



Death, Deprivation and the Afterlife

Anna Brinkerhoff¹

Received: 2 August 2020 / Revised: 19 March 2021 / Accepted: 25 March 2021 /

Published online: 13 April 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2021

Abstract

Most people believe that death is bad for the one who dies. Much attention has been paid to the Epicurean puzzle about death that the rests on a tension between that belief and another—that death is the end of one’s existence. But there is nearby puzzle about death that philosophers have largely left untouched. This puzzle rests on a tension between the belief that death is bad for the one who dies and the belief that that death is *not* the end of one’s existence. Many philosophers have responded to the Epicurean puzzle with the deprivation account of the badness of death, which seeks to make sense of the badness of death given that there is no life after death. This paper focus on the other puzzle, and advances the argument that the deprivation account can also make sense of the badness of death given that there is life after death.

Keywords Death · Deprivation · Afterlife · Well-being · Epicurus · Grief

Why is death bad for the one who dies? Epicurus famously argued it isn’t.

So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us since, so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.¹

Many philosophers have answered Epicurus with the deprivation account of the badness of death: death is bad for the one who dies because it deprives one of the goods of life.² The deprivation account is meant to make sense of the badness of death given that “when death comes...we do not exist”. So it has been, almost

¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* in Saunders (1966)

² The deprivation account is considered by many to be the received view of the badness of death. For developments of various versions of the account, see Nagel (1970), Silverstein (1980), Feldman (1992), Nussbaum (1994), Kamm (1998), Broome (2004), and Bradley (2004).

✉ Anna Brinkerhoff
annakbrinkerhoff@gmail.com

¹ Brown University, 45 Prospect Street, Providence, RI 02912, USA

without exception, advanced along with the assumption that one's death is the end of one's existence.

But many people, especially outside of academic circles, are troubled—not by Epicurus's argument—but by a nearby one that philosophers have left largely untouched.³ These are people who reject that death is the end of one's existence and yet maintain that death is bad for the one who dies.⁴ Of course, it's easy to understand why death is bad for the one who dies if one goes on to an afterlife that is, on balance, bad. But many believe that death is bad for the one who dies even if one goes onto an afterlife that is, on balance, good – indeed *very* good.

This is a puzzling belief, and the deprivation account seems to be of no help. After all, if one continues living after one's earthly life has ended, then one is not deprived of the goods of life. So are all of these people's beliefs about death irrational? I'll argue that they are not – in fact, they are quite sensible. The deprivation account can make sense of the badness of death not only given that there is no life after death, but also, I'll argue, given that there *is* life after death.⁵ The goods in the afterlife are different in significant ways from the goods on earth, even if they are of the same type. So death is bad for the one who dies even if one goes onto enjoy the goods of life in an afterlife, the argument goes, because it deprives one of those goods as they are here and now. This holds even if the goods as they are in the afterlife are superior to the goods as they are on earth.

1 The Deprivation Account

The deprivation account of the badness of death is a response to the Epicurean argument that death is not bad. The Epicurean argument starts off with the idea that death is bad for the one who dies if and only if death is a harm for the one who dies. In order for death to be a such harm, there must be a harm incurred, a subject who incurs that harm, and a time at which that harm is incurred. There are only two possible times the harm of death could be incurred, the argument goes: before or after death. If the harm is incurred before death, it's not clear what harm is incurred. And if the harm is incurred after death, there is no subject of the harm. So, the conclusion is that death is not bad for the one who dies.⁶

³ One exception is Cyr (2016).

⁴ A 2015 study from the Pew Research Center - <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/> - found that 72 percent of Americans believe in heaven. And, according to Haraldsson (2006), 52 percent of those in Nordic countries, 58 percent of those in Western Europe, and 47 percent of those in Eastern Europe believe in life after death.

⁵ comes to a similar conclusion. He argues that we can make sense of the badness of death of one who is "paradise-bound" if (i) one endures "purgatorial fire" before entering paradise, (ii) there is a temporal gap in one's conscious experience between death and paradise, or (iii) there are different levels of paradise, one which is better than the other. The argument advanced in this paper does not depend on these conditions.

⁶ For contemporary discussions and defenses of the Epicurean argument, see Rosenbaum (1986), Olson (2013), and Smuts (2013).

The Epicurean argument rests on the idea that one is harmed by having bad things. The deprivation account rests on the idea that there is another type of harm: deprivation of good things. Defenders of the deprivation account can agree with the Epicureans that one who dies cannot be harmed by having bad things; but, their thought is, one who dies can be harmed by *not* having good things. That's why death harms – and, thus, is bad for – the one who dies: death deprives one of the good things one would have had if one continued living. But what good things, exactly, does death deprive one of?

