CONSIDERABLE LIFE EXTENSION AND THE DEPRIVATION VIEW

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Abstract

An important question related to the ethical discussion on considerable life extension is whether longevity is valuable in itself. Prolongetivism is the view that supports considerable extension of healthy and productive human life. Many views that represent prolongetivism start from the notion that life is good and thus more life is better. Still it is rarely examined whether this claim is justified. According to the deprivation view, death is a bad thing since it deprives us from something, namely life itself. The most famous proponent of this account is Thomas Nagel. The deprivation view has been seen as supporting prolongetivism but Nagel makes no such commitment: the fact that life has intrinsic value does not mean we should live as long as possible.

Nagel’s view on death is one of the most influential views in recent analytic philosophy. His deprivation view is often connected to the other versions of this view and criticized as one of them. However, many critiques miss the target when it comes to Nagel’s view because they fail to recognize crucial differences between his account and other forms of the deprivation view. Acknowledging this makes the deprivation view more defensible
against different versions of the Epicurean view, which hold that death is not bad for us. Accepting this reading of Nagel’s argument also means that some implications of the deprivation view that are usually presented in academic debate are based on misunderstanding. In the final part of my paper, I will discuss in more detail the way in which the deprivation view is related to the general discussion on considerable life extension.

Introduction

The discussion on the ethical desirability of considerable life extension by medical technology has increased during recent years. A fundamental question related to this debate is whether longevity is valuable in itself. In philosophy of death you often come across with the deprivation view, a view according to which death is a bad thing since it deprives us from something. It is not bad only because it deprives us of the goods we have, and might have in the future, but also because it deprives us of life itself.¹ The most famous proponent of the deprivation view is American philosopher Thomas Nagel.

It is often argued that the deprivation view implies that we should extend human life. The view that supports considerable extension of healthy and productive human life is called prolongetivism. In her book Aging, Death and Human Longevity (2003), Christine Overall for one has claimed that Nagel is an advocate of this view. I will argue, however, that Nagel’s approach does not imply prolongetivism. It seems that Nagel’s theory provides one reason to support prolongetivism but does not imply that we should aim for considerable extension of human life.

Prolongetivism is based on the notion that life is good and therefore more life is better than less. The link between the deprivation view and prolongetivism needs to be examined not only by considering Overall’s claim but also in a larger context. Considering the widespread societal effects that considerable life extension might have in the future, the arguments for prolongetivism should be scrutinized in a careful manner to ensure that the ethical discussion on life extension is based on

¹ There are different versions of the deprivation view but I will concentrate on the account promoted by Nagel. Other supporters include, among others, Fred Feldman who emphasizes the meaning of losing good experiences: “Death is bad (when it is bad) primarily because it deprives the deceased of goods – the good he would have enjoyed if he had lived” (Feldman 1991).
correct understanding of the arguments. Nagel’s view is well-known among philosophers and intuitively attractive, which is why its implications for the discussion on considerable life extension are worth a careful consideration.

**Nagel on Death**

In his well-known article “Death”, originally published in 1970, Nagel states that “the trouble is that life familiarizes us with the goods of which death deprives us” (Nagel 2010, 9). He adds that even though human beings are aware of their mortality, an individual cannot really fully understand the idea of the limitedness of her own existence. According to Nagel, an individual’s existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future, containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so tolerable in the past. Having been gratuitously introduced to the world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he finds himself the subject of a life, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future. Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods. (Nagel 2010, 10.)

In order to gain a better understanding of what Nagel is saying – and what he is not saying – it is in place to present an extensive quote of his view on death. The following quote is taken from the article “Death”, and it helps to understand Nagel’s approach in a more detailed way:

> If death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of. I shall try to deal with the difficulties surrounding the natural view that death is an evil because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains. We need not give an account of these goods here, except to observe that some of them, like perception, desire, activity, and thought, are so general as to be constitutive of human life. They are widely regarded as formidable benefits in themselves, despite the fact that they are conditions of misery as well as of happiness, and that a sufficient quantity of more particular evils can perhaps outweigh them. That is what is meant, I think by the allegation that it is good simply to be alive, even if one is undergoing terrible experiences. The situation is roughly this: There are elements which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which if added to one's experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely neutral: it is emphatically positive. Therefore life is worth living even when the bad
elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its consequences. (Nagel 2010, 2–3.)

Some supporters of the deprivation view think that when the future of an individual is hopeless enough, lacking any kind of possibilities to improvement in the quality of life, death is actually a good thing for that person. Nagel, on the other hand, seems to state that losing life is in itself a bad thing, even if the life would consist of negative experiences. In other words, Nagel says that life has intrinsic value.iii

The notion of intrinsic value is of course a complicated concept, but for the present purposes it need not be interpreted in a mystical or complex way. We value our friends for the good things they bring to our lives but also because of themselves. Should a friendship end, it would be an unfortunate thing for us – even if the friendship would have mostly negative things left in it and it was not as much fun as it used to be. Friends are not valued just as having instrumental value but because of the mutual understanding and the special relationship we have with them. Arguably, a person who values her friends only as instruments does not really know what friendship means. The intrinsic value of life can be understood in a similar way: we don’t only value life merely because of the goods it brings to us but we value it as such.

