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# DEATH AS A LOSS

Brian Sayers

In this paper I describe and argue against two positions. The first, espoused by Epicurus and other philosophers, contends that in permanent death, since there is no longer a subject, my own death cannot be a loss for me. I argue that this thesis makes an illicit assumption and itself embodies a conceptual confusion. Therefore, my death *can* after all have the logical status of a loss for me. The Christian Church, however, has adopted what I call the “official” position; namely, that while my death *could* be a loss for me, if I am a believer, it must instead be considered a gain. Against this claim, I urge the adoption of a contrary “unofficial” position which argues that even as a believer my death may be a loss for me. I contend that the “official” position embodies internal incoherence and promotes a corrupt version of Christianity. The “unofficial” position, however, is compatible with Christian teaching on self-mortification and more accurately represents New Testament attitudes towards death. Thereby I conclude that regarding my death as loss to myself is neither conceptually absurd nor a failure of faith.

What is my death to me? Apparently for many people their own death is something to be feared, resisted, avoided. It is considered a great loss, possibly the greatest loss of all. As Schopenhauer has noted, people will cling tenaciously to life even when their situation is utterly miserable and hopeless. Tolstoi speaks for the masses when he writes:

Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying, and he was in continual despair.<sup>1</sup>

Although not in despair, I am inclined to consider my death a significant loss; not just for others, but myself as well. Yet, on two fronts, I am discouraged from thinking this.

First, thinkers as disparate as Epicurus, Lucretius, Shakespeare, and Wittgenstein argue that it makes no sense to consider one’s own death as a loss to oneself, since after death there is no existing subject for whom there can be such a loss. Where there is no traveller there is no journey, and where there is no person there can be no loss. From this position, then, there is nothing to deplore about one’s own death *per se*, nor anything for which it is appropriate to feel remorse, fear, or regret.

Second, while Christendom<sup>2</sup> holds that the subject does survive physical death, and thus could logically experience death as a loss, it denies that for believers death is something evil. Rather death is but a doorway into a better existence;



it is gain, not loss. As the Apostle put it, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21) Consequently, regarding my death as a loss to myself would constitute a failure of faith.

However, in this paper I shall argue that both of these positions are mistaken, that a rational attitude towards one's own death would be neither indifference nor anticipation. I shall argue that even if my death were a permanent death it could still be a loss to me, and that even if Christianity is true, death would still be a loss to the believer.

In his Letter to Menoceus, Epicurus asserts that a fear of death<sup>3</sup> embodies a conceptual confusion:

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 occurs, 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.<sup>4</sup>

It is the recognition of this conceptual confusion which unites the above-mentioned thinkers in their insistence that my death is not properly a loss to me. Rosenberg characterizes this confusion as a conflation of two sensible concepts which when conjoined produce "logical hash." That is, it does make sense to speak of (a) me experiencing death (I am present at someone else's death), and (b) experiencing my death (someone else is present at my death). But it makes no sense to speak of *me* experiencing *my* death. (5) When there is no me, there is no possibility of me experiencing anything, including my own death. Thinking otherwise is possible only when one has confused the two legitimate concepts and lumped them together indiscriminately. Lucretius concurs in this thought when he writes:

For, if by chance there is to be grief and pain for a man, he must needs himself to exist at that time, that ill may befall him. Since death forestalls this, and prevents the being of him on whom these misfortunes might crowd, we may know that we have nought to fear in death, and he who is no more cannot be wretched . . . . (6)

Shakespeare joins this group in depicting death as non-experience, in the following haunting image of old age approaching death:

. . . and his big manly voice  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion-  
Sans teeth, sans eye, sans taste, sans everything.<sup>7</sup>

And finally, D. Z. Phillips, under the influence of the early Wittgenstein (“Death is not an event in life. We do not live to experience death.”<sup>8</sup>), sums this point up as well as anyone:

Death is not an experience, but the end of all experience, and one cannot experience the end of experience.<sup>9</sup>

And thus we reach the conclusion that my death cannot have the logical status of an evil or loss for me. I may think that it is something dreadful or something welcome, but I can only think this because I am not thinking clearly. Insofar as my ignorance is removed I would be compelled to say with Epicurus, “Death is nothing to me.” So, while philosophy may not help me bear the toothache, it should eliminate the fear of death for me.

