

Goodness is reducible to betterness:
the evil of death is the value of life.

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1 Utility theory and betterness

The methods of economics can contribute in many ways to the study of ethics. One way is that utility theory can help to analyse the *structure of goodness*.

At least, utility theory can help to analyse the structure of *betterness*, the comparative of goodness. Betterness is a mundane matter. We very commonly discuss which things are better or worse than others. We say that sun is generally better than rain; we wonder whether it would be better to move to a new job or stay in the old one; we debate about which is the best way of coping with the sufferings of refugees. Betterness and worseness are common topics of our ordinary conversation. To put it more formally, between objects from some range we may be considering, there is a betterness relation denoted by:

_ is better than _,

where each blank is to be filled in with the name of an object. Utility theory can help to analyse the structure of this relation.

What do I mean by the *structure* of a betterness relation? One structural feature is that a betterness relation is necessarily transitive. If *A* is better than *B*, and *B* is better than *C*, then *A* is necessarily better than *C*. I think this is a fact of logic, because for any property *F*, its comparative relation denoted by '*F* is better than' is necessarily transitive. Betterness is therefore an ordering. But this is only one of its structural features. There are others, which utility theory can help to reveal.

Utility theory was originally designed as a theory of rational preferences. It consists of a number of axioms that are intended to apply to *preference relations*. A person *P*'s preference relation is denoted by:

P prefers _ to _.

The blanks are, again, to be filled in with the names of objects. Utility theorists claim that, provided a person's preferences are rational, they will conform to the axioms of the theory. Different versions of the theory have different axioms, but every version includes transitivity as an axiom. The point of utility theory is that, granted the axioms, useful theorems can be proved about the structure of a person's preferences.

Utility theory is only a formal structure. Although it was intended for preference relations, it can be applied to any relation that satisfies the axioms. I believe betterness relations satisfy these axioms, or many of them at least; I have already said they necessarily satisfy transitivity, for instance. That is why I think utility theory can be useful in analysing the structure of good. I have tried to develop this analysis in my book *Weighing Goods*. *Weighing Goods* explains why I think betterness relations satisfy the axioms, and it uses theorems from utility theory to investigate the structure of good.

That utility theory applies to betterness is a matter of the *form* of the betterness relation: it conforms to the axioms. I am not suggesting there is necessarily any *substantive* connection between betterness and preferences. For instance, I am not suggesting it is necessarily good for a person to have her preferences satisfied. Whether or not that is so is a separate question.

This paper is not about the details of applying utility theory to betterness. It is about a possible limitation of the whole idea. Preferences constitute a two-place relation rather than a one-place property. Since utility theory was originally designed for preferences, it is only available as a tool for analysing a relation and not a property. Consequently, it may be suitable for analysing the betterness relation, denoted by '*_ is better than _*', but inadequate for analysing the goodness property, denoted by '*_ is good*'. So there may be structural features of goodness that cannot be captured in utility theory. In order to bring utility theory to bear on the problem, I started by announcing I was going to concentrate on the structure of betterness rather than good. In doing that, I may have

missed out something important.

Because economists are used to working with preferences, they naturally think in comparative terms. I have suggested taking over utility theory to analyse betterness in a formal fashion, but economists have been doing the same thing informally for a long time. They use, for instance, the concept of 'social preference'. When an economist says that A is socially preferred to B , she often means simply that A is better than B . Rightly or wrongly, she evidently thinks of betterness as a sort of preference. This has the advantage of opening it up automatically to exactly the analysis by means of utility theory that I have been recommending. I think that is very useful. On the other hand, it constrains the economist to think of goodness only in terms of its comparative, betterness. This might be a limitation of the approach.

But actually, I do not think it is a limitation at all. I think that goodness is actually fully reducible to betterness; there is nothing more to goodness than betterness. I think economists are right to think in comparative terms, and they miss nothing by doing so. I think some philosophers have occasionally found themselves chasing red herrings because they have not had the economist's instinct to work with comparatives. There are some examples in Section 5 below. Thinking in comparatives is one of the lessons economics can teach to philosophy.

