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Well-Being and Death

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This is an opinionated survey of some ways in which our thinking about death intersects with our thinking about well-being. Some of the main philosophical questions about death are the following: Is death bad for the one who dies? What *makes* death bad, on those occasions when it is bad? *How bad* is it to die – how great a misfortune is death for its victim – and what determines this? Is there any *time* at which death is bad for its victim? Can someone be harmed *after* she dies – are the dead still subject to benefits and misfortunes? What attitudes and emotions is it rational or fitting to have towards one's death? Our answers to these questions will require us to address questions about the nature of well-being and the place of well-being in the philosophy of death.

In what follows I will assume that there is no afterlife. If there were an afterlife, most of the interesting philosophical puzzles about the badness of death would disappear and be replaced by relatively banal epistemological problems (how can we know what the afterlife is like, will it be good or bad for us, etc.). I will assume furthermore that when one dies, one goes out of existence altogether rather than existing as a corpse – Fred Feldman calls this the "termination thesis" (2000). I make this assumption not because I am convinced it is true, but only because there are at least some cases – cases of annihilation in which no corpse is left behind – in which the deceased goes out of existence altogether; it seems safe to assume that concerning the badness of death, there is no interesting difference between cases where a corpse is left behind and cases of total annihilation.

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1. Death and Deprivation of Well-Being

Let us begin with the most obvious way in which well-being is connected to death. According to the most popular view about what makes death a misfortune, the *deprivation account*, death is bad because it deprives its victim of the good things in life – that is, death is a misfortune because, and when, it results in a net loss of well-being to the victim.[1] This thought is understood counterfactually: death is a misfortune for its victim if and only if the victim *would have been* better off overall if she had not died then. Furthermore, how bad it is to die is determined by how much good the victim is deprived of – that is, how much better her life would have been if she had not died then. If her life would have been worse had she not died – for example, if she was in excruciating pain with no hope of relief – then her death is not harmful for her, but is beneficial for her. A nice feature of the deprivation account is that it does not require us to take a stand on the controversial question of which is the correct theory of well-being.

Before we proceed, we should note that terminology is sometimes disputed. Here are three questions we might ask about death: (Q1) Is death *bad* for its victim? (Q2) Is death a *misfortune* for its victim? (Q3) Is death *harmful* to its victim? I have so far intentionally treated these synonymously in order to show how natural it is to treat them this way. But some have argued that death can be *comparatively bad*, in the deprivationist sense described in the previous paragraph, without being a misfortune, and without being harmful. Simply failing to get some positive well-being – for instance, by failing to find Aladdin's lamp – is comparatively bad for you, but it may nevertheless not be a misfortune or a harm, as it does not merit any sort of distress (Draper 1999). All parties seem to agree that death is comparatively bad, so let us instead

[1] See Nagel 1979, Feldman 1992, and Bradley 2009 for just a few examples of deprivation accounts.

focus on Q2: Is death a misfortune for its victim? And can the misfortune of death be explained by appeal to deprivation of well-being? There are several reasons one might think the simple deprivation account of death's misfortune presented here may be lacking. Here are four.

The first problem has to do with the evaluation of the counterfactuals involved in determining the deprivations of death. A victim's death is alleged to be bad if her life would have been better if that death had not occurred. But there are many ways for a death not to occur. For example, consider the following two counterfactual statements about Joan Rivers's death:

> If JR had not died (and had never gone for a vocal cord operation before), she would have lived several more happy years.

> If JR had not died (after having had the botched operation), she would have lived a short time longer and not enjoyed her life very much.

Both counterfactuals seem true, but when combined with the deprivation account would give us different answers to the question of whether JR's death was bad for her. This shows that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to *isolate* the badness of death itself and to give a *univocal* answer to how bad death is for someone, even when we know all that can be known about the case. These matters are complicated and important, but do not directly concern the connection between death and *well-being*, so I will not pursue them further.

The second problem is that some deprivations of well-being are fanciful or unrealistic. The case of Aladdin's lamp seems to show that mere deprivation of well-being is not a misfortune. Thus we might think the deprivation account needs to be supplemented in a way that

will rule out such cases. Since one cannot reasonably expect to find Aladdin's lamp, we might wish to say that a loss of well-being counts as a misfortune only when the victim could reasonably have expected to receive that well-being.[2] But a young adult who knows she has Huntington's disease cannot expect to receive a long life full of well-being; that expectation is as reasonable as expecting to win the lottery. This does not make us think that her loss of that long life is not a misfortune or that it would be unfitting for her to lament her premature demise. So it is unclear how to adjust the deprivation account in light of these cases.