Now, the first thing to notice about this position is that it has been very careful to distinguish between death and dying, between experiencing death and anticipating death, between fear of death and fear of some common accompaniments of dying (i.e. pain, isolation, the unknown). Rosenberg, for instance, does not deny that one could properly fear dying, currently regard one’s future death as unwelcome, and in general hope that one’s own death is neither soon nor painful. These are legitimate distinctions and serve to reveal that when some authors apparently talk sensibly about death as a loss, they are really discussing dying.<sup>10</sup>

The second point to note about this position, however, is that much of it is directed against a purely imaginary opponent. Epicurus is entirely correct to point out that, given a permanent death, then, at that time there is no subject for whom death could be a loss. A corpse is but dust and dust cannot suffer loss.

But who would ever deny this? When confronted with the ghost of Christmas future, when presented with his own tombstone in place over his corpse, when made aware of the lack of sorrow at his death, should Scrooge have dismissed the ghost with the retort that at that time he would not care? Was Tolstoi guilty merely of a logical blunder when he found his mortality an ever-present threat which devoured his life of its former satisfactions? I think not.

While it is true that Tolstoi and others have not sharply distinguished between dying and death, it *does* seem that dying itself was not their problem. Were dying not followed by death they would not have been so distressed.<sup>11</sup> It was death, their future death, that was the object of their attention. And to suggest that they bemoan their fate by virtue of a conceptual confusion seems far too easy.

Suppose we grant that death is permanent and so at death I am no longer an experiencing subject. Then it will be true that while I can experience my own dying, I cannot experience my own death. However, Epicurus proceeds from this premise directly to the conclusion that my own death cannot *ever* be a loss

to me. And this is quite a leap. Now, I *can* see how this conclusion is supposed to follow. It would follow, for instance, if one accepted a general principle that an event of which I could not be aware could not be a loss for me, either now or later. However, I do not see what reason there could be for accepting this general principle. It seems easy enough to find plenty of counterexamples to it.

Let us suppose, for instance, that a formerly intelligent adult has suffered brain damage and now possesses the mental abilities of a two year old. His physical needs are met in an institution and he is not suffering, in fact seems very cheerful and contented most of the time. Here we have an example of an event (or state) of which the intelligent adult is not, and could not be aware. He currently does not consider his reduced state to be a loss for himself. The question, however, is not whether he currently *regards* his situation as a loss for himself, but whether it *is* a loss for him. And this, in turn, reduces to the more general question of what it is that makes an event good or evil for a human.

Clearly, the position I have been examining contends that it is the *current state* of an individual that determines the good or evil of an event. So, when I experience my normal minor hunger at mealtime, raw horseflesh is not a good to me. On the verge of starvation, however, I might consider such food a good, even a great good. On this view, then, in death there will be no subject, therefore no current state of a subject, therefore nothing that could be considered good or evil. This is why Epicurus insists that death should be “nothing to us.”

And yet, the brain-damage example casts some doubt on the claim that good and evil must be restricted to the state of a subject at a given time. It does not seem conceptually absurd to regard the two year old adult as having himself suffered a misfortune. He has lost something, whether or not he is aware of it. It is because of such possibilities as dementia that Nagel contends:

A man is the subject of good and evil as much because he has hopes which may or may not be fulfilled, or possibilities which may or may not be realized, as because of his capacity to suffer and enjoy. If death is an evil, it must be accounted for in these terms and the impossibility of locating it within life should not trouble us.<sup>12</sup>