2 The Goods of Life

At the most basic level, good things are bearers of value whereas bad things are bearers of disvalue. But, in any given context, the relevant sort of value must be specified.⁷ The sort of value relevant to puzzles about the badness of death implicates one's well-being – after all, badness-for-one seems to directly correspond to one's well-being. So, for our purposes, whether a given thing is good or bad is determined by whether that thing is valuable or disvaluable to one's well-being. Good things contribute to one's well-being: having them is valuable to one's well-being while not having them is disvaluable. Bad things detract from well-being: having them is disvaluable to one's well-being while not having them is valuable. To get any more exact about the good things that death deprives one of, we must consult particular theories of well-being.

Many popular theories of well-being fall into one of two families: objective list theories and desire satisfaction theories.⁸ According to objective list theories, there are various items that constitute well-being – items that, when checked off, make a human life go well – regardless of one's particular attitudes towards those items.⁹ On these theories, a thing derives the relevant sort of value by virtue of enabling one to check off items on the list. Good things are themselves items on the list or else things that are somehow instrumental to one checking off some item that is.

According to desire satisfaction theories, one's life goes well for one insofar as one's intrinsic desires are satisfied; one's life goes poorly for one insofar as they are not.¹⁰ Some desire satisfaction theorists argue that it is not one's actual intrinsic desires that matter for well-being, but rather the intrinsic desires one would have under certain idealized conditions. On these theories, a thing derives the relevant sort of value by virtue of enabling the satisfaction of one's (idealized) intrinsic

⁷ Chang (2001), pp. 3–5

⁸ The traditional classification of theories of well-being includes hedonist theories in addition to objective list theories and desire satisfaction theories. For the sake of simplicity, I will set aside hedonist theories. See Woodward (2012) for a helpful overview of the traditional tripartite classification.

⁹ For developments and defenses of objective list theories, see Brink (1989), Arneson (1999), Moore (2000), Nussbaum (2000), Murphy (2001), and Hurka (2011).

¹⁰ See Heathwood (2016) for a helpful overview of desire satisfaction theories; see Bradley (2007) for a critical discussion.

desires. Good things are either desired themselves or else somehow instrumental to satisfying one's (idealized) intrinsic desires.

Defenders of the deprivation account tend to focus on the subset of good things that are typically taken to be central to one's well-being: meaningful work, loving relationships, pleasurable experiences.¹¹ Call these *the goods of life*. They will be are focus, too.

3 The Afterlife

Our question – whether death is bad for the one who dies and goes on to an afterlife – is about an afterlife that is, on balance, good. Views of such an afterlife vary widely. Common conceptions include heaven, paradise, and Jannah. Instead of addressing each view in turn, let's instead take on a couple of general assumptions about the afterlife that many people across religions and cultures will find acceptable.

The first assumption is that one's existence in the afterlife is everlasting. Those in the afterlife do not die, but continue living in the afterlife forever.¹² Another assumption is that many bad things that abound on earth – war, sickness, pain, loneliness, prejudice, exhaustion, violence, injustice, tedium, ignorance, ugliness – are either absent or reduced to non-gratuitous levels in the afterlife. Good things in the afterlife – peace, health, pleasure, love, rest, creativity, enlightenment, beauty – are even better, and more plentiful. The afterlife, we'll assume, is not just good on balance, but rather *very* good.

4 The Main Argument

The main argument of this paper is that the deprivation account can make sense of death being bad for the one who dies even if one goes on to an afterlife that is very good. Making good on this argument amounts to defending three claims: that death deprives one of something good, that this deprivation is a harm, and that this harm makes death bad for the one who dies.

4.1 Death Deprives

The first task is to show that death deprives one of something good even if one goes on to enjoy the goods of life in the afterlife. One thought might be that the goods one enjoys in the afterlife are of a different type than the goods one enjoys

¹¹ In Section 4.3, I discuss what makes a good thing central, as opposed to merely relevant, to one's well-being.

¹² I will not address the worry, raised prominently by Williams (1973), that it would be bad to live forever – he argues that that an everlasting life would be boring and pointless. See Kagan (2012) for a similar argument and Fischer (1994) for a response. Those who agree with Williams are invited, instead, to assume that one's existence in the afterlife is finite but much longer than the average earthly human life.

on earth. This is the case on some views of reincarnation – if one is reincarnated as a goldfish, for example, the goods of one’s life as a human will be of a different type from that of one’s life as a goldfish. Or suppose, for another example, that there is no work to be done in the afterlife: those in the afterlife drift around on clouds in endless leisure. In these cases, death would deprive one of *types* of goods.