Nagel states that he is not concentrating on death’s “objective value, but only the value that it has for the person who is its subject” (Nagel 2010, 3). He is interested in the value life has for each person as an experiencing subject. This implies that the criteria of death used here is not, and is not meant to be, a medical one but is understood as the irreversible end of the subjective experience. According to Nagel, “the value of life and its contents does not attach to mere organic survival;

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ii See e.g. Feldman 1994; 140. According to Feldman, it might be in some cases (where the person’s experience is mostly negative and there are no better things to come) a good thing for a person die. Nagel, on the other hand, thinks that death is always bad, even if it would be reasonable to think that there are no more positive experiences left in life. (Notice, however, that this does not mean that a person should not be allowed to die in this situation.)

iii The notion of intrinsic value is a subject of a philosophical discussion of its own. However, in this context it is not possible to examine the different approaches in an extended manner. For further discussion see e.g. Bradley 2006.
almost everyone would be indifferent (other things equal) between immediate death and immediate coma followed by death twenty years later without reawakening” (Nagel 2010, 2).

Nagel’s account can be, and has been, contested by many. The emphasis of this article is mostly on the implications of Nagel’s account, not on evaluating its critique. I will, however, provide a short example of such critical remarks. In her 1993 book *Morality, Mortality* Frances Kamm presents various criticisms of the deprivation view. Among them is the claim that Nagel’s view fails to acknowledge the badness of *nothingness* as such. (Kamm 1993, 21.) According to her, Nagel’s view “results in overemphasizing the significance of unexperienced goods; it ignores the possibility that nothingness in itself is bad, insofar as this means that things being all over is bad” (Kamm 1993, 21–22).

It’s true that when thinking about the badness of death one is more likely to worry about the fact that “I will no longer exist” rather than “I will never visit Italy again” or “I will not have the time to read *Crime and Punishment* again”. But recall that Nagel holds that the goods of life that death deprives also include life itself – as long as we consider life as a state a subject can experience. He states that that some goods like “perception, desire, activity, and thought, are so general as to be constitutive of human life” (Nagel 2010, 3). If the goods of life equal subjective experience which is equal to life, it is not clear how to differentiate between nothingness and being deprived of the goods of life. This means that Kamm’s notion of nothingness is actually compatible with Nagel’s view.

**The Deprivation View and Prolongetivism**

Overall argues that Nagel advocates prolongetivism when he claims that more life is better. According to Overall Nagel’s views “provide examples of prolongetivism” (Overall 2003, 16). She uses the term prolongetivist to “describe any individuals or theories that advocate the extension of the human life span significantly beyond its current typical length” (Overall 2003, 16).

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**iv** It is may be more accurate to say that basic goods (perception, desire, thought, activity) equal subjective experience; there are many goods not necessary for subjective experience. However, none of those goods (such as joy, pain, love) can be gained without a basic level of human experience.

**v** An interesting objection to all versions of the deprivation view is the claim that a person cannot be deprived of something she does not actually have (we cannot really have a future the same way we have the past or the present). See e.g. C. Williams 2007.
Overall’s view is understandable as Nagel has, in many contexts, explicitly expressed that more life is better than less. In “Death” he writes that life, like most goods, “can be multiplied by time: more is better than less” (Nagel 2010, 2). According to Nagel “the fact that we will inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer” (Nagel 2010, 10). In The View from Nowhere, first published in 1986, he writes that “given the simple choice between living for another week and dying in five minutes I would always choose to live for another week; and by a version of mathematical induction I conclude that I would be glad to live forever” (Nagel 1986, 224). This suggests that Nagel is clearly in favor of choosing a longer life instead of a shorter one.

However, Nagel does not say that people would always choose life over death. Even though life is usually more appealing, it’s not impossible to imagine a point where it becomes meaningless, boring, or physically or psychologically unbearably painful. It happens that people kill themselves because of physical or mental sufferings or “sacrifice” themselves for what they believe to be a greater good. Sometimes people are ready to let go of life because they feel they have had a good one with plenty of experiences gained, and not a lot to look forward to.

In The View from Nowhere, Nagel states that he can’t, at the moment, understand “those many distinguished and otherwise reasonable persons who sincerely assert that they don’t regard their own mortality as a misfortune” (Nagel 1986, 224). However, he does point out that it is possible that he would perhaps eventually get tired of life. In other words, he acknowledges that holding on to life is not a reasonable choice in all imaginable situations even though most of the time he would prefer staying alive.