These considerations suggest that Epicurus' position has itself failed to make a crucial distinction. It has conflated the concept of a loss with that of a *felt* loss. It has assumed that because a loss is not felt that it cannot really be a loss at all. And this seems wrong, simply false. Merely because one cannot locate a current sense of loss one is not entitled to conclude that no loss has been suffered. According to Rousseau, people born in chains have lost their desire for freedom. They do not know it, but they have suffered a loss. Likewise, an adult reduced to the life of a cheerful infant has suffered a loss. He has lost the ability, for instance to participate in many activities which formerly were enjoyable and

significant for him. Nagel seems right on this point. Deprivation of future possibilities, especially when they would be continuations of previous activities, may be considered as loss.

By analogy, then, a person who has died a permanent death, even though now unaware of his state, can also properly be spoken of as having suffered a loss. So, if the Rousseau and brain-damage examples may be considered as losses for the subjects involved, and if there is sufficient strength in the analogy between those examples and death, then there is no logical barrier to considering my death as a loss to me.

One might argue against the first point by contending that the formerly intelligent adult, for instance, is no longer the same subject, so there is no loss for *him*, felt or otherwise. Yet this response -as is well known- threatens to overpopulate us with subjects. In the case of Alzheimer's disease, where the mind gradually deteriorates, we would have to posit possibly hundreds of subjects, one having existed for perhaps sixty years, subsequent ones merely a week or two. So, in the face of such unresolved difficulties, I believe that I am on firmer ground logically to invoke Occam's razor. Rather than saying "He is not the same person (or subject, or whatever), and so he has suffered no loss." I should say instead, "He has suffered a loss although he does not know it."<sup>13</sup>

And so the second point remains. Is there sufficient strength in the analogy between brain damage and death? Of course, there are differences. In the first case there still exists a subject even though unaware of his loss. In the second case, we have presently no subject at all; we have a corpse. But for the point we are considering this difference is irrelevant. I am not claiming that the corpse could be pitied any more than I am claiming that a contented infant (although adult in body) should be pitied. It is the intelligent adult who has been *reduced* to infancy that has suffered the loss, and it is the person who has died that has lost possibilities which he would otherwise still have had.

Unless the question is being begged, the current status of the individual being considered is not germane. What is germane is that in each case, while possibilities have been precluded, no loss is felt. And on this point, which is the one at issue, the examples are similar. And so the tests of an analogy seem to have been met. Relevant similarities exist, and differences that obtain are not relevant to the point of the analogy.

Consequently, I contend that the analogy between brain-damage and death is strong enough to be used in an argument. My argument proceeds from the premise that an adult who has experienced severe brain damage has suffered a loss even though this loss cannot be located in a current state of his life. We may properly attribute a loss to him even though he does not

“experience” the loss as a loss. Following Nagel, I argue that the loss consists in the loss of possibilities, relationships, and activities which he would have continued to enjoy had he not suffered this loss. As it is with the brain damage case, so it is with death. They are analogous in this respect. So I conclude that there remains no logical barrier to considering my death as a loss to me. To think otherwise is to make the illicit assumption that a loss must be a felt loss.

From another angle, the general teaching of Christendom would concur in my contention that it does make sense to consider my death as something that could be good or evil for me. More specifically, it teaches that if I am a believer, then my death, while it could have been a loss, is not in fact. Instead it is a gain or victory. It is in this sense that we have another claim that my death is not a loss to me. And again, we have a position which I shall argue is indefensible.

Throughout its history the Christian Church has tried to impress upon unbelieving humans a fear of death.<sup>14</sup> Whether to provoke repentance, or to exact obedience to (allegedly) Scriptural requirements, one’s own death was a day of reckoning. Wrong acts, wrong attitudes, wrong beliefs would all come to light and would be punished appropriately. “Be not deceived, God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.” (Galatians 6:7) It was because death could be *the* loss that the death-bed scene assumed such awesome significance in Medieval Christianity. It became the place of the last struggle to avoid the judgement of God.

