Death stings back: A reply to Sorensen’s ‘The cheated god’

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Lucretius argues that death does not harm the person who dies. Harm could occur only if a person’s future non-existence were harmful. But one’s future non-existence is no more harmful than one’s non-existence prior to being born. Since a person is not harmed by lacking existence prior to being born, it follows that one is not harmed by lacking existence after dying. There is thus no need to fear death’s sting. (1951: 122)

Thomas Nagel responds that there is an important asymmetry between our non-existence prior to birth and our non-existence after death. For while it is true that a man does not exist either before his birth or after his death,

time after his death is time of which his death deprives him. It is time in which, had he not died then, he would be alive. Therefore any death entails the loss of some life that its victim would have led had he not died at that or any earlier point….But we cannot say that the time prior to a man’s birth is time in which he would have lived had he been born not then but earlier. For aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he could not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else….His birth, when it occurs, does not entail the loss to him of any life whatever. (1970: 79)

One way of reading this passage is to see Nagel as emphasizing the role that time plays in our assessment of mortality. When we die, we are immediately deprived of the time

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to experience the various goods we would have enjoyed had we remained alive. Far from comforting us, the asymmetry between pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence is a reason for anxiety. *Pace* Lucretius, death does us great harm.

Roy Sorensen (2005) has challenged the adequacy of Nagel’s account. Sorensen proposes a series of thought experiments designed to show that it is not death per se but rather the limitation of our ‘personal time’ that we find troubling. (2005: 4) Nagel’s asymmetry argument can be falsified by showing that death-like harms could occur even without actual death. (2005: 5–6)

While there is a certain intuitive appeal to Sorensen’s position, the three thought experiments he develops are systematically flawed and do not support the conclusion he draws from them. In addition to other difficulties I bring out, Sorensen neglects to situate his thought experiments within their proper modal context. Justification for my critique of Sorensen can be drawn from Sorensen’s own (1992) analysis of the nature of thought experiments.

1. Sorensen’s first thought experiment: ‘veiled immortality’

Sorensen adapts his first thought experiment from an earlier version originally proposed by Adrian Moore. (1990: 228) Sorensen’s ‘veiled immortality’ thought experiment runs as follows:

You are a god. You would have enjoyed the normal immortality of an Olympian god. However, a demon cursed you to live in a stop and go fashion that makes you indistinguishable from an ordinary mortal…. [The] demon divided your existence into a Zeno sequence: You live half your life, followed
by a trillion years of nothingness, then a quarter of your life followed by a trillion years of nothingness, then an eighth of your life followed by a trillion years of nothingness, and so on, ad infinitum. During the intermissions, everything stops (except perhaps for the ticking of a clock in a remote corner of the universe). (2005: 1)

Eternal life is yours, but that is cold comfort indeed. The demon’s curse has harmed you as grievously as death harms mere mortals.

The harm done to the god is death-like in its character and severity. Certainly the demon’s curse prevents the enjoyment of innumerable goods that the god might have benefited from otherwise. Yet, there is no foreclosure of possible future goods, in the sense that the god does not miss out on any goods because those goods fall temporally beyond the future limit of the god’s life. Living forever, the cursed Olympian never faces the nothingness that might follow the death of a mortal being. Death’s sting comes even to those who do not die. Which supports Sorensen’s conclusion that it is not necessarily death that generates our anxiety: ‘only a limit to…personal time is needed, not death per se.’ (2005: 6)

Sorensen’s assessment of the god’s predicament seems reasonable. But it is not yet clear that Sorensen has made a significant advance upon Nagel, for Nagel himself places great weight upon the loss of expected goods that death brings. Sorensen’s kind assertion to the contrary, I am not a god, Olympian or otherwise, and it is not obvious to me how I should apply the cursed god’s predicament to mine own.

The failure of application arises because Sorensen illegitimately shifts modal contexts between thought experiment and conclusion. The thought experiment itself is plausibly construed as located within the domain of logical possibility. (I will give reasons for this interpretation below.) But to count against Nagel, any lesson Sorensen wishes to draw from
the god’s veiled immortality must find traction in a considerably richer modal domain. This
would not be an issue if the point of the experiment were to prove that some combination of
affairs is logically impossible: that which is logically impossible is impossible everywhere.
But in the present case the god’s veiled immortality is something whose very logical
possibility is supposed to be informative for how we humans either do or should think about
death. And that requires a much richer and more informative modal context then mere logical
possibility.