The third problem involves desires. Some have argued that in order for death to be a misfortune for its victim, in addition to the death's depriving the victim of some well-being, the victim must have certain desires.[3] (On a more extreme version of this view, those desires are the only thing relevant to whether death is a misfortune; deprivation of well-being does not enter the picture at all.) Some candidate desires include a desire to live or to have a certain sort of life story. In many cases, desire-based views will have the same implications as the deprivation account, because a desire to live and a future with positive well-being tend to go together. But this is not always the case. So we must examine the cases in which they come apart and see which way we should go.

Sometimes an individual might desire to live even though continued life would not be good for her. In such cases, it still seems very wrong to kill that individual. There are different explanations one might offer for this judgment. One explanation for this would be that death is still harmful to her in some way. If that is so, then the harm of death cannot be fully explained by appeal to the loss of well-being involved. The victim's desire to live offers a possible explanation

[2] Draper offers this as a sufficient, but not necessary, condition for death to be harmful (1999: 393). The deprivation theorist can agree that this is sufficient, since there would be a conflict with the deprivation account only if it were necessary.

[3] See Cigman 1981, Williams 1993, Belshaw 2009 and Belshaw 2012 for examples of desire-based views.

of this harm. On the other hand one might just explain the wrongness of killing directly by appeal to the frustration of the victim's desire to live, without the intermediate claim that frustrating that desire constitutes a harm to the victim – thus killing, in this instance, would be a case of harmless wrongdoing.

Some creatures might lack the cognitive sophistication to have desires concerning their own deaths. For such creatures, even though they have good lives, death would fail to be harmful if a desire-based view of death's badness were true. This is sometimes seen as a benefit of desire-based views, as they would provide some support for the thought that it is permissible to kill such animals for food; and in fact this is probably the primary motivation for such views. But it is far from clear that, for example, cows and pigs lack a desire to live; behavioral evidence certainly indicates they want to live. Perhaps their desires insufficiently represent their futures; they desire to eat this now, or they desire to get away from this danger now, but they don't exhibit the kind of long-range planning behavior that would indicate a desire to have a certain kind of long life, nor do they have the abstract representational abilities required to envision their future lives. Even if this is true, though, the problem is that some humans, for example babies, do not exhibit that sort of behavior either. It seems clearly wrong to say that babies are not harmed by dying (DeGrazia 1996: 237).

Someone might falsely believe he will have a bad future, and therefore desire not to continue living. Someone who is severely depressed might lose a desire to live, even though his depression would eventually be cured and he would enjoy life again. In such cases, the deprivation account entails that death is bad for its victim, but desire-based theories do not. This seems to be a point in favor of deprivation accounts, since death does seem to be bad for its victim in these cases. Here the defender of a desire-based theory might wish to appeal to the

ability or *capacity* to have a desire to live, or to the individual's *past* desire to live, as what is really necessary for death to be harmful.

The fourth problem involves cases where the one who dies is not very connected psychologically to the goods of which death deprives her. Jeff McMahan has developed a time-relative interest account of death's misfortune to account for such cases (2002: 165-74). According to McMahan, we must adjust the misfortune of the deprivation of well-being in light of the degree of psychological connectedness between the victim at the time of death and the victim at the time she would have received the goods of which she was deprived. Desires are one such connection, but not the only one. An extreme example serves to illustrate McMahan's view. Suppose you have a fatal disease that will kill you painlessly in five years' time if left untreated, during which time you will still be able to enjoy your life. The cure for the disease will allow you to live for twenty equally happy years, but will also cause deep changes in your psychological profile: you will have different desires, different values, and no memory of your previous life. According to McMahan, it makes sense to refuse the cure. This is because although refusing the cure will result in you getting far fewer goods than you would get if you took it, the misfortune of missing out on those goods is discounted for the extreme psychological disconnectedness that would obtain between your pre- and post-cure selves.

McMahan thinks this is the right answer to the question of whether to take the cure. But the time-relative interest account is also alleged to do better than the simple deprivation account in other sorts of cases. For example, the deprivation account seems to entail that death is a greater misfortune the younger the victim is, and therefore that the death of a very young fetus is a greater misfortune for it than the death of a young adult is for him. This in turn suggests that it is more seriously wrong to kill a fetus than a young adult, which seems the wrong result.