Another thought might be that the goods of the afterlife, though they are the same type as the goods on earth, are inferior in quality or quantity: loving relationships in the afterlife, for example, are less loving and harder to find. If this were the case, death would deprive one who dies of superior goods or access to them.

But let’s assume for the sake of argument not only that goods in the afterlife are of the same type as goods on earth, but also that goods in the afterlife are superior in both quality and quantity: in the afterlife, one enjoys better and more meaningful work, loving relationships, and pleasant experiences. Even on this assumption, I want to suggest that death deprives one of something good – namely, the goods of life as they are *here and now*.

This idea here is that the goods of life as they are in the afterlife are different, in significant ways, from those goods as they are in the earthly life. We are already assuming that the goods in the afterlife are superior in quality and quantity. But the difference runs deeper than that: goods in the earthly life, and one’s interaction with them, are shaped heavily by the temporal limitations of earthly existence as well as the bad things on earth that are absent or largely mitigated in the afterlife.

Take meaningful work. Much of the meaningful work we engage in here and now centers on eliminating or minimizing the bad things that won’t be around in the afterlife. In the afterlife, there are no fires to fight, no cancer to cure, no wars to end, no starving mouths to feed. Some of our meaningful work on earth does center on the good things that are around in the afterlife. In the afterlife, let’s assume, one still teaches and learns, creates and cooks, explores and loves, and helps others. But with unlimited time and no paucity of resources, it’s plausible that the methods and institutions of learning, exploration, art, entrepreneurship, and so on in the afterlife differ from their counterparts on earth.

Now take loving relationships. Suppose that one not only has loving relationships in the afterlife, but also with the very same people with whom one has relationships on earth. The ways of relating to loved ones differ drastically in the afterlife, since relationships on earth are heavily influenced by the bad things that abound here. In the afterlife, one won’t worry that a friend is lonely, won’t have to care for an ailing parent, won’t need to ease a child’s pain or protect him from bullies. Also, the various social structures and institutions which provide the context for one’s relationships – media, marriage, gender and race, schools, governments, markets, healthcare – differ drastically in the afterlife without the limits on time and resources that shape them on earth.

What’s more, relationships with one’s parents and children, for example, are greatly affected by the social role one occupies in those relationships. But it’s likely that the norms of these social roles are different in the afterlife given that the gap in age, maturity, and knowledge that informs those norms will matter less and less as one continues on everlastingly in the afterlife.

Finally, take pleasant experiences. Perhaps some sources of pleasure in the afterlife are different. If there is no childrearing in the afterlife, for example, one will not derive pleasure from raising one's children. But there might be new activities – new sports, forms of art, books and places – in the afterlife to enjoy. Also, one might pursue higher pleasures that require a lot of time to achieve—learning new languages, for example—which one would forgo on earth given the temporal constraints of earthly existence. One might also take more time to savor the simple pleasures in life.

Plausibly, pleasant experiences in the afterlife life aren't so often interrupted or diluted by painful experiences generated by the bad things that abound on earth. But, also, painful experiences aren't there to provide a sharp foil to pleasant experiences, so pleasant experiences might not seem so precious in the afterlife. The afterlife casts one's subjective phenomenological experience of pleasure in a whole new light.

So let's take for granted that the goods of life as they are in the afterlife differ in significant ways from those goods as they are here and now since the latter are shaped heavily by the bad things and temporal limitations that are absent, or largely reduced, in the afterlife. Death, then, deprives one of the goods of life as they are here and now. To put it another way, death deprives one of one's particular goods of life – one's tokens – even if one goes on to enjoy other goods of the same type in the afterlife.

4.2 Death Harms

One can be harmed either by having bad things or, as the defenders of the deprivation account argue, not having good things.¹³ Thus, a harmful event causes one either to have a bad thing that one would not have had, or to not have a good thing that one would have had, if the event had not occurred. Either way, harmful events are disvaluable to one's well-being: they cause one to do worse along some dimension of well-being which one would have otherwise done.¹⁴ On objective list theories, these dimensions correspond to the various items on the list: having a bad thing or not having a good thing is a hindrance to checking off some item. On desires satisfaction theories, these dimensions correspond to various intrinsic desires: not having a good thing or having a bad thing is a frustration of some intrinsic desire.

Importantly, though, not all events that cause one to have bad things or to not have good things are harmful. For example, getting a flu shot is not harmful even though it causes one to have a bad thing (pain) and vacationing at the beach is not a harm even though it causes one to not have a good thing (a vacation in the mountains).

¹³ See Rabenberg (2014) for a critical overview of philosophical accounts of harm.