Choice of modal context clearly matters: modality defines the set of background
constraints that guide our interpretation and assessment of thought experiments. Since what is
held to be possible under one type of modality may not be possible under another, contrary
assessments of the same thought experiment may occur when different modal assumptions
are brought to bear. For instance, it is logically possible that my computer suddenly, and
without intervening cause, turn into a rhinoceros. Thankfully, this is not metaphysically
possible. (For ‘metaphysically possible’ one could substitute Plantinga’s notion of ‘broadly
logical possible’. (1982: ch. 1) Should one insist upon a distressingly loose notion of
metaphysical possibility, I would be willing to retreat to saying that the computer to rhino
transformation is not chemically possible. Or, if really pushed, not technologically possible.)

Sorensen himself is sensitive to the role that modality plays in evaluating thought
experiments. He is perfectly happy to talk about degrees of possibility and impossibility.
(1992: 200–201) He finds tracking modal assumptions crucial when challenging thought
experiments. For example:

Modal inquests are powerful but perilous stimulants. Close interrogation
tends to inflate standards of possibility. Is it possible for an iron bar to float on
water? That’s a bar, not a needle, right? So we can rule out surface tension. Fe
has a specific gravity of between 7.3–7.8. And you meant float didn’t you? To float means for a thing to have a lower specific gravity than its medium. Since water has a specific gravity of 1.0, it only seems like an iron bar can float on water. Think it through, dummy!

Notice the slide from mere logical possibility to chemical possibility.

(1992: 150)

Sorensen does not tell us which sort of modality he has in mind when he offers the veiled immortality thought experiment, so I am not certain that logical possibility is the intended context. But as written, it is a safe bet that veiled immortality requires a wider domain of possibility than strong metaphysical possibility, and one can bank on the required modality’s being broader than physical possibility. An indication that Sorensen is working within the domain of logical possibility may be found in his employment of David Lewis’s idiosyncratic distinction between ‘external time’ and ‘personal time’. (Lewis 1986) The harm caused by the demon, like the harm death brings to mere mortals, is the curtailment of personal time. As Sorensen puts it: ‘we care about personal time rather than external time. Death gets its sting from limiting our personal time.’ (2005: 4)

Lewis introduces the distinction between external time and personal time to make sense of science fiction stories involving time travel. Time travel is logically possible, but a world wherein time travel were possible would be very different from the actual world we inhabit. (1986: 67) Concepts of time that apply within a time traveler’s universe are, understandably, somewhat vague, and Lewis can offer only functional definitions. ‘External time’ is genuine time, that is, ‘time itself’, whereas personal time is a time-like relation that ‘occupies a certain role in the pattern of events that comprise the time traveler’s life.’ (1986: 69–70) Roughly speaking, personal time is time as the time traveler experiences it, a sort of
subjective, experiential time that gets measured by the time traveler’s wristwatch. From Lewis’s description, it is clear that personal time is an odd variant within the family of B-theories of time. (It would, admittedly, be difficult to talk of time travel without adopting some sort of B-theory.)

The notion of personal time Sorensen adopts from Lewis imports heavy metaphysical baggage where it simply is not needed. A literal reading of personal time à la Lewis makes Sorensen’s position absurd. He would be claiming that what troubles us is the foreclosure of experiences in a B-theoretic possible world far removed from our actual world. Surely Sorensen cannot mean that. Presumably, Sorensen also intends something stronger by ‘personal time’ than merely that there is a relational frame of reference according to which a god’s life seems very long or very short. Sorensen’s precise meaning is obscure.

What might do the trick is a traditional Greek distinction between *chronos*, clock time, and *kairos*, lived time or time with respect to which we adopt an evaluative perspective. As Peter Kreeft puts it:

*Chronos* is abstract, characterless time, the time measured with chronometers. One moment of *chronos* is always exactly the same as any other. But every moment of *kairos* is unique, like every place. For *kairos* is concrete time, lived time, human time, time full of meaningful content. What time is it? Chronologically, it is 2:00 A.M. Kairotically, it is time to go to bed, or the time Father comes home, or time to die…they are very different *kairos*-times, though they may be the same *chronos*-times. (1990: 142)

Three points may be mentioned in favor of the *chronos/kairos* distinction. First, as a distinction operative within ordinary language, the *chronos/kairos* distinction is likely to be
psychologically illuminating when we hope to understand what is troubling about our
mortality. Second, the traditional chronos/kairos distinction does not come saddled with the
sort of metaphysical baggage that automatically accompanies Lewis’s personal time. The
Greek terminology is applicable to both A- and B-theories. Third, a naïve reading of
‘personal time’ would I think suggest something like the chronos/kairos distinction. The god
lives within a subjectively experienced kairos, packing in whatever meaningful experiences
are compatible with a punctuated mode of life. The punctuated intervals the god kairotically
experiences are themselves bounded by an oddly-structured chronos of demonic manufacture.

