly for this reason that I sent the women away, to avoid such unseemliness, for I am told one should die in good omened-silence. So keep quiet and control yourselves." (Plato, 117e)

So while death is universal, affecting men and women equally, we see that women are associated with emotion, men with reason; women with the life of the body and men with the life of the mind. The true philosopher, according to the ancients, lives to transcend bodily needs and desires. Thus, Socrates excludes his wife from his bedside choosing to die instead in the company of male philosophers. Traditionally women have been excluded from philosophy and in the case of the ancients doubly excluded both from death as the triumph of the mind over the body, and from philosophical discussions about death.

Feminist philosophers have in recent years turned their attention to the problem of death. My paper presents some of that work but it also needs first to set the stage by

giving a general account of recent mainstream philosophical thinking about death. Parts 1 and 2 of the paper quickly cover contemporary work on death that attempts to deal with a puzzle first posed by the ancient philosophers. Part 3 presents and examines one aspect of the feminist critique of contemporary philosophical work on death.

PART ONE: The Badness of Death

Recent philosophical work on death is not particularly concerned with the relationship between the life of the mind and the kind of event death is (Donnelly, 1978; Feldman, 1992; Fischer, 1993; Kamm, 1993; Rosenberg, 1983). The sort of questions which preoccupied the ancients concerned the after-life but most contemporary philosophical work assumes that death is the end of the person whose death it is. The main question that arises once we assume this is what to make of this fact? Is death bad for the person who dies? This way of asking the questions brackets a great many concerns about death. We are to rule out as bad-making factors the pain and suffering that often accompanies dying. We are to rule out the grief and sadness of loved ones. Instead, we are to ask ourselves whether death, considered on its own, is a bad thing for the person whose death it is.

Teaching this literature to undergraduates and talking to friends and family about this problem, I am familiar with the blank stares and bewildered expressions. They ask why, of all the questions one might ask about death, we should care about this one. Death is inevitable. Isn't it pointless to ask whether it's good or bad? But it doesn't follow from an event being inevitable that it is neither good nor bad. When we are determining what attitude we ought to take to some event in our future—say a root canal or an office Christmas party—we need to know what sort of event it will be. The attitude we ought to

take to a future event depends on answering questions about what we can expect of that event. In a letter to Menoeceus, the pre-Socratic philosopher Epicurus thought we should regard our own deaths neutrally. "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 concern either the living or the dead, since the former it is not, and the latter are no more." Epicurus (341-271 BCE) Epicurus aside, most of us do regard our deaths as bad. Or at the very least we undertake steps to avoid them. We practice safe sex, we quit smoking, we work out and watch our diets, and we generally look both ways before crossing the streets. We think it a bad thing that West Nile virus is sometimes fatal. Certainly we think it is worse to beat someone and then kill him than to merely beat him. How are we to explain our moral repugnance at killing if death is a neutral event to the person whose death it is? Even the elderly, on whom one might wish an attitude of accepting death, often resent death. Certainly we view the deaths of others as a bad thing. In many, but not all, circumstances we lament *death* and we can only sensibly lament something if we believe it to be bad.

Finally, even if we believe, against the prevailing philosophical view, that death is not the end because some part of us continues on in an afterlife, death's badness ought to be of interest. That death would be bad, were it not merely the death of the body, is an attitude shared by many religious people. Death's badness is part of what makes the afterlife a great gift. Some religious people believe in an afterlife precisely because they think that death is so bad that an all good, all powerful, all knowing God would not allow it to happen to good people. Thus, there is a strong connection between dread of death as non-existence and a belief in the afterlife. Determining whether it is true that death—

construed as non-existence—would be bad, should be of interest then even to people who believe that death is not the end.

So the question is worth asking after all. However, the pre-Socratic philosophers thought that they had an easy answer. Recall Epicurus' argument that death can be nothing to us as once we are dead, we are beyond all harm. Responding to that answer is the philosophical puzzle about the badness of death. The puzzle arises because of a clash between the conclusion of what looks like a good argument and our commonsense belief that death can be bad for the person whose death it is. Few people are persuaded by Epicurus' argument (at least not for very long and certainly not in the middle of the night). Could it really be that our dislike of death is based on a simple misunderstanding of what sort of event death is? Should our reaction to the news that the West Nile virus is sometimes fatal really be neutral? Where might Epicurus have gone wrong?

PART TWO: The Deprivation Account of the Badness of Death

A near consensus has been reached among contemporary philosophers who think that Epicurus is wrong (Feldman, 1992; Kamm, 1993). They agree on a single account of the error Epicurus' argument makes. It is true that in death, I can neither feel happy nor sad, and so in terms of the quality of my experiences, death can be nothing to me. But *quality* of experience isn't all that matters; *quantity* matters too. Consider the two ways in which a person can be harmed. You might have a bad experience. That's one way. But you might also miss out on some good experience. That's the second way.