Section 2 of this paper explains more exactly what I mean when I say goodness is reducible to betterness. It explains the alternative possibility, that there might be absolute degrees of goodness and an absolute zero of goodness. Section 3 considers some senses in which goodness has an absolute zero, but shows goodness is reducible to betterness nonetheless. Section 4 describes a sense of goodness that is genuinely irreducible, but argues it is not the right sense to use in ethics. Section 5 describes some of the difficulties philosophers have been led into when pursuing the idea of irreducible goodness. From Section 3 onwards, the context of my discussion will be the value of life and the evil of death. Questions of life and death raise the idea of absolute goodness most urgently, and they are the main subject of this paper.

2 The idea of absolute goodness

Let us say a property F is 'reducible to its comparative' if any statement that refers to the property has the same meaning as another statement that refers to the property's comparative, F er than, instead. I think goodness is reducible to its comparative. Anything that can be said using 'good' can be said using 'better than'. To put it another way, if you knew everything about betterness – of every pair of alternatives, you knew whether one was better than the other, and which – then you would know everything there is to know about goodness. There is nothing more to goodness than betterness. So there is in principle nothing about the structure of goodness that cannot be captured within utility theory.

When I say there is nothing more to goodness than betterness, you might think I mean to say that goodness is an ordinal property rather than a cardinal one. But I do not mean that. I am not concerned with ordinality and cardinality in this paper. I consider both to be features of betterness. Betterness is a cardinal concept if we can make sense of amounts of betterness: if we can sensibly ask how much better one thing is than another. More precisely, if it makes sense to say A is better than B to a greater extent than C is better than D , then betterness is cardinal. If not, betterness is ordinal. All this is a matter of the structure of the betterness relation. Whether there is more to goodness than betterness is a different matter.¹

¹ For accuracy, I should explain this more formally. Many one-place properties can be possessed by objects to a greater or lesser extent. These properties can be treated formally as two-place relations. For instance: $_$ is wet to extent $_$, where the first place is for an object and the second for an extent. Similarly, many two-place relations can be

It is a matter of whether there are absolute degrees of goodness. Some properties have absolute degrees, and consequently cannot be reduced to their comparatives. One example is the property of *width*. Many statements that mention width can be reduced to others that mention only comparative width, but not all can. 'The Mississippi is wide' can be reduced; it means the same as 'The Mississippi is wider than a typical river'. But the statement 'An electron has no width' cannot be reduced in this way. You might at first think it means simply that nothing is less wide than an electron. But actually it means more than that; the fact that an electron's width is specifically zero has a significance over and above the fact that nothing is less wide. Width is not reducible to its comparative because there is an absolute zero of width.

Width has an absolute zero. Other properties have absolute degrees of other sorts beside zero. *Correctness*, for instance, has an absolutely maximal degree. An arithmetical calculation can be absolutely perfectly correct, and this fact about it cannot be expressed in terms of comparative correctness. But for goodness, I take it that if it has absolute degrees of any sort, it will surely have an absolute zero. If it does, there will also be absolutely positive and negative degrees: things that are better than the absolute zero will be absolutely good; things that are worse, absolutely bad.

To test whether goodness can be reduced to its comparative, I shall therefore look for an absolute zero of goodness. However, if goodness does have an absolute zero, it will certainly not have one in quite the way width has. If it does have a zero, goodness is likely to have a structure more like the structure of *attractiveness*. Things are ordered by the comparative denoted by '*_* is more attractive than *_*'. Towards one end of the ordering are positively attractive things; towards the other negatively attractive or positively repellant things. In between are things with zero attractiveness. So the zero of attractiveness is in the middle of the ordering, whereas width has its zero at the end. Still, the zero ensures that attractiveness, like width, is an irreducible property. 'Pandas are attractive' cannot be replaced with a comparative statement. No doubt, the zero of goodness, if it has one, will also be somewhere in the middle of the betterness ordering. And goodness may resemble attractiveness in another way too. The zero of attractiveness is doubtless vague; it will occupy some vague position in the middle of the ordering. If goodness has an absolute zero, that may well be vague too.

In looking for an absolute zero of goodness, we must not be too hasty. Goodness may have absolute degrees of a sort, whilst still being reducible to its comparatives. In Section 3, I shall explain ways this can happen.

3 Reducible senses of goodness.

Are there absolute degrees of goodness? Suppose we have the betterness relation fully worked out over some range of objects; we have all the objects arranged on a scale from the worst to the best. Once that is done, can we sensibly ask the question: where on the scale is the zero point? If there is a zero, objects above it will be good, and objects below it bad. Can we divide the objects into the good ones and the bad ones?

