FOREWORD

Jeff McMahan

Various philosophers in the ancient world—particularly Epicurus and Lucretius but also Cicero, Seneca, and others—thought seriously about the nature and evaluation of death. They asked how, on the assumption that to die is to cease to exist, death could be bad for us and, if so, how bad. Their concern was not whether a person's death could be bad for those who remain, but whether and to what extent it could be bad for the person herself. Epicurus and Lucretius concluded that it could not be, or at least that there is no reason for us to fear death for our own sake.

Yet with the rise of certain religions, such as Christianity and Islam, that promised—or threatened—an unending afterlife, philosophers largely ceased to discuss whether death is bad for us, good for us, or neither. And even those who did discuss death, such as Montaigne and Schopenhauer, did not go very deep. I suspect that a significant part of the explanation of this philosophical neglect is that, particularly in those regions in which philosophy was most ardently pursued, it was for many centuries heretical and thus dangerous to profess or even to discuss the view that when we die we simply cease to exist. So even while people continued to fear death, sought to avoid it themselves and to save others from it, and grieved for those who had succumbed to it, they were unable to discuss freely whether their attitudes and practices were rationally justified. Together with a threat of eternal damnation as punishment for suicide, the refusal to permit questioning of the relevant theological dogmas was self-protective for those religions that offered the faithful a blissful afterlife. For that offer certainly seems to provide a reason for believers to end their own lives and the lives of those they love, which would hardly promote church attendance or provide remunerative work for the clergy, apart from conducting funerals. So better to leave people's instinctive aversion to death alone, even while asserting doctrines that suggest that the aversion is irrational.

It was not until 1970, with the appearance of a short but brilliant essay by Thomas Nagel, which was closely followed by another by Bernard Williams, that serious philosophical discussion of death resumed after almost two millennia of reticence.[1] Over the decades since Nagel broke the silence, the

[1] Nagel (1970); Williams (1973).

philosophical literature on death has burgeoned. Both Nagel and Williams, along with other early contributors to the renewed discussion, addressed the arguments advanced by Epicurus and his Roman disciple Lucretius. Epicurus argued that death cannot be bad for those who die, since when a person dies there is no longer anyone for whom anything can be bad. There cannot be a misfortune without a subject of that misfortune. One influential response to this challenge was to argue that the evaluation of death does not require the identification of a postmortem victim of misfortune. We can instead simply compare the life that a person has given that she dies at *t* with the life she would have had if she had not died at *t* and, if the latter would have been a better life overall, conclude that her death at *t* was bad for her because it caused her to have the less good of two possible lives.[2] I have elsewhere referred to this as the *Life Comparative Account* of the badness of death.[3] It is a natural inference from this view that the difference in goodness between the two possible lives is also the proper measure of the extent to which a death is bad for the victim. A death is bad because, and to the extent that, it deprives the victim of the additional good life she would have if that death were not to occur.

Lucretius's challenge was quite different. He sought to dispel the fear of death by observing that we are not disturbed by the fact that there was an indefinite period before our lives began during which we did not exist; therefore, we should be equally undisturbed by the fact that there will be an indefinite period after we die in which we will not exist. Since we do not regret that we began to exist later than we might have, we ought not to care that we will cease to exist earlier than we might.

Those who thought that the Life Comparative Account provided a satisfactory reply to Epicurus thus faced a challenge from Lucretius. Suppose that a person who died at *t* at the age of 70 could have begun to exist 10 years earlier, so that although she would still have died at *t*, she would have lived for 80 years rather than 70. Suppose that of these two possible lives, the longer would have been better. The Life Comparative Account then implies that it was bad for this person to have begun to exist later rather than earlier, in the same way that it would be bad for her to die earlier rather than later. Both beginning to exist later and ceasing to exist earlier deprive a person of good life that she might have had.

Contemporary philosophers have suggested many plausible responses to Lucretius's challenge. But the Life Comparative Account faces another and arguably more serious objection. For it implies that the worst death an individual can suffer is death immediately after that individual begins to exist, for that is the death that results in the greatest possible difference between the

[2] Feldman (1991, 1992).
[3] McMahan (2002).

actual life and the possible life the individual would have had in the absence of the death—in other words, the death that deprives the victim of the most good life is the earliest one possible. Most of us believe that we begin to exist either at conception or, perhaps more plausibly, sometime between conception and birth. If we also accept the Life Comparative Account, we seem committed to the view that the worst deaths are those of zygotes, embryos, or fetuses. Philosophers who have found this implication hard to believe have therefore sought to find an alternative to the Life Comparative Account to explain why and to what extent death is a misfortune for the one who dies.

Philosophers have in recent decades discussed many other questions about the evaluation of death: for example, which of the many ways of understanding what would be involved in a person's not dying is relevant to evaluating her actual death, with what possible life span a person's actual life should be compared in determining how much life she has lost in dying, and so on. But the question about the relative badness of death at different ages, to which the Life Comparative Account gives an intuitively implausible answer, is especially important for a range of practical issues. Indeed, in recent years it has come to be debated in discussions with potentially highly important consequences among theorists in the field of population health.