When explaining this point to my students I tell them that there are two ways to have a bad Friday night as a single person at the dating stage of life. The first is to have a bad date. But the second is to miss out on a good date. Epicurus is right that death cannot

be bad in the way a bad date is bad. It cannot be a miserable experience. But death can be bad like the dateless night. Death can get in the way of our having some good experience.

Philosophers who reason this way about death focus on what is lost through death. Versions of this sort of account have been put forth by Feldman (1992), Nagel (1970), Kamm (1993) and Nussbaum (1994) among others. We can group their accounts together though they differ in detail as versions of the Deprivation Account of the Badness of Death (DABD). The DABD builds on the claim that quantity of experience matters in addition to quality. What Epicurus gets right is that death cannot be a bad experience. Where he goes wrong is in concluding that because death cannot be a bad experience, it cannot be bad for us. Not all bad things are bad experiences. Sometimes we can be made worse off when we are deprived of good experiences. The badness of death, according to the DABD, is located in the good experiences of which death deprives us. Death is bad because it reduces the quantity of good experiences by depriving us of the next chunk of life.

Of course, it follows from this account of death's badness that death is not always bad. Death is good when it deprives us of bad experiences. Death is the permanent loss of life. Whether that loss is good or bad depends on what that next chunk of life would have been like. So the DABD accords with our intuitions that death can be good for those for whom the next chunk of life would have held only pain and suffering. These are advantages of the DABD and in my presentation of the view I have not been particularly critical. There are, however, many philosophers still prepared to defend Epicurus and who think that the DABD is an inadequate response to a powerful and compelling argument. We will not go any further down this road. Instead, this paper now veers in the

direction of explicitly feminist responses to the contemporary literature on death and its alleged badness.

There is a growing feminist philosophical literature on death, much of it quite critical of mainstream philosophical thinking on the subject. Here I focus only on the first aspect of the feminist critique, the response to the account of life's goods assumed by the deprivation account of death's badness.

PART THREE: Feminist Interventions in Debates about the Goods of which Death Deprives Us

Recall what the DABD says about the badness of death. Death is bad when it deprives us of the goods that life has to offer. On Frances Kamm's account, death is bad because it deprives us of the goods of experience and action (1993, p.17). On Martha Nussbaum's it is bad because it interrupts the project of living a complete human life (1994, p. 208-211). What all versions of the DABD have in common is their focus on what death takes away. To understand the loss that is death, we need only understand the nature of life's goods. But it is on this point that feminist worries have been raised.

Does the DABD make it the case that death is worse for some people than others? To the extent that we invest ourselves in the goods of experience and action (thinking here about Kamm's view) then death will make us worse off. But are the goods of experience and action the only goods in town? Death may be worse if we focus during our life on certain goods, ignoring the possibility that there may be a diversity of goods which are differentially affected by death.

In "Getting Out of Line: Alternatives to Life as a Career" Margaret Urban Walker notes that a certain conception of life is shared by philosophers with otherwise quite

divergent philosophical views (1999, p. 83). Walker calls this conception “the career self.” A career self, she writes, sees his life as a unified field in which particular enterprises, values, and relationships are coordinated in the form of a “rational life plan” (Rawls, 1971). This conception of a human life puts a great deal of emphasis on agency, narrative unity, and planning. Life is viewed as coming in distinct stages, each stage with its own goods. But a problem with narrative unity is that not all lives have it. A focus on life as a story makes death particularly poignant when it happens to the very young. But narrative unity can also be disappointed by a final chapter that goes on too long. Many of us have had the difficult experience of living with an elderly relative who is “ready for death” but for whom death does not come for years and years. Our expectations about the structure our life’s story will take can make a life go worse than it otherwise might have, minus the expectations of life neatly unfolding into chapters of equal length.

Walker is not making the complaint that we all, or even all men, view our lives in this way. Rather, she is concerned with the image of life as a career as a normative ideal. Walker writes: “The image of the fit, energetic, and productive individual who sets himself a course of progressive achievement within the boundaries of society’s rules and institutions, and whose orderly life testifies to his self-discipline and individual effort, remains an icon of our culture.” (1999, p. 102) While Walker mainly focuses her critical attention on the role this ideal plays in moral philosophy, she also notes that the metaphor of life as career can be found in cross disciplinary literature on aging. Some gerontologists, for example, recommend life review as a meaningful activity for the elderly. The elderly can focus their attention on the making of scrap books, or the writing of memoirs, or the development and storage of oral histories. But Walker worries that

while this may be enjoyable and meaningful for some, others will have had lives that lack the kind of narrative unity that such an exercise requires. Walker questions the universality of life review, with its emphasis on individual agency and instead thinks of it as a culturally specific activity. Life review is a project perfectly suited to retired career selves.