The answer is that we can indeed make this division in various sensible ways. Here is one. When we are assessing the goodness of something, there is often an obvious standard of comparison. Given that, we may say the thing is good, and simply mean it is better than the obvious standard. The obvious standard depends on the sort of objects we are assessing. If they are actions or events, the obvious standard is generally what would otherwise have happened. 'It is a good thing you remembered the corkscrew' means it would have been worse if you had forgotten the corkscrew. Alternatively, if the

satisfied by pairs of objects to a greater or lesser extent. Cardinal comparatives are in this class of relations. They can be treated formally as a three-place relations. For instance: *_* is taller than *_* to extent *_*, where the first two places are for objects and the third for an extent. See Adam Morton, 'Hypercomparatives'.

objects are propositions, the obvious standard for a particular proposition is its negation. When we say a proposition is good, we mean it is better than its negation. In *The Logic Of Decision*, Richard Jeffrey works out this idea formally, and shows how it determines a zero for goodness that always lies between the goodness of a proposition and the goodness of its negation.²

The existence of obvious standards of comparison gives us absolute degrees of goodness of a sort. But these degrees are themselves determined by the betterness relation, so they do not prevent goodness from being reducible. 'X is good' reduces to 'X is better than the standard'. Once you know which things are better than which, you know all there is to know about the goodness of things.

When the objects we are considering are not events or propositions, but people's lives, there is another way to make sense of the question which are good and which bad. Questions of life and death very easily raise thoughts about absolute good and bad. The rest of this paper concentrates on these questions.

People lead lives of different lengths and different qualities. Some lives are better than others. There is a betterness relation between lives, that is to say. This relation arranges lives on a scale from the worst to the best. Having done that, we may still have reason to ask what point on this scale divides good lives from bad ones. This is because we may want to know whether it is a good or a bad thing that a life of a particular quality is lived at all. As the question is commonly put, is a particular life *worth living*? For instance, is it a good or a bad thing that people are born to live in desperate poverty, or to suffer some genetic disease? Between lives that are worth living and those that are not, is a quality of life that we might naturally count as zero on the scale of goodness. So here is an idea of absolute zero for goodness.

But whether a life is good, or worth living, is once again a matter of comparing one thing with another. Precisely which comparison is in question depends on the context. Sometimes we may ask, of a particular person now alive, whether her life is good. In that context, to say her life is good generally means it is better for the person that she should continue to live rather than die now. Or it may mean it is better, not necessarily for the person but from some impersonal point of view, that she should continue to live. In either case, to say the life is good reduces to a comparative statement of betterness. The relevant comparison is between one possible life and another: on the one hand a shorter life, coming to an end now, and on the other a longer life that continues into the future. This comparison determines the zero of goodness in this particular context. Goodness reduces to betterness.

In another context, to say a person's life is good or worth living means it is better that the person should live her life than that she should never have lived at all. Here the comparison that gives sense to goodness is not a comparison between lives. I started by supposing we have lives ranked from the worst to the best. To fix a zero in the ranking, in the sense I am now considering, we have to go outside the ranking itself. We need to compare, not lives, but worlds: we must compare a world in which a life is lived with one in which it is not lived. But still, this is a comparative judgement of betterness. It is true that if you knew only which lives are better than which, you would not know which lives are good in this sense. You would need a wider knowledge of betterness than that. Still, if you knew all about which things are better than which, you would know which lives are good and which are not. Goodness reduces to betterness once again.

All these are ways of making sense of a zero of goodness. None of them is any reason to doubt that goodness reduces to betterness. But there is another possible way, and this one would make betterness irreducible. I shall come at it indirectly, through a discussion of Derek Parfit's notion of a life worth living.

² *The Logic of Decision*, p. 82. The zero turns out to be the goodness of the necessarily true proposition.

4 Naturalism

In Part IV of *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit considers the value of adding people to the world's population. He uses the idea of a good life or a life worth living throughout his discussion. What exactly does he mean by it? I suggested some possible meanings in Section 3. One suggestion was that a life worth living is a life such that it is better that this life should be lived than that it should not. But this is evidently not Parfit's meaning. At one point, he considers the view that 'though . . . a life is worth living, . . . it would have been in itself better if this life had never been lived'.³ Parfit treats this as an intelligible opinion, but if 'worth living' had the meaning I suggested, it would be self-contradictory.

