
Article:
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'No one has ever died' – A New Paradox[1]

Like all good paradoxes, this one can be stated succinctly. But first of all we need to make a clarificatory definition: 'dying' shall mean the change from being alive to being dead. This is in contradistinction to a common usage in which dying can be a long, drawn-out and even reversible process identified by its likely or normal outcome. On that usage one might reasonably remark that all living is also dying, whereas on my usage, dying happens once and quickly, right at the end of life.

(1) Dying is a discontinuous change.

While it is often hard to identify the precise moment in time at which someone dies, and perhaps dying itself takes a period of time, it seems to be an a priori truth that we cannot represent dying in terms of the continuous change of some variable. To see this, suppose we could and call the variable 'liveliness'. Then dying would be a continuous decrease in liveliness until its value was so low the person was dead. What would be that value? Surely it must be zero: whatever the property is which makes for being alive, being dead consists in a total lack of it. You can perhaps be more or less alive, but however little alive you are, you are not dead at all. So dying is a discontinuous change, from possessing some liveliness to possessing none at all.

Another way to make the point is this: dying is a process and its product is death, a state. The former may be painful and feared but the latter, according to Epicurus at least, cannot be experienced and is thus not to be feared. So dying is a process which takes you from one state to another which is incotenable, but all through the process you are in the first state. At the moment the process completes, you switch states.

(2) There are no discontinuous changes in nature.

It seems to be the case that all natural changes, that is, all changes studied by the natural sciences, consist in continuous change of some variable such as mass, energy or velocity. Let's accept that for now.

These two premises entail the paradoxical conclusion:

(3) No one has ever died.

Now the simplest way out would be to deny premise (2), but that is not so easy. Not because (2) is undeniable, but because it is contingent and a matter of empirical discovery. Perhaps quantizing effects in current physics show that (2) is false, but the problem (2) presents is that it makes the question of whether anyone has ever died or not depend upon fine details of theoretical physics, and that just seems plain wrong. Similarly, for the suggestion that a phase state shift is a discontinuous change: the existence of such shifts is contingent and a hard won discovery of physics. Furthermore, for someone to die, the completion of the process of dying would have to supervene upon a phase state shift – something we do not yet know.

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Furthermore, the state of being dead plays a rather major role in several widespread religions and it would be surprising – and a little uncomfortable – to discover that the coherence of those religions depends upon e.g. whether light quantizes or not.

Another way of seeing the paradox is to combine (1) and the denial of (3): this seems to prove something about physics which we should not be able to prove from an a priori claim like (1). So perhaps we should deny that (1) is a priori? Unfortunately, that is not plausible, because our reasons for thinking (1) is true look like they are conceptual: anyone who properly grasps the concept of dying will think that it is a discontinuous change.

So the paradox is genuine. That does not mean there are no solutions, but we need to do some philosophy to find them.

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