¹⁴ This claim could be qualified: harmful events cause one to do *non-negligibly* worse along some dimension of well-being which one would have otherwise done better. This qualification allows us to say that stubbing one's toe, for example, causes one to do worse along some dimension of well-being, but the difference is so small that it doesn't count as a harm. Alternatively, it could be thought that stubbing a toe is a harm, just a really insignificant one.

That's because getting a flu shot and vacationing at the beach both provide a compensatory benefit – protection from the flu and fun at the beach, respectively. An event that causes one to have a bad thing or lack a good thing, then, is harmful only if it also fails to provide a compensatory benefit.¹⁵ A compensatory benefit is one whose value fully makes up for the disvalue of having some bad thing or not having some good thing. It enables one to do just as well or better along the same dimension of well-being which the event would have caused one to do worse along were it not for the benefit.

With those clarifications in mind, let's consider the claim that death harms. We have seen that death deprives one of some good things: one's particular goods of life. But if death harms one, it must be that death fails to provide a compensatory benefit whose value fully offsets the disvalue of losing one's particular earthly goods of life. On first pass, it may seem that death does provide such a benefit – namely, the new and superior particular goods of life of the same type that one enjoys in the afterlife. But I will argue that this is not the case.

To see why, it's important to see that the disvalue of losing some good cannot always be offset by the value of gaining another good of the same type, even if the new good is superior to the original. Suppose, for example, that someone takes a beloved family heirloom from you – say, your grandmother's beloved ruby ring – and gives you two new ruby rings in exchange. In this case, it seems that the disvalue of losing the good cannot be fully offset by the value of the goods gained, even if the new rings are bigger and shinier than your grandmother's. In contrast, suppose instead that someone takes a 100-dollar bill away from you and gives you two 100-dollar bills in exchange. In this case, it seems that the disvalue of losing the good is offset by the value of the goods gained.

The difference between these two cases is illuminating. Why can the disvalue of losing the bill, but not the disvalue of losing the ring, be offset by the value of gaining similar goods? The reason is care. Caring deeply about something causes it to become valuable to one in ways that are independent of any market value or intrinsic value it may have. You may care about having money in your wallet, but, probably, you do not care about the particular bills that happen to be there, and you would be just as happy if other bills were in their place. But you do not just care about wearing any old ring; rather, you care deeply about wearing your grandmother's in particular, and you would be far from happy if another ring were on your finger instead.

It may be said, then, that the value something has to one by virtue of one caring deeply about it is incommensurable or nonsubstitutable with the value of different, even superior, goods of the same type: the disvalue of losing it cannot be offset.¹⁶ The value born by your grandmother's ring by virtue of you caring about it, for example, is incommensurable with the value born by the new rings by virtue of being big and shiny.

¹⁵ The account of harm here is based in part on a discussion of posthumous harms in Luper (2004): an event harms us, Luper writes on p. 66, “if it prevents us from having some goods and fails to provide a benefit that fully compensates for the lost good.” Luper calls this the preclusion view of harm.

¹⁶ See Chang (2013) for a helpful overview of incommensurability.

Our key question is this: can the disvalue of losing one's particular goods of life be offset by the value of gaining different, superior goods of life? If so, the goods of life one enjoys upon one's death in the afterlife are compensatory benefits and death is not a harm. If not, such goods are not compensatory benefits and death is a harm.

I will argue typically not, and ultimately for the same reason that's in play in the ring case: one tends to care deeply about one's particular goods of life – after all, they are the very things that fill one's life with meaning and love and pleasure.¹⁷ One cares not only about having meaningful work but also one's particular stripe of meaningful work (teaching high school math) and one's particular works-in-progress (teaching Calculus to the particular students in second block). One cares about the particular struggles and dreams and projects of loved ones, their particular personalities, and the particular contours of one's relationships with them. One cares about the particular pleasures of earthly life, simple and big: a cup of coffee in the morning, returning to one's favorite cabin in the woods, finishing another chapter of one's novel.

If one cares deeply about one's particular goods of life, I want to suggest, one's particular goods of life end up being valuable to one's well-being in a way that, if lost, cannot be made up for by the value of gaining other, even superior, particular goods of life. When it comes to one's well-being, the value of one's particular stripe of meaningful work, and one's particular meaningful works-in-progress, for example, goes above and beyond the value of having meaningful work in general.