There is also the related danger of valuing only one's own projects. Roy Bauermeister (1997) identifies heightened anxiety around death as one of the costs of the elevation of the self and of the concern for its achievements and experiences. When we come to regard our selves as the major source of value in our lives, the extinction of the self through death poses a threat to the meaning of one's life in a way that it didn't for past generations. Writes Bauermeister, "The self is a far more temporary and hence fragile value base than its rivals (religion, family, tradition, and so forth.) Making the self into a value base entails that death is not just the end of life: it signifies the nullification, the stripping away of meaning, of life." (1997, p. 214) We can contrast this with a life lived to serve God or serve others. This value is retained after death and the project can be continued on by others. "But if one's life is devoted to serving the self (e.g., building an impressive resume of honours and promotions)," he writes, "then when the self ceases to exist those actions become trivial. No one reads your resume after you are dead." (1997, p. 213-214).

But what is the alternative? Frances Kamm agrees that death takes away the goods of experience and action but she leaves open the possibility that there may be other things that matter in a human life. Death is a certain kind of deprivation but there may be goods that are not as vulnerable to death as the goods of experience and action.

Before we get too excited at this flicker of an answer at the end of the tunnel, we do need to pause and note that not all changes to one's life that would make death less bad are changes worth making. Recall that on the deprivation account what makes death bad is the goods it takes away so one way to make death less bad is to have very few of these goods in one's life. We can always make death welcome by having a sufficiently miserable life. But this way of reconciling oneself to death does not recommend itself to us because it makes death less bad by stripping life of its value. We can adapt a cliché for our purposes and affirm that it is better to have *lived* and lost than to never have lived at all. What we need is a source of value in life that is more resilient to the harm of death than are the goods a career self values.

What might these goods be? James Lindemann Nelson (1999) contrasts the goods of relationship with the goods of agency. Nelson gives us the example of Jack and Jill. Jack's true enthusiasms revolve around what he has experienced whereas Jill is much more invested in unexperienced goods. Jill cares a great deal about her children's flourishing. True, she locates some of that value in her experiences as a parent of flourishing children but we would be wrong to locate all of the value in Jill's experiences of her children's flourishing. Nelson notes that Jill might choose more flourishing for her children even if the trade-off meant that she would experience less of their flourishing herself. Writes Nelson, "People who manage to make the good of others central to their lives...are importantly invested in something robust enough to withstand their deaths." (1999, p.124)

Nelson's choices of Jack and Jill are no coincidence of course. The example would not resonate the same way if the genders were reversed. That's not to say that

women don't also live the life of a career self—I know that I do—and that there are no men who care more about the goods of relationship than the goods of agency. But the gendered associations are there as normative ideals even if individual men and women manage to resist their lure. Women stand in an ambiguous relationship to the career self, notes Walker, for it is a real achievement to reach the kind of autonomy and resources necessary to lead such a self-directed life. I have worries about the recommendation made by Bauermeister, Nelson, and Walker about finding value in the lives of others.

First, many women already invest much of their effort, interest, and energies into the lives of others. I am often shocked to read the acknowledgements of books written by male academics which inevitably thank some devoted wife without whom the project's completion would not have been possible. But I find myself wondering what books their wives might have written had their own intellectual work been taken on as someone else's life project. This advice to care more about relationships and less about one's own achievements may be useful when directed at traditional men but it does not speak to women who must struggle with internal and external accusations of selfishness in order to make room for their own plans and projects.

Second, self-interest is dangerous, on this view, because it means I put all of my eggs in one basket. But the best mutual interest can achieve is diffusing death's badness over larger numbers. We broaden the risk pool but the underlying problem remains. If death stands to rob your life of value because your projects won't be completed, and my life of value because my projects won't be completed, then all we have done by caring about each other's projects is share the problem around. This recommendation doesn't change what it is that we care about when we care about other persons. We could have a

shared interest in each other's projects but our lives would still be lives of caring about projects.

Are there further feminist alternative suggestions? Here I briefly give two.

Frances Kamm writes that there are certain sorts of achievements the attaining of which is not diminished by death. Nor is it clear that more of them would be better. Unlike pleasure where it is clear that more is better, in the case of character or virtue this isn't obviously so. Writes Kamm: "If someone really has a good character and it would remain with him if he lived, he already has the most important thing. Losing it through death is not the same as losing it in life." (1993, p.62) Thus, on Kamm's view, having a good character and attaining wisdom are among the most important of life's goods and these goods—unlike the goods of experience and action—are less threatened by death. Death is bad then because it deprives us of goods that are not the most deeply worthwhile even though we may care more about experiences than we do about wisdom and virtue. Like Kamm, Margaret Walker thinks that the more resilient goods are those associated with *being* rather than *doing*. Walker focuses on the kinds of goods that are complete in themselves, such as the appreciation of great art and the feeling of comfort in the natural world. She draws our attention to the goods of life which don't require more time for them to possess value. Such moments are good and complete in themselves. Regardless of whether these recommendations will remove the sting of death, it is true that we would do well to have lives which contain a diversity of goods. Enjoying and appreciating the goods of life is surely worth doing whatever one thinks of death and its badness.

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