When re-expressed in terms of chronos and kairos, the veiled immortality thought
experiment attains a certain plausibility. Unlike Lewis’s logically possible external time and
personal time, chronos and kairos are clearly metaphysically possible, as they already have a
perch in our actual world. The difficulty, though, is that the god’s experience simply cannot
translate into possible human experience. While it is logically possible for an Olympian god
to survive the stop and go existence Sorensen describes, it is metaphysically impossible that
any human being would. A human being in stasis is a dead human being: we change
constantly, else we cease to be. In our actual universe, a complete cessation of activity
involves lowering the temperature to 0°K. No human being would survive Sorensen’s flash-
freeze.

Perhaps Sorensen could patch up his thought experiment. To relate the god’s plight
more sympathetically to our own, we could rewrite the veiled immortality scenario as a sort
of Sleeping Beauty fable, wherein the trillion-year intervals are smoothly incorporated as
unnoticed patches of sleep.

As soon as we make this move, though, the thought experiments starts to creak. After
all, falling asleep and waking take some minimal amount of time and would naturally
commend themselves to Sleeping Beauty’s attention. So, Sleeping Beauty needs another
condition built into the description of her life: she must forget the periods of falling asleep and arising from slumber in such a way that her memory resumes precisely where it left off before. Suppose she listens to music: awakening from her slumber, Sleeping Beauty hears the next part of the composition as seamlessly joined with what came before.

As Sleeping Beauty’s periods of wakefulness become shorter and shorter, the stimuli she is expected to join together fall beneath her experiential threshold. Too short a note cannot be heard; too brief a vision cannot be seen; too quick a touch cannot be felt. Given the necessity of setting aside some time for gaining consciousness and falling asleep, the presentation of the necessary stimuli cannot be additive in such fashion that they can transcend Sleeping Beauty’s experiential threshold. The Sleeping Beauty thought experiment therefore obliges Sleeping Beauty to experience that which she cannot experience.

Without experiences, it makes precious little sense to say that Sleeping Beauty is living. When the presented intervals of conscious stimulation fall beneath Sleeping Beauty’s notice, when her *chronos* can no longer be filled with *kairos*, she is effectively dead. It would be quite misleading to claim that Sleeping Beauty lives forever. Her lot would be no better, and perhaps significantly worse, than that of a coma patient in a permanent vegetative state. And we do not need fancy thought experiments to tell us how unattractive people find that sort of existence: the legal provisions of living wills, and the pronouncements of major religious groups that extraordinary measures need not be taken to prolong one’s life, testify to the common opinion that a life devoid of experience is not worth living. We have killed Sleeping Beauty (one hopes that Snow White isn’t next), her demise occurring far sooner than we were led to expect. But a dead Sleeping Beauty cannot be used as evidence for the interpretation Sorensen would like us to draw, as there is an intuitively significant gap between Sleeping Beauty’s finite experiential existence and her purportedly infinite life.
Without closing that gap, so that Sleeping Beauty’s experiences last for an infinite external time (*chronos*), the conclusion Sorensen wants us to make does not follow.

A related difficulty is considered by Sorensen. Sorensen anticipates that Nagel might respond to veiled immortality by suggesting that there is a smallest amount of time for value. Once the cursed god’s temporal increments fall below some minimum duration, the god would be as good as dead. (This would, of course, undercut Sorensen’s project. If you live for a very long time, but still die, Nagel’s observed asymmetry between pre-natal and post-mortem existence would apply.)

Sorensen responds by arguing that the existence of a minimum time for value would entail that the demon could have cursed you with a valueless infinite life simply by dividing your life into a punctuated series of valueless slices. This is as good as killing you, for your infinite life would have no value. But, continues Sorensen, summing the values of this minimum time scenario underestimates the value of your life. This is because value is continuous, as evidenced by the applicability of calculus within economics.