McMahan's view does not have that result because when a fetus dies, it is not very strongly connected to the goods it would have received as an adult. There are no shared memories, no continuing desires, and generally no psychological continuity between a fetus and the adult it becomes. Thus the misfortune of losing out on those future goods is sharply discounted in the fetus's case, but not so much in the case of the young adult. The defender of the standard deprivation account cannot claim that death is worse for the young adult, but he can appeal to differences in the moral statuses of fetuses and adults to explain why it is more important to care about the death of the young adult even though the fetus's death is a greater misfortune.

McMahan's view may go wrong in other sorts of cases. In particular, since the relevant psychological connections are between the agent at the time of the harming event and the agent at the time she would have received some goods, McMahan's view seems to entail that it makes a difference *when the harming event occurs*, even if this is unknown to the victim and has no effect on the extent of deprivation (Bradley 2008).[4]

2. Connections between judgments about death and judgments about well-being

If we think that well-being and the evil of death are connected in the way suggested by the deprivation account, even in one of its modified forms, we may also find ourselves committed to particular views about well-being, depending on what we think about how bad certain deaths are. For example: suppose you must choose whether to save the life of a human or the life of a non-human animal. Knowing nothing else about the situation, you might think that you should save the life of the human. (Let us stipulate that the human is not Hitler or anyone remotely as evil as

[4] Broome gives an interesting objection to McMahan's account (2004: 251).

Hitler.) But suppose the non-human is a young turtle that would live a hundred years if it were saved, while the human is a middle-aged human who would not live even half that long. You might think that doesn't matter; the human is still the one that should be saved. What would make this so?

Perhaps we have special moral obligations to members of our own species: obligations of partiality, such as we might have towards family members. Or perhaps humans have greater inherent moral status than turtles, due to our greater cognitive sophistication, so we have an obligation to save a human rather than a turtle even if we could benefit the turtle more by saving it. I won't here object to either of these views. But there are other possibilities. Perhaps, even though the human would live a shorter life if saved, her death is a greater misfortune than the turtle's. It would be difficult to maintain such a position if, for example, some simple version of hedonism were true. So long as the turtle gets a reasonable amount of pleasure in life, and generally avoids pain, its life would be so much longer that it would accumulate a higher hedonic balance than the human could. This might lead us to reject simple hedonism. We might therefore conclude that there is a difference between higher and lower pleasures, such that higher pleasures of the sort that people get – pleasures of art, music, intellectual activity and such – are much more valuable than the sorts of lower pleasures a turtle can have. Or maybe there are certain objective goods, such as friendship and virtue, that are inherently beneficial and that can be had by humans but not turtles. It is important that we be careful not to assume too lightly that death is a greater misfortune for a human than for a non-human. After all, we are highly motivated to think that we are more important than non-humans. In any such case we ought to take extra care that we are not merely being self-serving.

Connections also run in the other direction: judgments about well-being can have surprising implications for judgments about the evil of death. For instance, the notion that the "shape" of a life is relevant to well-being has implications for whether death is a misfortune. By the "shape" of a life, I mean such factors as how the well-being in that life is distributed within it (more at the beginning, middle, or end), or how the parts of the life fit together to tell a story (e.g. whether later successes redeem prior failures) (Velleman 1993). According to a study performed by Ed Diener and others, many people are inclined to prefer a life that ends on a very high note to a similar life that reaches the same high note, but continues on for several years with a period of relatively modest positive well-being (Diener et al 2001). If they accept a deprivation account of death's misfortune, people who prefer the shorter life that ends on the high note are committed to saying that death is beneficial even if it prevents the victim from having several more years of good life, as long as those years are not as good as the peak. It is unclear whether many people would in fact make that judgment about death. If not, then they must reject either the deprivation account or the shape-of-life judgment (Bradley 2009: 157-63).

3. At what time does death harm?

Epicurus argued that death is not harmful to its "victim." It does not harm you before you die, because you haven't died yet; but at the moment of death you go out of existence, and there is no longer anyone for your death to harm. Since it seems impossible to accept that death is not harmful, philosophers have attempted to find fault with Epicurus's argument. Three strategies have been most popular.

Priorists say that death harms its victim before she dies. How can that be? Wouldn't this require backwards causation, which is impossible? No. There are ways to affect the past without backwards causation. For instance, I can now make it the case, by quitting, that yesterday was my penultimate day at my job. In so doing I *make something the case* yesterday, but not by *causing something to happen* yesterday. In the case of death, it is argued that death harms its victim in virtue of frustrating the plans, goals, and desires the victim had while alive.[5] The harm accrues to the victim at the times when she had those plans, goals and desires. The advantage of priorism is that it attributes harm to the victim at a time when the victim exists, thereby avoiding potential for unwanted metaphysical commitments.