Parfit also speaks of a life worth living as one that 'has value to the person whose life it is'.⁴ This could point to another of the meanings I suggested for 'worth living': that a life is worth living if it is better for the person that her life continue than that she should die. But this is not Parfit's meaning either. Whether a life is worth living in this sense may change from one time in a person's life to another. If a person lives happily when young, but experiences acute suffering for some months before she dies, her life may be worth living in this sense when she is young, but not during those last months. But in his discussion of population, Parfit only considers the value of lives as a whole. He has no place for values that change over time. So this cannot be his meaning.

The expression 'has value to the person whose life it is' might also suggest a third possible meaning: a life is worth living if it is better for the person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all. I have not mentioned this as a possible meaning before, because I think it makes no sense. At least, it cannot ever be *true* that it is better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all. If it were better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all, then if she had never lived at all, that would have been worse for her than if she had lived. But if she had never lived at all, there would have been no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse for her. Parfit agrees.⁵ So this is not his meaning either.

At this point, Parfit says:

Causing someone to exist is a special case because the alternative would not have been worse for this person. We may admit that, for this reason, causing someone to exist cannot be *better* for this person. But it may be *good* for this person.⁶

Parfit here seems to be explicitly denying that goodness can be reduced to betterness. But we have still not discovered what he means by this irreducible 'good'. Explicitly, he identifies a good life with a life worth living,⁷ but what does he mean by that?

There may be a clue in the examples he uses throughout his discussion of population. Parfit does not accept hedonism, but he often assumes hedonism for the sake of argument in his examples. Hedonism says the only good thing in life is pleasure, and the only bad thing pain. Given hedonism, we can define an *empty* life as one that contains neither pleasure nor pain. And we can still use the same idea of emptiness even if we drop hedonism. Suppose we have a list of the good and bad things in life; no doubt the list will include pleasure and pain, but it may include other things as well. Then we can define a life as empty if it contains none of these good or bad things.

The idea of good and bad things in life can be defined in terms of betterness; it does not depend on any absolute notion of good. Something – pleasure, for instance – is a good thing if and only if a life that has more of it is better than one that has less, other things being equal. However, once we have identified the good and bad things in life,

³ *Reasons and Persons*, p. 433.

⁴ p. 433.

⁵ p. 489.

⁶ p. 489.

⁷ p. 487.

they present us with a plausible absolute zero for goodness. It is plausible to take an empty life to have zero goodness, so that a positively good life is one that is better than an empty life. This idea exploits the natural zeros of good and bad things – the natural zero of pain, for instance – to give us a zero for goodness. This zero is certainly not reducible to betterness; it is defined in terms of the zeros of the good and bad things.

Parfit seems to think of a life of zero goodness, or a life that is just not worth living, in this way. For instance, when describing lives that are not much above the zero, he says:

A life could be like this either because it has enough ecstasies to make its agonies seem just worth enduring, or because it is uniformly of poor quality. Let us imagine the lives . . . to be of this second drabber kind. In each of these lives there is very little happiness.⁸

If this is indeed what Parfit means by 'a good life' or 'a life worth living' – a life that is better than an empty life – it would explain why he thinks goodness cannot be reduced to betterness.

G. E. Moore would have called this account of the absolute zero of goodness 'naturalistic'.⁹ The account depends on some particular theory of good: before we can define an empty life, we must first identify the good and bad things in life. This theory of good is not necessarily naturalistic in Moore's sense. A naturalistic theory is one that claims 'good' *means* some natural thing: 'good' means pleasure, say, or something else. But when we say that particular things in life are good – pleasure amongst them – we are simply saying that a life containing more of these things is better than a life containing fewer of them. We need not claim this is true in virtue of meaning. The meaning of 'better' may be determined independently, in some quite different way. However, our theory of good has supplied us with a naturalistic notion of zero goodness. According to this idea, 'a life of zero goodness' *means* a life that is neither better nor worse than an empty life. As yet, in following Parfit, we have not found any other meaning for zero goodness; this is the only meaning we have found. The natural zeros of the good and bad things in life have given us a naturalistic zero for goodness.

Naturalism is subject to Moore's open-question argument.¹⁰ Here is a version of the argument, adapted to our context. Suppose some person lives an empty life; suppose, indeed, she is unconscious throughout her life and has no pleasures and pains for that reason. We might ask: would it have been better if this person had never lived? We might plausibly reach the answer: yes.¹¹ If we did, we would surely say this empty life was a bad one. Since it would have been better if the life had not been lived, it is a bad thing that it is lived, so we should surely say it is a bad life. According to the account of meaning I have given, however, it is not a bad life; it has zero goodness because empty lives necessarily have zero goodness. Even if we concluded it is not bad that this empty life is lived, it is certainly an intelligible question whether or not it is bad. Therefore, it cannot be the case that an empty life is neither good nor bad simply in virtue of meaning. Yet that is implied by the naturalistic account of zero goodness. So this account must be wrong.