Contra Sorensen, value is not continuous. To claim that the applicability of calculus in economics supports the thesis that value is continuous displays a serious misunderstanding of the role idealization plays in economics and econometrics. Economists *assume* that value (or, more ominously, utility) is continuous because they wish to generate smooth curves with unique solutions. It is customary for economists to make idealizing assumptions, such as the assumption that economic goods are infinitely divisible. But not every economic good is like sugar or salt: half a train engine is no train engine at all, nor would one get very far in the actual world with half a train track, a quarter of a train station, and an eighth of an engineer. Scientific idealization is generally benign, as real-world cases usually get tracked with sufficient operational accuracy. The behaviour of actual gases can be modeled quite well by considering the behaviour of an ideal gas. But both economists and physicists are aware that
they are making a convenient mathematical assumption and are not describing the actual world in its coarse particularity. A putative experience that falls below one’s experiential threshold has no value at all, and convenient mathematical fiction does not change that real-world fact. An Olympian god might be able to extract value from the miniscule slices of *chronos* the demon makes available; no human being could. Again, what is logically possible for gods is not metaphysically possible for humans.

2. *Sorensen’s second thought experiment: ‘pseudo-immortality’*

Sorensen’s second thought experiment is designed to illustrate the importance that personal time (or *kairos*) has for us. We would joyfully embrace the prospect of living for but two minutes, if only our lives were structured in the following way:

During the first minute, the pseudo-immortal lives the first day of his life.
During the next half minute, the pseudo-immortal lives the second day.
During the following quarter minute, a third day passes. Since there are infinitely many junctures in this sequence, the pseudo-immortal will enjoy infinitely many personal days….Admittedly, I prefer to have my personal time coincide with objective time. I like appearances to match reality. But I would not be keenly disappointed to learn that my region of the universe must be organized by personal time rather than by external time. Life as a pseudo-immortal would be almost as sweet as life as a genuine immortal. (2005: 4)
Note the curious modal slide from the divine to the human in this thought experiment. Sorensen inserts himself into the thought experiment and looks at pseudo-immortality from the inside.

Personally, I am inclined to grant the logical possibility of pseudo-immortality. Others might not be so charitable. As William Lane Craig has pointed out, there is some tension in supposing that an actual infinite could be brought into existence by means of a potentially infinite process. (1979: 104) Actual infinities are static and complete totalities; potential infinities are dynamic and forever incomplete. For this reason, Georg Cantor suggestively described the potential infinite as the ‘variable finite’. Given the conceptual importance of the points wherein the actual infinite and the variable finite differ, supposing that it is logically possible to transmute the potential infinity of a god’s personal days into an actual infinity of personal days may just be a case of wishful thinking.

Unfortunately, logical possibility does not suffice for Sorensen’s purposes. Pseudo-immortality is metaphysically impossible: not even an Olympian god could live that way. *A fortiori*, it is metaphysically impossible for a human being to enjoy pseudo-immortality. (I am here granting the metaphysical possibility of Olympian gods.)

Though not explicitly mentioned, given Sorensen’s aim of refuting Nagel it is reasonable to think that the pseudo-immortal lives in a universe where causal connections hold. At least within the metaphysically possible world we actually inhabit, causation is a key assumption in our planning and enjoyment of those goods of which death deprives us. Much of the point of talking about pseudo-immortality would be lost if we were to suppose that the universe did not keep on spinning, causes bringing about effects and one event following another, after the pseudo-immortal dies. But once causal connections are admitted, the following thought experiment suffices to show that an Olympian’s pseudo-immortality is metaphysically impossible.
From the day of his birth, Theseus has been playing out at least 10 yards of new twine every day. Theseus is afflicted with pseudo-immortality, and lives his entire life within a span of external time (chronos) that measures only two minutes. When Theseus expires, his buddy Hercules gathers the considerable quantity of twine that has accumulated. As a testament to his friend, Hercules ties the two ends of twine together and unfurls the twine, hoping to make a great circle of it. Immediately, problems arise. The twine cannot assume any definite geometric shape. For instance, the twine cannot take the form of a circle. All circles describe a path around a midpoint. But the circumference of an actually infinite circle could have no curvature, and hence could not describe a path around a midpoint. (Other geometric shapes can be eliminated by induction.) But since Theseus’s twine cannot assume any discrete geometric shape, and since being able to assume a discrete geometric shape is a necessary feature of any metaphysically possible physical body, it follows that a piece of twine that is actually infinite in length cannot exist. Theseus’s task is metaphysically impossible. But if Sorensen’s pseudo-immortal thought experiment is metaphysically possible, then so is Theseus’s task. It follows that pseudo-immortality is not metaphysically possible. Since pseudo-immortality is metaphysically impossible, Sorensen’s thought experiment does not support the conclusion he wishes to draw from it.