However, for the believer, the situation was to be quite different. While it was true that death was a great enemy, the power of death derived from man’s own sinful acts. The effects of these sinful acts, though, could be cancelled by the intervention of Jesus performing His salvific acts. So now, for the believer, death was a defeated foe. Death was not a true end, but rather the beginning of a much superior life. Rather than dreadful judgement, death became a glorious triumph. The Medieval assertion that death was better than life (*mors melior vita*) was the logical outcome of such Scriptural claims as the following:

A good name is better than precious ointment: and the day of death than the day of one’s birth.” (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

. . . Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 15: 54-57)

It is this attitude, that death should not be feared, that it was not at all properly

regarded as a loss for a person of faith, to which I shall refer as the “official” position. The unbeliever properly feared, but for a believer, to regard death as a loss was “officially” a failure of faith.

Since the teaching of the Church was thus double-sided about death, we would expect believers (nominal and otherwise) to possess ambivalent attitudes towards their own death. And while we do possess records of some believers who welcomed death,<sup>15</sup> we also have discovered more recently that fear of death is not appreciably diminished by religious belief.<sup>15</sup> However, I am not concerned with what attitudes Christians have *actually* possessed on this issue. My interest is in showing that the “official” position of Christendom, contrary to initial appearances, cannot support itself from within.

From within it certainly *looks* as though death cannot be a loss for a genuine Christian. Given the resurrection of the dead, the forgiveness of one’s sins, the promise of heaven, and the nature of this life as a vale of tears, it seems to follow that a logically consistent attitude towards one’s own death would be one of glad anticipation, not remorse.

Of course, if the notion of personal survival after death is incoherent, or if salvation doctrine cannot be accepted, then these constitute serious *external* attacks on the “official” position of Church teaching on death. However, I shall ignore such external attacks, and concentrate instead on problems which can be generated from *within* a Christian perspective. (17) More specifically, I propose to explore the ramifications of an “unofficial” but Scriptural attitude towards death. Thereby, I hope to show that the “official” position commits a serious distortion of its own sources and should be replaced.

First of all, Jesus’ death and resurrection is considered a source of celebration and victory. It is the basis for the believer’s triumph over the grave. So attitudes towards His death are crucial for the “official” position.

However, it is clear that Jesus’ death is considered to be the most amazing, the most incredible *sacrifice* on his part.<sup>18</sup> It is not that He submitted to inconvenience, or pain, or hunger, or persecution, or rejection, but that he submitted to *death* which is emphasized by Paul and which is to arouse feelings of awe and gratitude.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, His own death was significant and repugnant to Jesus Himself. It seems to be death from which He shrank in the Garden of Gethsemane and death which was the “bitter cup” which He would have preferred to decline. (Luke 22:41-44)

At the same time, it is death which is often cited as a metaphor for what happens when one becomes a Christian. One is to pick up His cross and “*die*” to sin. (Romans 6:2) That is, to become a Christian requires self-mortification. Now, while this metaphorical death is intended to bespeak a radical break with one’s former life, it is also used to indicate the cost involved in such a switch

of allegiance. A Christian could not live as he used to live. He had to leave possessions, family, and old comforts. Thus, when the fathers of the Church wanted to highlight this loss incurred in becoming a Christian they chose their most dramatic analogue - they chose death as representative of this loss. In order to “know” Christ a believer had to become “conformable to His death” (Philippians 3:10), a phrase which is used in the context of insisting on the rigors of the Christian life.

But not only is salvation analogous to death, it is also considered as deliverance from death.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that the disciples and other followers of Jesus were most pleased when they believed that some of them would not “see death” but escape it altogether.<sup>21</sup> Apparently, then, death is still represented as a loss in the New Testament.

Kierkegaard effectively captures this “unofficial” Christian attitude towards death in a late journal entry:

Of all torments, being a Christian is the most terrible; it is-and that is how it should be-to know hell in this life.