Overall operates mainly with Nagel’s article “Death”, and someone might argue that the article does not include a straightforward argument in which Nagel says that it is not always the case that people choose life over death. However, whether it does or not, is not important. The fact that in the article on “Death” Nagel says that more life is better than less is not, in itself, an argument that could justify prolongetivism.
Why Nagel’s Deprivation View Does Not Imply Prolongetivism

The fact that Nagel’s deprivation view is compatible with prolongetivism does not mean that it is a normative argument for supporting considerable life extension. The central point of prolongetivism is that we should considerably extend the human life span from the current. Nagel, on the other hand, is not arguing for this kind of a view. He is saying that we have a reason think that longevity is a positive thing. But Nagel does not argue for this kind of a view. He is saying that we have a reason think that longevity is a positive thing.

Gerald Gruman correctly points out that prolongevists are interested in “not merely an increase in time per se but an extension of the healthy and productive period of life” (Gruman 1977, 8). Some scientists believe that by means of medical technology it is possible, eventually, to arrest the process of aging and even to defy death. These views are promoted by many people in the public sphere and in the academia, although they have also been criticized heavily. Despite of what the outcome of this debate might be, we can say that prolongetivism is a view that aims to affect everyday decision making on political and societal levels and not only to state that we have some reasons to extend human life or that considerable life extension would be good. Since it has a strong normative commitment, it should be distinguished from the deprivation view, which is not a normative but an axiological view, a view concerning values rather than norms.

Nagel states that life is valuable as such. Given a simple choice between life and death, without further knowledge about the context, we would intuitively choose life. There might still be many reasons why we should not, in real life, always choose to extend life. This might be because of the suffering a person is going through or because a person thinks that it’s not ‘right’ or ‘natural’ to try

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vi It can be added that hardly anyone would advocate prolonging the late stages of life if it means merely more suffering caused by aging-related illnesses. There are still different views among prolongevists about whether we should maximize the healthy life within the limits of the maximum human life span or also try to extend the maximum itself. See e.g. Juengst et al. 2003.

vii E.g. Aubrey de Grey’s view that the first person to live a 1000 years has already been born or Ray Kurzweil’s theory of ‘technological singularity’ (see de Grey & Rae 2007 and Kurzweil 2005). These extreme views have, on the other hand, been criticized by other scientists, see e.g. Preston W. Estep III, Matt Kaeberlein, Pankaj Kapahi, Brian K. Kennedy, Gordon J. Lithgow, George M. Martin, Simon Melov, R. Wilson Powers III, and Heidi A. Tissenbaum. "Life-Extension Pseudoscience and the SENS Plan.” MIT Technology Review, 2006 July/August;109(3)80-84.
to live as long as possible. There are many difficulties related to considerable life extension considering, for example, environmental concerns, the distribution of life extension procedures and issues related to population overgrowth.

The claim that life has value as such does not imply that it would always be reasonable, or even morally permissible, to put it ahead of all other things. According to some critical interpretations, valuing human life above all would lead to unbearable consequences because we would have to maintain a person’s life even when she feels reluctant to live on and there is no hope for better in the future. But to say that something has intrinsic value is not to say that this value is absolute: it simply means that, other things being equal, we would choose life over death.

Consider again the friendship analogy. We can think that friendship and life both have intrinsic value. We are willing to work in order to make the friendship flourish and last. Still it does not mean that the value would be absolute, overriding all other things. The fact that we value friendships as such does not imply that we should in all imaginable situations maintain the friendship. Nor does it imply that we should make as many new friends as possible.

Accordingly, many of us would rather choose to live to 500 than to 90 if we were talking about our preferences as such. But, all things considered, it might after all seem to be a better choice to settle for 90 years of life, if that would be considerably more just for other people and much more comfortable for us. In other words, we would naturally prefer more (good) to less per se but it does not mean that we should pursue as many goods, or as much good, as possible in all cases, and in this world.

The Relevance of the Deprivation View

In what follows, I will briefly consider the relevance of my argument to the societal discussion on considerable life extension. In Ending Aging (2007), Aubrey de Grey, a well-known British biogerontologist challenges us to ask ourselves: “How many healthy, youthful years in total do you think you could add to people’s lives, in your life?” (De Grey & Rae 2007, 7.) He explains that by

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viii Some people hold that a possibility to solve health issues and extend life does not justify interfering with the ‘circle of life’. See e.g. Juengst et al. (2003); “For someone who holds this view, even if anti-aging interventions could help forestall some health problems, they cannot do so without sacrificing patients’ essential identity as human beings.”
following his anti-aging agenda, we could save numerous people from aging. If we want to save a person from, let us say, drowning when we see her sinking under the water, why do we not, were that possible, save a person from dying of old age?

