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Epicurus and the Innocence of Death

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The Greek philosopher Epicurus famously stated that “death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience and death is the privation of all sentience” (qtd. in Hicks 169). Though Epicurus’ flippancy towards the subject has the potential to be off-putting, he is quite right that death is not to be feared. Death, in all of its haziness, becomes quickly disconcerting, however, it need not be viewed as a thing that contains within it ethical “goods" and “bads.” Death is often viewed as a static moment of exorcism, a violent jolt out of the realm of life and subsequent plunge into somewhere or nowhere. If one applies a process ontology, that is a metaphysical viewpoint with an “emphasis on becoming and changing over static being,” death can be interpreted as a transition in the same way any of life's changes ought to be (Hustwit). If death is viewed as a transition from state to state, it becomes much more palatable. This transition is not arbitrary or distinctly human since everything is in a constant state of fluctuation. If one assumes a process approach to understanding nature, death as a demarcation along this trajectory of change should not be viewed as an ethical event, but an aspect of an eternal becoming, and therefore innocent. I will argue that death as a process is merely the extinguishing of subjectivity in the transition from one state to another using Heraclitean metaphysics, then use the Deleuzian reading of Nietzsche to justify death’s moral innocence, hopefully verifying the claims of Epicurus through process metaphysics.

We should first establish a list of things that one can empirically gather about human death. Death is a cessation of mental and bodily function; an individual is decidedly dead upon the total ceasing of these two things. In the physical world, dead individuals do not feel or experience the things taking place, they do not interact with humanity in the same intentioned way that they once did. The experiences beheld by a dead individual (at least from the finite, bound perspective of the physical senses) seem to be nothing at all. When a person dies the totality of their physical body remains on the earth only without the “I,” divorced from the subjectivity that once differentiated them from the other. Epicurus establishes this by saying death is the "privation of all awareness," which could also be read as the privation of the self which might be aware. Outside of those memories and images retained by the living, the corpse is matter.

Death need not be seen as an event localized to the human being, however. Heraclitus, a Pre-Socratic philosopher and the first in a long line of thinkers to uphold a form of process philosophy uses the term death less in the context of bodily decline and instead as an amoral transition. For instance, “fire lives in the death of earth” references death as a benchmark for complex change rather than the end of a human life (Heraclitus 25). Less abstractly, Heraclitus describes death and life as “the same [,] for these several states are transmutations of each other” (Heraclitus 78). This view of death is different from Epicurus, but only in the sense that Epicurus speaks of a human death. Heraclitus' death being a force for transition is not distinct from human death but instead situates human death as an anthropic expression of a larger cosmic process (“1.4: Heraclitus (Fragments)”). Though a dead individual may not be subject to the same localized experience that was once the case, their existence in the material world as a corpse is subject to constant fluctuations in the same way that everything else is. This calls to mind the somewhat vulgar expression of being dead as “feeding the dirt,” since the dead still occupy the material world in their physical totality. The body rots, falls apart and is eternally distributed just like any other particle of matter. When a person dies, the subjectivity that causes their individuation from other forms of matter dies along with them, leaving them to be pulled around by the forces of the organic world. The human stops, but not the "being," which was never truly local, to begin with. If we adopt a process view of death, the distinction between dying and living is merely a difference of particular organizations and geographies. The way Heraclitus describes death is not a metaphor, but instead an interpretation of death as an artifact of change itself. Considering that change is always occurring, this diffusion becomes both inevitable and necessary for existence to continue.

What, then, does this mean in the context of Epicurus’ claim? Epicurus claims that death is void of any value judgments, it cannot be good or evil since it cannot be anything at all. In using the terms “good” and “evil,” an invitation to incorporate Nietzsche’s philosophy becomes difficult to resist. Nietzsche was not a metaphysician, though Deleuze’s reinterpretation of Nietzsche as a torchbearer for modern process metaphysics is exceptionally useful to this conversation. Nietzsche’s concept of the “innocence of becoming” is an idea that removes the moral flavour from every instance of existence, it elevates reality to a position where all things exist beyond the realm of good and evil in pure innocence (43). Though Nietzsche’s argument is largely caught up in a polemic against the Christian God, his statements are metaphysically unique. By proclaiming that “one is in the whole” and “there is nothing outside the whole,” Nietzsche claims that nothing

can govern what might be morally good or evil since nothing is more aware of better circumstances(36). Thus, Nietzsche establishes an “innocence of becoming,” whereby existence cannot be moralized due to the absence of anything exempt from the process that might truly know better or more about it (36). The innocence of becoming is also applicable to death since its larger ramifications are occluded from the knowledge of the subject. This innocence can be accredited directly to the metaphysical framework set up by Heraclitus since this “becoming” described by Nietzsche aligns well with Heraclitus’ eternal flux. If we take Heraclitus' flux as a replacement for the vague becoming that Nietzsche alludes to, the concepts can cooperate to alleviate processes from being blameworthy. There is no static entity that can be judged as a pure evil or a pure good, since each event is momentary and singular, or as Heraclitus is thought to have put it, "no man steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man" (Robinson 139-142). Deleuze describes Heraclitus’ project as one in perfect synchronicity with Nietzsche’s as they both “[make] an affirmation of becoming” (Deleuze 23). Since death is purely becoming, a label given to a complex variety of change, it bears within it no room to be judged on the grounds of good and evil (which are only applicable to things with wills of their own). Death, like any other state of affairs, is metaphysically inconsiderate of what is good and evil. If death is merely a transitional mutation of life, and flux is not culpable to moral judgments, it follows that death is also incapable of being judged as anything other than an element of this fluctuation. The experience of human death, likewise, cannot be judged since it is by definition inaccessible to the only thing that could judge it.

If one were to give a level of credential to any of the various religious conceptions of an afterlife, the question of death’s morality seems to remain upright. If there is a heaven or a hell awaiting after this transition, then how can it be said to contain no moral polarity? Up until this point, I have dwelt upon the Epicurean definition of death as the working description of a human’s passing away. There are, however, competitive ideas of what death might transition one into. If an afterlife were to exist in such a way that an individual could experience punishment or reward for actions on Earth, the subject would (in some way) necessarily still be around. This means it follows that the ethics of this situation are still perceived and understood through that subject. This conception of death is wholly bodily, and as such cannot be held as a total death since the spirit would persist. Epicurus’ argument accounts for human death as an event at which the human being comes against an end, and in order for the argument to mean anything we must play by his rules.

Provided one understood the afterlife as a process of desubjectification (in the case of the Vedic faiths or Neoplatonism), the argument would also remain functional. A material flux and a spiritual flux would pay equally little attention to the subjectivity of those individuals who are dissolved in it, and it would not require any adjustments. This type of afterlife retains the core principle that death is the destruction of the human being because it destroys the human *mode of* being.

Though living beings are capable of creating value judgments, this presupposes a subject capable of thought. Since the dead do not think, death cannot be good or evil. When the living person fears death or finds dying painful, this value is still rooted in life. The individual who has died experiences nothing in the material world, their remains are reincorporated into the flux of matter that they were originally composed of, only to be transformed again and again. Any value judgments placed on death privilege the existing subject, and since death is the extinguishing of this subjectivity in a completely natural process of transmutation, it cannot be valued as anything at all. It is through this that one can finally reapply Epicurus' original maxim that death is, in fact, "nothing to us" (qtd. in Hicks 169). Though death might be nothing to us, it is something to everything else, not as a moral event, but as a mode of change.

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