Priorism requires us to accept a theory of well-being according to which what is good for someone is to have a desire fulfilled, or to achieve a goal. Insofar as we find such theories implausible, we will find this answer to Epicurus unsatisfactory. But even those who accept such a theory might not wish to answer Epicurus in this way. For it seems more natural, when thinking about when one is benefited by having a desire satisfied, to say that one is benefited when the desire is *satisfied* – not when the desire is taking place. A child who wants to become an astronaut, and becomes one as an adult, did not have a better childhood in virtue of later becoming an astronaut (Velleman 1993). If I now want to eat lunch in an hour, I am not better off now in virtue of eating lunch in an hour. And so on.

Subsequentists say that death harms its victim after she dies: in particular, the times after death at which the victim would have been well-off, and therefore better off than she is being dead (Feit 2002; Bradley 2004 and 2009). The motivation for this view is that it makes the harm of death similar to other harms. If I sleep through a concert I wanted to see, my sleeping is bad

[5] Pitcher 1993, Feinberg 1993, and Luper 2012 are three examples of this view; Luper also thinks death harms atemporally.

for me while the concert is taking place, since it is at those times that I would have been well-off but instead have neutral well-being while sleeping. Death is in a way like sleeping through everything, and its harmfulness gets explained in the same way. Unlike priorism, subsequentism does not carry any commitment to a particular theory of well-being.

However, subsequentism does have one implication that may be hard to swallow. It requires us to compare how well-off someone is at times after they die, and therefore no longer exist, with how well-off they would have been at those times if they hadn't died. The subsequentist assumes that after death, a person has a well-being level of zero; the objection is that a dead person, since she doesn't exist, cannot have a well-being level at all, not even zero. So although the subequentist is not committed to any particular theory of well-being, he is committed to the claim that it is possible to have a well-being level at a time at which you do not exist, which seems as nonsensical as saying that a nonexistent person has a zero level of beauty or health, or that a nonexistent object has zero temperature.

It is not clear, however, that well-being is relevantly like beauty or health. The following argument seems sound: for my own sake, I now prefer a future in which I exist and am well-off to a future in which I do not exist at all. I am correct to have that preference. Stipulate that a future in which I am well-off ranks higher on the X-scale than a future of nonexistence. The X-scale is what we are interested in when engaging in prudential evaluation. If the X-scale were not the well-being scale, then well-being would not be what we are interested in when engaging in prudential evaluation. That is absurd; so the X-scale is the well-being scale. So a future of nonexistence has a ranking on the well-being scale.[6]

[6] This is a brief version of an argument that appears in Bradley 2009, 108-110. See Johansson 2012: 264-66 and Luper 2012: 320-21 for criticism.

Though this argument seems sound, it remains surprising that someone could have a well-being level after death. Well-being and health do seem like very similar notions, and you can't have a mediocre level of health at a time at which you do not exist. What I am suggesting is that we stop thinking of well-being as being very much like health, and rather think of it as essentially connected to prudential deliberation. We can prudentially deliberate about circumstances in which we do not exist, so we can have well-being levels there too.

Atemporalists object to the assumption that in order for something to be harmful to someone, it must be harmful to them at a time (Nagel 1979; Feldman 1992; Broome 2012; Johansson 2012; Luper 2012). According to atemporalism, there can be *timeless* harms. Death is one of those. It is harmful because it makes the victim's life go worse overall; but there is no time at which the victim is worse-off because of death. John Broome gives the following analogy: suppose some words are cut from the end of a book. To determine how many words are cut from the book, you just compare the total number of words it has with the number it would have had; you don't look at which pages would have had more words on them. Likewise, he says, to determine how bad death is, you don't look at how much worse things are for the victim at particular times; you just look at the difference in total well-being between the actual and counterfactual lives. There is no time at which death harms its victim just as there is no page that is missing words (Broome 2012: 221-222).

Like all analogies, Broome's is imperfect. One relevant difference between the Meinongian judgment that page 1,789 of Parfit's 1,732 page *On What Matters* would have had more words on it, if only the book were a little bit longer, and the judgment that today would have had more well-being for Joan Rivers than it actually does if only her life had been longer, is that page 1,789 doesn't exist but today does. So Broome's analogy does not support

atemporalism over subsequentism, if it was supposed to do so. However, there are many harms that it is difficult to locate in time (e.g., the harm of never getting what one deserves). The question is whether the harm of death can be *fully* accounted for by appeal to timeless harms.