Following Nagel’s argument it can be said that, in principle, for an individual a long life is better than a short one. De Grey would most probably agree on that. One might then argue that theoretically his point of view is compatible with the kind of account that Nagel’s deprivation view represents. However, Nagel’s account only provides a reason, but offers no strong normative claims that would imply the kind of view promoted by de Grey. Whereas Nagel’s deprivation view is a statement about the value of life as such, prolongetivism is a statement about what should be done regarding considerable life extension. In other words, prolongetivism is a normative account and Nagel’s deprivation view is not.

Of course this alone does not prove de Grey’s position wrong, but it is important to note that the views promoted by de Grey (and other supporters of prolongetivism) cannot be justified merely by referring to the deprivation view as presented by Nagel. Overall examines arguments both for and against life extension and states that prolongetivism is stronger than the opposite view. (Overall 2003, 122.) Her own account is not completely dependent on Nagel’s view. But Overall does use Nagel’s theory to draw conclusions that do not directly follow from the deprivation view, and uses these to argue for life extension.

At the moment, considerable life extension is not reality, but it is not complete science fiction, either. There have been some prominent scientific results to slow down the process of aging by, for example, cell reprogramming, telomere lengthening, and so on.\textsuperscript{iix} Regardless of the fact that the research is still at a very early stage, the raise of prolongetivism has attracted many people to buy anti-aging products and join organizations that support prolongetivism. In Europe, there is, for example, an organization called Heales that is promoting a similar prolongetivism agenda to de Grey’s. The organization’s objective is “stimulating, promoting and informing the public about life extension achieved by all kinds of biogerontological technologies”.\textsuperscript{x} These technologies include

\textsuperscript{iix} For scientific results, see e.g. Lapasset, Laure & Milhavet, Ollivier & Prieur, Alexandre et al. (2011), and Karlseder, Jan et al. (2002).

\textsuperscript{x} https://heales.org/ENGLISH/objective
SENS (developed by de Grey), calorie restriction, genetics and regenerative medicine. Since organizations like Heales and public figures like de Grey are increasingly popular especially in Europe and in the United States, it is important to scrutinize the philosophy constitutive of their views.

The debate on considerable life extension technologies covers a wide range of ethical issues from metaphysical questions to empirical challenges. It is important to have detailed theoretical approaches in order to enable well-informed ethical considerations and guidelines for the public and the policy-makers. The deprivation view has been interpreted, for example by Overall, to be compatible with prolongetivism. This means that prolongetivism could be theoretically justified by its opponents by referring to the deprivation view. However, as opposite to some other defenders of the deprivation view, Nagel is not saying that death is bad because it deprives us of something good but because it deprives us of life itself.

What, then, is the contribution of Nagel’s argument to the discussion about human life extension? In a sense Nagel’s claim about the intrinsic value of life seems somewhat empty. From a subjective point of view, many people prefer that their own life (experience) continues rather than comes to an end, which is quite an intuitive approach. But because an individual’s life is defined by its properties – such as physical and mental well-being, environment, social relationships, and moral, political, and religious views – it is hard to come across a situation where we would actually consider life per se. Nagel’s deprivation view is compatible with prolongetivism, but it is also clearly compatible with the denial of prolongetivism.

Nagel’s view on death is one of the most influential views in recent analytic philosophy. The deprivation view is often connected to the other versions of this view and criticized as one of them. Yet many of the critiques fail to recognize crucial features of his theory, namely that Nagel sees mere experience as positive, and often miss the target when criticizing Nagel. This makes the deprivation view more defensible against different versions of the Epicurean view, which hold that death is not bad for us. Recognizing this is a step in examining whether a considerably longer life

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\textsuperscript{1} SENS stands for Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence. This set of medical technologies is promoted by de Grey: he believes that developing these technologies will enable rejuvenation of the human body in the future.
span is an ethically desirable option. However, as I have argued, accepting the deprivation view does not mean that prolongetivism is correct.

Concluding Remarks
I have argued that Nagel’s deprivation view does not imply prolongetivism. The deprivation view does give us one reason to support life extension. However, this does not imply that prolongetivism, understood as a normative doctrine that we should in fact promote in our daily life, would be desirable. Nagel clearly only considers the individual viewpoint where death is “the unequivocal and permanent end of our existence” (Nagel 2010, 2) as experiencing subjects, which is why we should not draw too many normative conclusions considering the desirability of life extension from his views on death. This is important to recognize since it is one way to defend the deprivation view against the Epicurean views in the ethical discussion on the desirability of considerable life extension.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank the referees for their valuable comments. I am also grateful to the audience of the Death and Emotions symposium (Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, November 2011) for helpful comments and especially to Juha Räikkä and Jukka Varelius for their suggestions on the earlier versions of this paper. This article has been supported by the Academy of Finland and the research project “Ageing, Diminishing Autonomy, and Physician-Assisted Suicide”.

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