The underlying idea here is that doing worse along some dimension of well-being cannot be made up for by doing better along some other dimension.¹⁸ On objective list theories, this means that failing to check off one item on the list is not made up for by checking off another item. On desire satisfaction theories, this means that the frustration of some intrinsic desire cannot be made up for by the satisfaction of other intrinsic desire. Because of this, the value of some good that, if lost, results in one to doing worse along one dimension of well-being is not commensurable with the value of some other good that, if gained, results in one to doing better along another dimension. On both objective list and desires satisfaction theories, gaining new, superior goods of life does not result in one better along all of the relevant dimensions along which being deprived of one's particular earthly goods of life results in one to doing worse. This means that the value of one's particular goods of life is not wholly commensurable with the value of new, superior goods of life of the same

¹⁷ This claim is qualified with “typically” because it is typically, but not always, the case that people care deeply about their particular goods of life in specific.

¹⁸ For a defense of this idea, see chapter 1 of Nussbaum (2000), especially section IV. In developing a version of an objective list theory, she writes on p. 81, “We cannot satisfy the need for one of [item on the list] by giving a larger amount of another one. All are of central importance and all are distinct in quality. The irreducible plurality of the list limits the trade-offs that it will be reasonable to make, and thus limits the applicability of quantitative cost-benefit analysis.” A similar idea can be developed within a desire satisfaction framework. As Nussbaum indicates, it can be rational to choose to be subject to a harm – for example, if the thing that harms causes one to only somewhat worse along some dimension but also much better along another dimension.

type, and so the disvalue of losing the former cannot be fully offset by the value of gaining the latter.

Start with objective list theories. Various items have been purported to be on the list including, centrally, meaningful work, loving relationships, and pleasurable experiences. But there are other purported items on the list that are more subjective – for example, satisfying one’s deepest desires or achieving one’s important ends or simply being happiness.¹⁹ By virtue of one caring deeply about them, one’s particular goods of life are typically instrumental to checking off these subjective items. After all, the things that one cares deeply tend to feature prominently in one’s desires, ends, and happiness. The value that one’s particular goods of life have by virtue of being a token of some type of item on the list is commensurable with the value of some other token of that same type: losing one’s original token of meaningful work, for example, causes one to do worse when it comes to having meaningful work, but gaining a new, superior token causes one to do better when it comes to the same item. But the value they have by virtue of being instrumental to checking off these subjective items – value which they have because one cares deeply about them – is not so commensurable. Losing one’s original stripe of meaningful work causes one to do worse when it comes achieving one’s important ends, for example, and gaining a new, superior stripe of meaningful work does not cause one to do better when it comes to that same item.

Now for desire satisfaction theories. Typically, one not only has a general intrinsic desire for the goods of life, but also a specific intrinsic desire for one’s particular goods of life. After all, one tends to care deeply about those particular goods specifically, and partially for their own sake. When one is deprived of one’s particular goods of life, then, an intrinsic desire for those particular goods of life is frustrated, even if one’s general desire for the goods of life ends up being satisfied by other tokens. The value that one’s particular goods of life have by virtue of them satisfying the general desire is commensurable with the value of new and superior goods of life. But the value that they have by virtue of them satisfying one’s specific intrinsic desires – value which they have by virtue of one caring deeply about them – is not: being deprived of one’s particular earthly goods frustrates these specific desires, and having the new goods does not satisfy them.²⁰

When death deprives one of particular goods of life, then, death deprives one of some good and does not provide a benefit that fully compensates for not having that good, thus causing one to do worse along some dimension of well-being than one would have done had not died. Having meaningful work matters in general, but having one’s particular stripe of meaningful work and one’s particular

¹⁹ An objective list theory that includes subjective items like these may be classified as a hybrid theory of well-being. Parfit (1984), Wolf (1997), and Kagan (2009) develop and defend hybrid theories. See Woodward (2016) for a helpful overview.

²⁰ Elizabeth Harman argues that it can be reasonable to prefer the way things are to different, superior alternatives. She calls this “reasonable attachment to the actual.” See especially Harman (2009) but also Harman (2011, 2015). If Harman is right, then it’s plausible that one would have a specific intrinsic desire for one’s particular goods of life even under idealized conditions, which is important here if idealized desires are what matter for well-being.

works-in-progress in specific. To lose them is to lose something with incommensurable value, and to lose something like that is a harm.

4.3 Death is (Very) Bad

Upon establishing that death harms, it is a short jump to the conclusion that death is bad for the one who dies. Something is bad for one if it had a negative effective on one's well-being, and something has a negative effect on one's well-being if it causes one to do worse along some dimension of well-being than one otherwise would have done.²¹ All harms, then, have a negative effect on well-being, and death is bad for one because, and to the extent that, it harms one.

But badness-for-one comes in degrees: a harm can be not so bad for one or very bad for one and everything in between. How bad a harm is for one is determined by how much more poorly it causes one to do along the relevant dimension of well-being, and, by extension, what thing it causes one to (not) have: the worse it causes one to do, the worse the harm is for one. So just how bad for one is death?