4. Posthumous harm

So far we have focused on the question of death's harmfulness; but we may also wonder whether events that occur *after* death can harm someone. Sometimes someone cannot quite complete an important project during her lifetime. We may then be faced with a choice about whether to complete that project for her after she died. Often we think we should do that, for the sake of the deceased. Similarly, we think it is important to honor certain wishes of the dead, as expressed in their wills. These attitudes towards the projects and wishes of the dead might be explained by the thought that we benefit the dead by completing their projects or honoring their wishes, and that we harm them by failing to do so.

The hedonist will deny that posthumous harm or benefit is possible, since events occurring after death cannot cause or prevent any pleasure or pain (unlike death itself, which does not cause any pleasures or pains to the victim but does prevent them). Some other theory of well-being must be employed to make sense of such harms and benefits. For example, a desire fulfillment view is compatible with posthumous harm and benefit, so long as the desire and its object need not obtain at the same time.

Just as in the case of the harm of death, we might ask *when* a posthumous event is harmful or beneficial to its subject. When is the deceased benefited or harmed? We have the same array of possible answers as in the case of the harm of death, but their plausibility might

not be the same. For example, we could say that the deceased is harmed or benefited while dead – but this would require not just attributing a well-being level to the deceased, but a *non-zero* well-being level. It seems hard to believe that a dead person could be well-off or badly-off *while dead*.

More commonly, defenders of posthumous harm endorse a priorist view, and say that posthumous events can affect the subject's welfare level at times while she was alive (Luper 2012). Again, there is no commitment to backwards causation here. The claim is that by, for example, completing the deceased's important project, one makes it the case that her interest she had in completing the project is fulfilled; this benefits the deceased at the times at which she had that interest. And again, this seems like an implausible view given that the fulfillment of a desire does not seem to benefit us at the time of the desire, but at the time of the fulfillment.

Insofar as we think that common attitudes towards the wishes and projects of the dead can be justified, it seems more promising to look for justifications of those attitudes that do not entail that we can affect the welfare of the dead. For instance, we might think that there is a moral duty to honor promises to the dead even though nobody would be benefited by this. Or we might think the universe is a better place when people have certain attitudes towards the dead even though it is not better for anyone.[7]

5. Well-being and rational attitudes towards death

[7] For further discussion of posthumous harm see Taylor 2005 and Portmore 2007.

People have a variety of attitudes towards death, but they tend to be negative. Fear, dread, and horror are common attitudes. Some claim to be more serene, and not to be bothered by death. Which of these attitudes, if any, is rational?[8]

Epicurus thought it was irrational to fear death. This is because, as noted earlier, he thought that death does not harm the one who dies. We might undermine the thought that one should not fear death by showing that death is bad for its victim. But undermining Epicurus's argument is insufficient to show that death should be feared. Even if Epicurus's argument fails to show that death should not be feared, some other argument might do so.

If death is bad for its victim, there is a straightforward argument for the claim that *some* negative attitude towards death is warranted. We merely need a premise that says that if something is bad, it is fitting to have a negative attitude towards it. If we accept a "fitting attitude" account of value, this would follow straightaway. According to fitting attitude accounts, to say that something is bad is just to say that it is a fitting object of a negative attitude. But we need not accept a fitting attitude account in order to think that negative attitudes are appropriate to have towards bad things.

Consider, though, the way in which death is bad according to the deprivation account: it deprives the victim of positive well-being. This is bad, and warrants some negative attitude – but which attitude? In particular, think of the existential horror many people have when thinking about death. Could such horror be appropriately directed at a mere deprivation of well-being? There are certain attitudes that could be justified by such a deprivation: disappointment, sadness, and frustration seem fitting. But these are not the same as fear, dread, and horror. In cases of deprivation of well-being that do not involve death – missing out on a concert, for example – it

[8] See Draper 2012 and Scheffler 2013 for some recent discussions of this question.

would seem very strange if the individual were horrified or terrified to be deprived of these goods.

If attitudes or emotions such as horror are appropriately directed at death, then the explanation for their rationality must come from something other than the loss of well-being that results from death. Perhaps, as Frances Kamm suggests, there is something especially important and terrifying about things being "all over" for us – the "Extinction Factor" – over and above the loss of well-being that is entailed (Kamm 1993: 49-54). But why would that be? One thought is that the rationality of being terrified at extinction must be explained by appeal to loss of meaning, where meaningfulness in life is understood to be a kind of value that is distinct from well-being. Perhaps permanent death robs life of its meaningfulness in some way; it takes away the point of ever having been alive. Or perhaps we just think it does, and this causes us to have irrational existential angst about our future demise.

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