One exceptionally influential and important project in that field that has been in progress for almost three decades is the Global Burden of Disease Study, directed primarily by Christopher Murray, which seeks to quantify in a systematic way the burdens that different diseases impose on people throughout the world. As Andreas Mogensen points out in chapter 3 of this volume, Murray and his colleagues initially deployed age-weighting and discounting in their calculations, which enabled them to accommodate the belief that the death of an adolescent is a greater misfortune for that person than the death of a newborn infant is for the infant. Later, however, they abandoned these functions, thereafter using the Life Comparative Account to evaluate the badness of different deaths, beginning at birth. On these new assumptions, the death of an infant immediately after birth is a substantially greater harm or misfortune than the death of a 20-year-old. And while death immediately or soon after birth is a greater misfortune than death at any subsequent point, the death of a fetus immediately prior to birth does not count as a loss or misfortune at all. But unless we begin to exist at birth, the fetus and the newborn are one and the same individual, and it can hardly make a difference to the misfortune that the individual suffers in dying *where* the death occurs—that is, inside or outside of the mother's body.[4]

[4] The question of when we begin to exist is a question in the area of metaphysics concerned with personal identity. Jens Johansson addresses some of the relevant issues in chapter 11, this volume.

If used in guiding the formulation of policies governing the distribution of health-care and life-saving resources, these assumptions would give substantially greater priority to the prevention and treatment of diseases that cause death in early infancy over the prevention and treatment of diseases that tend to be fatal primarily among older children and young adults. This would be highly controversial. Concern about this and other such possibilities has prompted serious reflection about how death at different ages should be evaluated among many of those who work in population health and health metrics. This in turn has led some of these theorists to examine the hitherto rather obscure philosophical debates about death that have appeared during the period since the publication of Nagel's seminal essay.

Until quite recently, philosophers writing about metaphysical and evaluative issues raised by death and theorists working on summary measures of population health have worked largely in isolation from one another—to the detriment of both. *Saving People from the Harm of Death* is a milestone in collaborative engagement across these fields. Some of the chapters explore the relations among philosophical evaluations of death, the measurement of population health, and health policy. Others are explicitly concerned to suggest ways in which insights from the philosophical literature can be integrated into our thinking about how, for example, deaths at different ages should count in measurements of the burden of disease. In other chapters, philosophers who have made substantial contributions to our understanding of the evaluation of death offer revisions of their original views or, in some instances, advance objections to other views or investigate foundational assumptions presupposed by those views.

The making of the book involved substantial interaction and discussion among the contributors, many of whom are primarily philosophers but others of whom work in population health, in bioethics, or even directly in the practice of medicine. We have extensively discussed one another's ideas and arguments in workshops in Oslo and Oxford and have continued the discussions over email and through further personal contacts. I think I speak for all the contributors in saying that we have learned a great deal from one another. I would like to be able to say that we have achieved a consensus, but that is of course too much to expect from a group containing so many philosophers. But I do believe that the hard thinking that has gone into this project has advanced the debates with which the chapters are concerned, and I am optimistic that this book is just the beginning of extensive collaborative efforts among thinkers from the various fields that have been brought together here. Ultimately our hope is that these efforts will result in policies governing both national and global distributions of resources for preventing and treating disease that will be more rational and more just than those that might otherwise be adopted.

I will conclude by acknowledging a special debt that many of the contributors to this book owe to Derek Parfit, who died in January 2017. Many of

the chapters are concerned in one way or another with what Joseph Millum and others refer to as "gradualism," a term that covers any view that implies that death can be a lesser misfortune early in life, gradually becomes a greater misfortune, eventually reaches a peak at some later age, and then gradually becomes a lesser misfortune. The account of the misfortune of death for which I have argued—the Time-Relative Interest Account (or TRIA)—was one of the earlier versions of gradualism to appear in the philosophical literature on death. It draws very directly on Parfit's work on personal identity and what matters in survival. To the extent that some of the chapters in this book discuss the TRIA or related gradualist views, they too are indebted to Parfit's pioneering work. With this in mind, I approached Parfit shortly before he died about the possibility of his writing a foreword or afterword for the book in which he might develop his current thinking on the debates in the chapters that had been prompted by his earlier work. He read the chapters in draft and greatly admired them. He told me that he would happily write an enthusiastic endorsement, or "blurb," for the back cover and also offered, with characteristic generosity, to write comments on all the chapters for the benefit of the authors. But, he said, he needed to think more about whether he had enough to say before committing himself to writing a substantive comment on the relevant issues. He died unexpectedly shortly thereafter. The chapters in this book—a book on death—are among the last pieces of philosophical writing he read. To honor the great progenitor of the debates in the following chapters, the editors decided, with my encouragement, to dedicate this book to Derek.

References

Feldman, Fred. 1991. "Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death." *Philosophical Review* 100: 205–227.

Feldman, Fred. 1992. *Confrontations with the Reaper*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McMahan, Jeff. 2002. *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nagel, Thomas. 1970. "Death." *Noûs* 4, 1: 73–80. Reprinted in Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 1979, 1–11. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1973. "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality." In *Problems of the Self*, 82–100. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.