It's not just bad, I want to argue that it's very bad. Or, at least, it has the potential to be very bad, and often is. That's because one's particular goods of life are typically *central* – not just relevant – to one's well-being. And because their value is incommensurable with the value of other goods of the same type, their being central means that being deprived of them results in one doing very poorly along some dimension of well-being. This is why the badness of death is so sharp, sharper than the badness brought on by most other harmful events, like the theft of a family heirloom: one's death typically has a very big negative impact on one's well-being.

The claim that one's particular goods of life are typically central to one's well-being needs defending. On objective list theories, a thing is central to one's well-being if it is either a token of some item on the list or else necessary for – not just instrumental to – checking off some item. One's particular goods of life are central in both ways, but it's because they are central in the second way that their value is incommensurable with the value of other, superior particular goods of life. If one cares deeply about one's particular goods of life, they typically become necessary for one to have if one is to satisfy one's desires, achieve one's important ends, and simply be happy. For example, completing one's novel or fostering a particular friendship may be a necessary for one's happiness. As such, one's particular goods of life are typically central to one's well-being, making it so that losing them has a big negative impact on one's well-being.

This is in contrast to things like family heirlooms, which one may care about, and which, if one is deprived of them, would be bad for one, but which do not feature

²¹ This claim could also be qualified: something is bad for one if it has a *non-negligible* negative impact on one's well-being, which would amount to it causing one to do *non-negligibly* worse along some dimension of well-being. This would allow us to say that stubbing one's toe, for example, does have some negative impact on one's well-being but it's so small that it's not a harm and so doesn't count as bad for one. Alternatively, it might be thought that stubbing one's toe is, in fact, a harm and so is bad for one, however insignificantly. See footnote 14.

prominently in one's desires, important ends, or happiness. The value of these goods is incommensurable with similar goods but, unlike one's particular goods of life, they are not central to one's well-being: one cares about them, but not so deeply that not having them would cause one to do that much worse along some dimension of well-being.

Now for desire satisfaction theories. On most of these theories, not all desires are equally important to well-being. For example, a desire to eat dessert after dinner tonight, if frustrated, negligibly impacts one's well-being, if at all; in contrast, a desire to raise one's child well, if frustrated by the child's death, significantly impacts one's well-being. The desires that are central to one's well-being – the deepest desires of one's heart – are intrinsic desires that are strongest and most steadfast. One tends to not only *strongly and steadfastly* desire to have the goods of life in general, but also one's particular goods of life in specific – in part for their own sake, and also perhaps because they are typically necessary to fulfill other strong and steadfast intrinsic desires, such as the desire to achieve one's important ends or to be happy. When one is deprived of one's particular goods of life, then, a deep desire of one's heart is frustrated. And frustration of a deep desire of one's heart amounts to one doing very poorly along some dimension of well-being.²²

Again, this is in contrast to things like family heirlooms, which one may care about and desire for their own sake, but not with enough strength or steadfastness that one's desire for them count as a deep desire of one's heart. The value of these things is incommensurable, but, unlike one's particular goods of life, they are not central to one's well-being: one cares about them, but not so deeply that the frustration of a specific intrinsic desire for them would have a big negative impact on one's well-being.

Death, then, has the potential to be very bad for one. It lives up to this potential when the particular goods of life that it deprives one of are not only incommensurably but also centrally valuable to one's well-being, as they typically are. Importantly, though, death being very bad for one does not entail that death is bad for one *overall*.²³ In fact, death may be *good* for one overall even if it is also bad for one. As has been discussed, something being bad for one amounts to it causing one to do worse along some dimension of well-being, whereas something being bad for one overall amounts to it decreasing one's overall level of well-being, and it's possible for the same thing to do both. In other words, it's possible for something to cause one to do worse – even much worse – along some dimension of well-being while also causing one to do better along other dimensions. Doing well along these other dimensions can result in an increase in one's overall level of well-being, but, as argued above, cannot fully compensate for doing poorly along another dimension.

²² Once again, if Harman is right and it is reasonable to be attached to the way things are, preferring them to superior alternatives, then it is plausible that one would have a strong and steadfast intrinsic desire for one's particular goods of life in specific.

²³ The account of badness-for-one developed in what follows is loosely based on the account developed in chapter 3 of Barnes (2016), which also includes an important distinction between something being bad for one and something being bad for one *overall*.