What are we to make of thought experiments involving pseudo-extensions of personal time? Suppose the goddess Athena appears before you and says: “O mortal, you have but twenty years left to live. Because it amuses me, I will offer you the following choice. You have lived your life such that one personal day equaled one external day. You may continue to do so, and in twenty years you will die. Or, you may have an additional year of personal time. Understand, though, that if you choose to have an additional year of personal time, your life will be compressed into two minutes of external time. After two minutes of external time

\[2\text{ Should one prefer, in this thought experiment and for the remainder of section 2 ‘personal time’ may be read as kairos and ‘external time’ as chronos.}\]
and twenty-one years of personal time, you shall die. Should you choose this compressed life, the experiences you undergo would be similar to what you have experienced thus far: you won’t hit the lottery, but then you won’t be involved in any spectacularly horrible incidents either. Now, choose!”

Now, if Sorensen is correct and it is personal time that really matters, it seems obvious which way we should choose: we should opt for the two minute external life with the extra year of personal time. But I, for one, do not find the choice that easy. I am strongly tempted to decline almost any such offer to trade my external time experiences for a measure of increased personal time. I do not think that this is for the reason Sorensen suggests, namely that we have a strong inclination to have appearances match reality. Surely, if there were such a thing as personal time, then the experiences enjoyed within its ambit would be as real to us as anything played out against the backdrop of external time. Personal time, let us suppose, is as real a forum for experience as external time, and as rich a life may be lived in a personal time that is out of joint with external time as may be found in a life lived in a personal time that is in perfect lock-step with external time. But since, as I suspect, many people would hesitate to take Athena up on her offer, this counts as evidence against Sorensen’s contention that it is personal time that matters.

What is even more odd is that, were Athena to offer us a choice between living the same number of days in personal time, then according to Sorensen we should be indifferent to the specific pace external time assumes. We would live the life of a mayfly, and not care. Our *kairos* would be so entrancing that *chronos* would have disappeared from view.

Regret for loss of personal time (or, better, *kairos*) may well play into our fear of death, but death’s sting involves more than this, and the loss of personal time might not be the decisive factor.
3. Sorensen’s third thought experiment: the ‘spore god’

In an attempt to refute Nagel’s asymmetry argument once and for all, Sorensen suggests that the demon could re-order our life so that we have neither a beginning nor an end to our existence:

One schedule is suggested by a temporal interpretation of the following sequence: \( \ldots-1/16, -1/8, -1/4, 0, 1/4, 1/8, 1/16, \ldots \) At the present moment, you are at the midpoint of your life. From this zero point, there is a Zeno sequence that goes forward much as before. The difference is that the quantity to be divided is the remaining half of your life. The other half has already been divided backwards: the previous quarter of your life is preceded by the previous eighth, that eighth by a sixteenth, and so on. Since each part has intermissions, you have already lived infinitely many years. There is no time before all the moments of your life. You have no beginning. You have no end. (2005: 5–6)

*Mutatis mutandis*, the arguments adduced against Sorensen’s first two thought experiments apply here. For example, the Theseus thought experiment can be adapted to show that it would be impossible for the spore god to live through the first half of his or her life. Imagine Theseus once again, playing out 10 new yards of twine for each past division of his life. (I suppose Theseus would need to be moving very fast indeed during his earlier divisions.) Having reached the midpoint of his life, Theseus cuts the twine and hands the end to his friend Hercules. Theseus then goes looking for the other end of the twine. Question: does the twine have a second end? Neither an affirmative nor a negative answer is acceptable.
If the twine does not have a second end then it cannot be a physical body, for all metaphysically possible physical bodies have determinate surface limits. If the twine does have a second end, let Theseus hand that end to Hercules. We once more ask Hercules to tie the ends together and then unfurl the twine. Since the twine would be actually infinite in length, it must describe a circle having an actually infinite circumference. However, it is metaphysically impossible for there to exist an actually infinite circle. Theseus’s task is metaphysically impossible. By parity of reasoning, at least half of the spore god’s life is metaphysically impossible. Half of a metaphysically impossible life is no life at all. Lacking an extension of infinite personal time in both directions, Sorensen’s thought experiment fails to support his desired conclusion.

Maybe Sorensen is right after all. There is something intuitively right about appealing to personal time or, even better, about appealing to kairos to explain why human beings abhor death. But as none of Sorensen’s thought experiments support this conclusion, we have yet to make any philosophical advance on Nagel.

References