I am convinced by the open-question argument in this application. I do not think it shows that the naturalist account is strictly wrong; it is no doubt acceptable to speak of zero goodness in the naturalistic way. But the argument displays a rival sense of zero goodness for lives. In the rival sense, a life has zero goodness if it is neither better nor worse that it should be lived than that it should not be lived. This is one of the senses I mentioned in Section 3. When it comes to ethics, it is goodness in this sense that we

⁸ p. 388.

⁹ *Principia Ethica*, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Principia Ethica*, pp. 15–16.

¹¹ Francis Kamm accepts this as a plausible answer, in *Creation and Abortion*, pp. 130–1.

are concerned with: is it a good or a bad thing that a particular life is lived? Therefore, in ethics, this second sense must have priority over the first. And whatever we understand by zero goodness, the argument certainly shows we cannot have a naturalistic meaning for the term 'worth living'. We must not call a life worth living if it is an open question whether or not it is a good thing that it should be lived.

I suggest a different terminology. Let us distinguish a person's wellbeing from her good. Let us treat her wellbeing as a natural property; it is made up of the good and bad things in her life. Wellbeing in this sense has a natural zero given by the natural zeros of the good and bad things. An empty life, with no good or bad things, has zero wellbeing. But it is an open question whether it has zero goodness. Wellbeing has a natural absolute zero; goodness does not. Goodness is still reducible to betterness.

5 The evil of death and the value of life

I have now said what I can to defend my claim that goodness can be reduced to betterness. I have described some senses of goodness that are reducible, and objected to a sense that is not reducible. I now want to give an example of the harm that can be done by neglecting the principle that goodness can be reduced to betterness. Philosophers have always debated the question of whether death is an evil. It seems to me that a good part of this debate has been diverted on to an unsatisfactory course by the search for a holy grail of absolute goodness. My main example will be Thomas Nagel's paper 'Death'. In writing this paper, I think Nagel was twice misled by the idea of absolute goodness.

He says:

The fact that it is worse to die at 24 than at 82 does not imply that it is not a terrible thing to die at 82, or even at 806. The question is whether we can regard as a misfortune any limitation, like mortality, that is normal to the species.¹²

Is it terrible to die at 82? Nagel assumes it is better to die at 82 than at 81 or younger, and worse than at 84 or older. Nagel takes this for granted from the start. But this remark about betterness are almost all there is to be said on the subject. Beyond that, 'Is it terrible to die at 82?' is an almost empty question.

It is not quite empty. When we ask whether an event is bad, we are normally asking whether it is worse than the obvious standard of comparison, which is what would otherwise have happened. But when we ask if it is bad to die at 82, that leaves it unclear what would otherwise have happened. This lack of clarity makes it tempting to pursue the question of what we should take as the standard of comparison. Nagel asks whether we should take as our standard what is normal to the species. Other authors have pursued the question at greater length. Jeff McMahan is one. In 'Death and the value of life', he recommends as a standard what would have happened if the person had not died, and he discusses how to interpret this counterfactual condition.

There may be some point in trying to answer this question about the standard of comparison, but it cannot tell us anything about the value of living and the evil of dying. It is only a question about what we might mean when we ask 'Is it terrible to die at 82?' What comparison do we have in mind? All the significant facts have been fully stated once we have said what dying at 82 is better than and what it is worse than. There is no further significant question whether or not dying at 82 is an absolutely bad thing. Nagel concludes his article by saying: 'If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all.'¹³ What is in store for us is an end that is worse than living longer would have been, and better than dying sooner would have been. That is all. Nagel tries to say more when there is nothing

¹² p. 9.

¹³ p. 10 in the reprinted version.

more to be said. That is the first place where had been led astray by the search for absolute goodness.