To get a firm grasp on the distinction between badness-for-one and badness-for-one-overall, it's helpful to consider some examples. Suppose that tragedy strikes and your daughter dies due to gross negligence of a big company. You sue and settle out of court, receiving a hefty sum of money, which you use wisely and charitably. Within a few years, your overall level of well-being is higher than before the tragedy. But, importantly, your daughter's life is centrally and incommensurably valuable to your well-being, and so losing her cannot be fully compensated for by any goods gained from the settlement. This tragedy, then, is bad for you but not bad for you overall: it results in a big negative impact on your well-being even though it ultimately increases your overall level of well-being. For another example, suppose that you are in a car accident that leaves you physically disabled. Before the accident, you were lonely and reclusive but, after the accident, you go to a rehabilitation center where you make friends and find community. The accident takes away your independence and your promising career as a pilot, which are central to your well-being, and the disvalue of losing these things cannot be offset by the value of gaining relationships. The accident, then, has a big negative impact on your well-being even supposing that it increases your overall level of well-being: it is bad for you but not bad for you overall.

Death for the one who goes on to the afterlife is analogous to these cases. Death deprives one of goods central to one's well-being whose value is not commensurable with the value of the other goods it provides; nevertheless, death may be good for one overall if these goods result in a higher overall level of well-being in the afterlife than on earth.

This marks a divergence between the deprivation account given the Epicurean assumption that death is the end of one's existence and the deprivation account given our assumption that the one who dies goes on to a very good afterlife. On the Epicurean assumption, the deprivation account says that, typically, death is not only bad for one, but also bad for one overall.²⁴ On our assumption, the deprivation account says that, typically, death is bad for one, but does not go on to say that, typically, death is bad for one overall.

Even so, the deprivation account on our assumption is not trivial: the claim that death is (very) bad for the one who dies and goes on to a very good afterlife is substantial and surprising, even if it is not bad for one overall. The deprivation account on our assumption does not simply say that death has some upsides and some downsides. Almost all events have both upsides and downsides. But only a small subset of these events that are harms and, thus, bad for one, resulting in one doing worse along some dimension of well-being than one otherwise would. Many events – like getting a flu shot or going to the dentist or moving to a bigger house or getting two hundred dollars in exchange for one hundred – provide compensatory benefits that make it so that does no worse or even better along the same dimensions of well-being affected

²⁴ Given the Epicurean assumption, the deprivation account says that death is bad overall for the one who dies whenever one's level of well-being would have been net positive if one had continued living. This is typically the case, although exceptions are notable – for example, the death of one who would have lived with debilitating pain and without hope of relief is not be bad for one.

by the event's downsides. These events are not bad for one. In contrast, harmful events – events that are bad for one – inflict a genuine loss: their upsides do not make up for its downsides even if they have more upsides than downsides. Death, then, inflicts a genuine loss on the one who dies – typically, a very great loss – even if one is better off overall in the afterlife than one would have been on earth.

This picture of value that explains why death can be very bad for one even if it's not bad for one overall also allows us to accommodate a couple of intuitive thoughts about the badness of death and the afterlife. One such thought is that death is worse for some than others who go on to a very good afterlife. For example, death may be especially bad for a new parent or a seasoned cancer researcher on the brink of an important breakthrough. That's because, at some points more than others in an average lifetime, one tends to care more deeply about having one's particular goods of life and, thus, they feature more prominently in one's deepest desires and important ends and happiness. Death depriving one of one's particular goods of life at these points is worse for one than death depriving one of one's particular goods of life at other points. For example, by depriving a new parent of his particular relationships with his child or depriving the researcher of her particular work-in-progress, death more likely and fully precludes them from satisfying their deepest desires, achieving their important ends, and being happy: death causes them to do especially poorly along some dimension of well-being.

Another thought that this picture of value allows us to accommodate is that one's death may become less bad for one the longer one is in the afterlife. That's because it's plausible that being in the afterlife is – to borrow L.A. Paul's terminology – a *transformative* experience.²⁵ After hundreds and thousands and eventually millions and billions of years living in conditions that are radically different from earth's, it is likely that one's cares will evolve – one will come to care about different particular things – and so, too, will the features of one's desires and ends and happiness. And to the extent that one's particular goods of life feature less and less in one's desires, ends, and happiness, they become less and less central to one's well-being and, thus, the disvalue of being deprived of them slowly abates. So, at the time of death, and for the beginning of one's time in the afterlife, one's death may be very bad for one yet slowly become less and less bad for one over time.

That said, it is not implausible to think that one's care for one's particular earthly goods of life persists everlastingly – if so, then not having one's particular early goods of life may continue to be bad for one long after death and in spite of the impossibility of ever having them again. In some religious traditions, it is held that one's time on earth is special, unlike any other time in the afterlife: one's earthly existence is definitive of one in essential and indelible ways. Because of this, the things that one cared most deeply about on earth – which typically involve one's particular meaningful work, loving relationships, and pleasurable experiences as they are on earth – may be permanently relevant, even central, to one's well-being. After all, the things that one cares most deeply about are the things that one typically organizes one's life around and the things one organizes one's life around during an

²⁵ Paul (2016)

especially formative period of one's life may become fixed features in one's desires and ends and happiness.

