

Essay/Personal Reflection

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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. And therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. *But 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.*"

Epicurus (c. 341–271), Letter to Menoeceus

Evil is a slippery word to define. At one end of the spectrum, there may be a consensus about what constitutes a truly evil act, but antecedent to that, there is little agreement.

It is instructive to distinguish between evil and bad. Evil is a bad thing, only more so. Evil is vile and carries with it a moral judgment that “bad” does not necessarily have. Bad is more commonly used as a descriptor for the senses. For example: I bought a bad (not evil) nectarine. Evil, on the other hand, incorporates a sense of right and wrong. It was evil to kill her because of the color of her skin. However, there are many examples of evil – torture, murder, euthanasia – that are morally ambiguous. This raises the imponderable issue of whether morality, and therefore evil, is absolute or relative.

There is no consensus as to whether we are born with an innate sense of good and evil or whether we are a *tabula rasa* and are taught good and evil. Some theorize that good and evil were introduced by God in the Old Testament, or even extraterrestrial powers (Clark 1968).

Emotions can also be a source of morality. Watching a cow being slaughtered for my beef burger may cause me to feel distress. This distress may then translate into a thought that killing a cow is bad and possibly wrong. I might then moralize about it and make a law. Hence, an emotion became a moral directive of good and evil.

Can death be evil? Can death have a moral vector, as in right and wrong? Or, is death simply “bad” because it assaults the senses by causing emotional pain and means the end of life that we cherish? The trauma of seeing a dead body, which might transmit a fatal disease or reminds us of our own mortality, has been transformed by cultures and religions into rituals about mourning and disposal. For example, there are religions that insist on ritual handwashing to remove spiritual impurities after visiting a cemetery. Some do not allow pregnant women to join a funeral procession because of the effect of the Evil Eye.

This raises the question, What is death?

We know nothing about consciousness after life ends. We cannot proffer moral (or any) judgment about life after death:

There is a notorious difficulty with the view that death is an evil for the person who dies... The difficulty, in brief, is that the evil of death seems to lack a subject. While one is still alive one has not, of course, suffered the evil of death; yet when one is dead one does not exist to be the recipient of goods or evils. But if the supposed subject of the evil thus fails to exist, then the claim that death is an evil for the person who dies would seem to be not (merely) false, but incoherent." (Silverstein 1980)

Epicurus said a similar thing in the epigraph. Yet, as intellectually coherent as their – Epicurus and Silverstein – arguments may be, their conclusions are easier said than done, and ultimately may not be realistic. Fear of death is genetically ingrained to keep us, and our genes, alive. Given that fear is an emotion, it is not surprising that fear (of death which is something unpleasant to the senses) may be transmogrified into a moral issue of good and evil.

Long ago, the question of evil and death was broached in the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. (Old Testament) A simple proposition was made: it is a sin to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of it, you will die. This established a relationship, including an explanation, between morality and death. Transgressing the commandment and eating the fruit was morally wrong, that is, evil. The punishment of death confirmed the nexus between death and evil. But does that mean that death per se is evil?

For millennia, suffering (i.e., death and its *hors d'oeuvre*) has been a profitable industry for magic, witchcraft, and religion. With the Enlightenment science demonstrated that reason works the world. The power of magicians and witches subsided.

However, the clergy still had to provide solace for their suffering parishioners since their theologies struggled to justify suffering in terms of good and evil. The only solution to theodicy (i.e., why bad things happen to good people) is to postulate an immortal afterlife, even if only of the spirit. It is in the afterlife (or afterdeath) that the suffering innocent in this world shall be recompensed and the evil ones shall get their just desserts.

Job remonstrated with God to explain unjustified suffering in this world. God put Job in his place with unanswerable premises and sarcastic rejoinders that nevertheless bypassed the central question of God's apparent injustice:

4. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.
5. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!...
12. In all your days, did you command the morning? Did you tell the dawn its place?

Job, 38:4-7

Death is described in terms of good and evil, in part because we need an explanation of why we suffer. By attributing meaning and purpose to suffering, the suffering might become more tolerable.

Contemplating immortality, either here on earth or in an afterlife, is another way to explore the meaning of suffering and death.

There is a rich literature of fiction addressing immortality on earth. Immortality is generally seen as an affliction, which results in meaninglessness, an inability to form lasting relationships, and an uncertain sense of morality. Repetitiveness and its mistress tolerance dull our desire to live. The literature concludes that the terror of death forces us to sculpt our lives, in terms of values and character, and sharpens our taste for life:

In "The Immortal" (Borges 1999) Borges asserts that the brevity of life gives it great value, value that would be lost if human beings achieved immortality... "Death (or reference to death) makes men precious and pathetic," and that "everything in the world of mortals has the value of the irrecoverable and contingent". (Cook 2009, accessed 2022)

Death is bad because it offends the senses. Death causes anger and emotional pain and is unpleasant. Death is a physical phenomenon and itself is not evil since it does not have a moral vector. The act that led to death – say murder – may be evil because it was

based on free will, which provides the moral dimension. This was the lesson of the prohibition in the Garden of Eden myth.

Is a tsunami evil?

For two and a half years, the Rabbis in the houses of study of Shammai and of Hillel disagreed. There were those that said: It would have been preferable had man not been created. And others said: It is preferable that man had been created. Ultimately, a vote was taken. The two houses of study concluded that it would have been preferable had man not been created. However, they declared that since he had been created, he should strive to behave in a moral way (Talmud).

This is promising as far as it goes. It seems to acknowledge the possibility that man is recalcitrantly evil, or at the least that his suffering is too great to bear. However, the cruelty of the world extends beyond man – from the crust of the earth to its core. From earthquakes to the hyena in the African veldt, who eats alive the graceful antelope, in order to live. The antelope (who also wanted to live) screams as it is torn apart (Full Wild Animal Fights). We are still a long way from the time when the wolf will lay down with the lamb.

Can there be justice in this world, on this earth?

Maybe it would have been better had the world itself never been created.

Then there would have been no need to discuss the miseries of dying and disintegration. Or the peccadilloes of evil.

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