What is a human being most terrified of? Most likely of dying, and most of all of the death-agony, therefore wishing it to be as brief as possible. But to be a Christian means to be in a state of dying—you must die off, hate yourself—and yet, after that, you have to live on, maybe for 40 years, in that state. (We shudder to read about the sufferings a beast undergoes when it is used for vivisection; yet this gives only a glimmering of the pain involved in being a Christian: to be kept alive in a state of death.)

That is not all, however; there is a further aggravation. Those who surround a dying man’s couch do not generally guffaw loudly at him because he groans in his last agony. Nor do they usually hate, curse, or loathe him because of that. But this torment forms an integral part of being a Christian; it comes along whenever true Christianity is to be expressed in this world.<sup>22</sup>

And so, we have set up a rather damaging internal attack on the “official” position. The only way to reject this attack is to reject the suggestion that becoming a Christian costs the new believer. But such a move would have unacceptable consequences for Christians. If death is not to be considered a loss then a central metaphor of New Testament teaching (written, after all, to believers) is devoid of meaning. If death is not a loss then it cannot be much of a bother to “die to sin.”

So I conclude that the “official” position has illicitly downplayed the significance of the believer’s death.

Further, even if many believers have been unable to consider their own death

with the approved equanimity, this position has had considerable ill effect in Western civilization. I suspect, for instance, that Kierkegaard was correct in his suggestion that Christendom has cheapened Christianity, and done so partly by its concomitant insistence that death is no loss. Hegel, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche have noted the tendency of Christendom to empty this world of significance and worth but could have made their points more trenchantly by indicating the role that the “official” position on death has played. Then too, it is possible that the “official” position has aided Western civilization in its currently lamented propensity to deny the reality of death. The claim that death is no loss could be part of an elaborate refusal to face the fear that it inspires. But these are merely speculations or suggestions for further study and not part of my argument.

Whatever the historical causes and effects of the “official” position, I believe that its logical defects may now be pointed out more precisely.

I would like to suggest that Christendom has entertained a confusion similar to that inherent in the Epicurus/Phillips/Rosenberg position on death. That is, it seems to me that the Church has overlooked a rather obvious distinction between an *utter* loss, and a loss *simpliciter*. It seems to have omitted the notion that a loss which issues in some gain may still be properly considered a loss. A man who has grown from childhood into an adult has lost his childhood, and whether he misses it or not, he has still lost something. Similarly, a person who loses his naiveté, his virginity, his innocence, his former ignorance, has-while gaining something-also suffered a loss. Even cultures, moving for instance, from an agricultural to a technological life-style, have lost one thing while they have gained another.

So, there is no good reason, although this may have been feared, to think that acknowledging the loss will detract from the gain. Instead, even if shorn of its terrors, even if it is the gateway to a life without sorrow and injustice, for instance, death may still deprive a believer of many enjoyable and significant activities.<sup>23</sup> Christendom loses its credibility, and needlessly, by insisting otherwise.

Consequently, the widespread inability of believers to approach their death with utter equanimity or even gladness, is not, after all, a failure of faith. Understanding the relationship between the cost of becoming a Christian and the loss incurred in death, prohibits a believer from genuinely adopting the “official” position. We can be glad of this, for as Emily Dickinson puts it,

Believing what we don't believe  
Does not exhilarate.<sup>24</sup>

Returning to Kierkegaard's point, then, I recommend that the “unofficial” position be adopted instead. Notwithstanding other aspects of the situation, to be a Christian is to suffer; and to die is to suffer loss.