The second place is in his central argument against the Epicureans. The Epicureans argued that death is not bad for us, and Nagel's main purpose in 'Death' is to answer their arguments. Epicurus says;

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.¹⁴

There are two arguments contained in this passage. Nagel concentrates on the first. If death is bad for a person, the argument goes, its badness must consist in depriving the person of the good of living. But, as Nagel puts it,

Doubt may be raised whether *anything* can be bad for a man without being positively unpleasant to him: specifically, it may be doubted that there are any evils which consist merely in the deprivation or absence or possible goods, and which do not depend on someone's *mind*ing that deprivation.¹⁵

Nagel aims to remove this doubt.¹⁶

His argument is to reject Epicurus's claim that all good and evil consists in sensation. He argues there are many sorts of evil that are not experienced. He gives examples. It is bad for a person, he says, to have her wishes ignored by the executor of her will, even though she can suffer no bad experience as a result. It is bad for a person to be ridiculed behind her back, even if she never finds out and suffers no bad experiences as a result. And so on. Amongst unexperienced evils like this Nagel places the evil of deprivation. Death deprives a person of the good she would otherwise have enjoyed, and this is an unexperienced evil.

This is a dangerous argument for Nagel to make. His examples of unexperienced evils are controversial. He makes such contentious remarks as:

A man's life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind, and what happens to him can include much that does not take place within the boundaries of his life. These boundaries are commonly crossed by the misfortunes of being deceived, or despised, or betrayed.¹⁷

To answer Nagel, a hedonist like Epicurus would simply deny all this. She would deny it is bad for you to be ridiculed behind your back, and so on. It is unwise of Nagel to rest his case on such contentious grounds. He certainly does not need to. He does not even need to reject Epicurus's hedonism in order to refute his argument. This particular argument of Epicurus's is trivially mistaken.

Suppose hedonism is true, and a person's good is determined entirely by the pleasures and pains she enjoys in her life. Now suppose something happens that causes you to have fewer good experiences – enjoy less pleasure – than you otherwise would have done. That is bad for you. An event is bad for you if it makes your life less good than it otherwise would have been, and that is what this event has done. That is so whether or not you find out what has happened, and whether or not you have any bad feelings as a result. Suppose you win a lottery, but because of a glitch in a computer you never find out you have won, and never receive the prize. If the prize would have given you

¹⁴ p. 85.

¹⁵ p. 4.

¹⁶ pp. 4–7. My views on Nagel's response are in complete agreement with Fred Feldman's expressed in 'Some puzzles about the evil of death'.

¹⁷ p. 6.

pleasure, the glitch is bad for you.

A event can be bad for a person even if it does not result in any bad experiences in her life. This is so even if a person's good is entirely determined by the quality of her experiences. One way an event can be bad for someone is to give her a bad experience she would not otherwise have had. Another way is to deprive her of some good experiences she otherwise would have had. Either makes her less well off than she otherwise would have been. We may call a bad event of the latter sort 'a deprivation'. A deprivation cannot fail to be bad, because by definition it makes a person less well off than she would have been. Since death is a deprivation, it is bad for you.

Both Epicurus and Nagel missed this elementary point. Why? They must have been mesmerized by the idea of absolute good and bad. They must have assumed that the badness of death must show up as some sort of absolute bad, like a bad experience or something else. But actually the badness of death simply consists in its being worse than staying alive.

Nagel says:

If we turn from what is good about life to what is bad about death, the case is completely different. Essentially . . . what we find desirable in life are certain states, conditions or types of activity. It is *being* alive, *doing* certain things, having certain experiences, that we consider good. But if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable. This asymmetry is important.¹⁸

But there is no such asymmetry. If life is good, that means simply that it is better than death, and if death is bad, that means simply that it is worse than life. What is good about life must be exactly the same as – or perhaps I should say exactly the opposite of – what is bad about death. As Nagel says, what is good about life is that, in life, we enjoy certain states, conditions or types of activity. What is bad about death is also that, in life, we enjoy certain states, conditions or types of activity. To be fair to Nagel, I must admit that, in effect, this is what he says. But he presents it as a puzzle needing explanation, whereas it is actually trivially true. Once we recognize that goodness is reducible to betterness, it is obvious.

The passage I quoted from Epicurus contains two arguments. The first is that 'all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation'. This argument, I have said, is trivially mistaken. The second argument is that 'so long as we exist death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist'. I find this a much more significant and persuasive argument. The real puzzle about the evil of death is not to do with the idea of deprivation, but with time: death deprives us of good, but when? Because he concentrated on the first argument, Nagel failed to deal properly with the second.

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¹⁸ p. 3.

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