*Houghton College, NY*

## NOTES

1. Tolstoi, Leo, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, translated by Aylmer Maude, (New York, New American Library, 1955), p. 131.
2. I use the term "Christendom" as neutral between what might be called genuine, as opposed to corrupt or distorted Christianity. Further, I use it to refer to the beliefs and practices of the common man as distinct from that of scholars, specialists, or clergy. For a discussion of the legitimacy and problems involved in such a distinction see (a) Aries, P. *Western Attitudes Towards Death*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1974), and (b) Duby, Georges, *The Knight, The Lady and the Priest*, (New York, Pantheon Books, 1983).
3. By "death" in this section I shall mean permanent death, whereas in discussing death in a Christian context I shall mean by death the ending of one life without precluding personal survival in a "next" life.
4. Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus", translated by Cyril Bailey, in, *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Whitney Oates, ed., (New York, Random House, 1940), p. 31. (Also Principal Doctrines No. 2 makes the same point. *Ibid.*, p. 35)
5. Rosenberg, Jay. *Thinking Clearly About Death*, (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1983), p. 197.
6. Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*, translated by Cyril Bailey, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966) Book III, 862-867, p. 347.
7. Shakespeare, William, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii. Charles Gaston, ed., (New York, Macmillan Press, 1919), p. 50.
8. Wittgenstein, L. W., *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by David Pears/B. F. McGuinness, (New York, Humanities Press, 1961), 6.4311, p. 147.
9. Phillips, D. Z. *Death and Immortality*, (New York, Macmillan Press, 1970), p. 13.
10. See especially, Edwards, Paul. "Existentialism and Death: A Survey of Some Confusions and Absurdities," in *Language, Metaphysics and Death*, John Donnelly ed., (New York, Fordham University Press, 1978).
11. See Nagel, Thomas. "Death," in *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 3.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 6,7.
13. In a recent article George Pitcher argues that dead persons can suffer wrong and can be harmed. In this respect he would be in sympathy with my claim that my death may be a loss to me. However, he requires at least two subjects, or "selves" as he calls them, to advance his claim. Only "ante-mortem" selves can be harmed, while the "post-mortem" self cannot. My position has no need for such a plurality of selves. Cf. "The Misfortunes of the Dead," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, April 1984.
14. (a) Smart, Ninian. "Death and the Decline of Religion in Western Society," in *Man's Concern with Death*, Arnold Toynbee ed., (New York, McGraw Hill, 1969).  
 (b) Choron, Jacques. *Death and Western Thought*, (New York, Macmillan Press, 1963).  
 (c) Vernon, Glenn. *Sociology of Death*, (New York, Ronald Press, 1970).
15. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, Marie King ed., (Old Tappan, J. J., Revell Press, 1968).
16. (a) I. E. Alexander/A. M. Alderstein. "Studies in the Psychology of Death," in *Perspective in Personality Research*, H. P. David/J. C. Bengelemen eds., (New York, Springer Press, 1960).  
 (b) Feifel, H. "Religious Conviction and Fear of Death Among the Healthy and the Terminally Ill,"

Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1973.

17. Three avenues of internal criticism which I do not investigate are the following:

(a) the claim that neither the Old nor New Testaments teach personal survival. See McGatch, M. *Death, Meaning, and Morality in Christian Thought*, (New York, Seabury Press, 1969).

(b) the claim that Jesus authored no significant teaching on death. See Kummell, W. G. *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, (Toronto, S. C. M. Press, 1957).

(c) that religion is grossly misunderstand if conceived as offering consolation in the face of death. See Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*, (New York, Seabury Press, 1961).

18. "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Philippians 2: 5-8).

19. Romans 5: 7,8.

20. John 11: 25,26.

21. John 8: 51,52; Matthew 16: 28; Luke 9:27.

22. Kierkegaard, Soren, Journals No. 239, September 25, 1855 in, *The Diary of Soren Kierkegaard*, Peter Rohde, ed., (New York, Citadel Press, 1960), pp. 200, 201.

23. It has been suggested, for instance, that sexual activity will not occur in heaven. cf. Mark 12: 18-27.

24. Dickinson, Emily, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas Johnson, ed., (Boston, Mass., Little, Brown, and Company, 1960), No. 1741, p. 706.