Consider, for example, a retired runner who dreamt of medaling at the Olympics but, during her one chance, finished in fourth. It will likely always matter to her well-being that she does not have an Olympic medal, even decades later when she's long retired from running. Something similar may be said about one's particular goods of life on earth. Having one's particular earthly goods of life might endure as a deep, though frustrated, desire; a necessary component of some important, though unaccomplishable, end; a major, though unrealizable, determinant of happiness. If so, the significance of one's particular goods of life to one's well-being survives extreme changes to one's personality and circumstances in the afterlife, and being deprived of them remains bad for one far into the afterlife.

5 Fear of Death and Mourning

We have seen how an appeal to the deprivation account of the badness of death can show that death is bad for the one who dies and goes on to an afterlife that is on balance good – indeed, *very* good. Even if one goes on to enjoy the goods of life in the afterlife, death harms and, thus, is bad for one because – and to the extent that – death deprives one of one's particular goods of life and does not fully compensate for their loss. In fact, the value that death causes one to lack is typically central to one's well-being, which makes death not just bad but often *very* bad for the one who dies. Even so, it is plausible that death leaves one better off overall: the upsides of death may outnumber its downsides but do not fully make up for them. Death, then, inflicts a genuine loss – typically, a very great loss – by depriving the one who dies of goods that are incommensurably and centrally valuable to one's well-being.

Discussions about whether death is bad for the one who dies are often conducted in tandem with discussions about whether it is rational to fear death. In conclusion, then, let's consider the fact that people who believe that they will go on to an afterlife upon their death often fear – even dread – their own death. These attitudes seem puzzling. If one believes that, upon death, one goes on to an afterlife that is very good, and even better than life on earth, why is one's attitude towards one's death so negative? The deprivation account, I want to suggest, can help us make sense of people's negative reactions towards their own death.

Looking back to the main argument, we see that death deprives one of one's particular goods of life of goods, which one tends to care deeply about: one cares deeply about one's work and relationships and pleasure just as they are here and now, perhaps even preferring them to different though superior alternatives.²⁶ Of course, being deprived of something you care deeply about can understandably engender a number of negative attitudes – dismay, distress, and anger, for example. In fact, mere knowledge that such deprivation will occur can trigger these attitudes. Just as one may be understandably dismayed if one knew that one must trade up a

²⁶ Harman (2009, 2011, 2015)

spouse, for example, one may be similarly dismayed at trading up one's work, relationships, and experiences. What's more, one may have negative attitudes – fear, hate, dread – directed at the thing that's doing the depriving. Just as one may fear the neurochemical disease which threatens to alter your spouse's psychology, one may similarly fear death, even if one believes that the afterlife is better than earthly life.

The deprivation account also helps us make sense of people's negative reactions towards the death of loved ones that they believe go on to the afterlife. Of course, part of their reaction is explained by the fact that they will miss them. Suppose that your spouse is kidnapped and taken to a faraway land, where you know that she will lead a wonderful life there but also that you cannot have contact with her until you join her there in, say, thirty years. Naturally, you would be very sad because you miss her terribly. But, in addition to mourning her absence, you also mourn the goods that are lost to her: the way she relates to you here and now, the projects she's engaged in here and now, the things, big and small, from which she reaps pleasure in your life together. The same goes for people's reaction to the death of loved ones whom, they believe, they will join in a happy afterlife upon their own death. Their sentiment is a somber one: "It will never be the same!" They not only mourn their loved ones' absence, but also the good things that are lost to them – the particular goods of life as they were for them on earth.

References

- Arneson, R. (1999). Human flourishing versus desire satisfaction. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16, 113–142.
- Barnes, E. (2016). *The minority body: A theory of disability*. Oxford University Press.
- Bradley, B. (2004). When is death bad for the one who dies? *Nous*, 38, 1–28.
- Bradley, B. (2007). A paradox for some theories of welfare. *Philosophical Studies*, 133, 43–53.
- Brink, D. (1989). *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Broome, J. (2004). *Weighing Lives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chang, R. (2001). *Making Comparison Count*. Routledge.
- Chang, R. (2013). Incommensurability (and Incomparability). H., LaFollette (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* (pp. 2591 – 2604). Blackwell.
- Cyr, T. (2016). A puzzle about death's badness: Can death be bad for the paradise-bound? *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 80, 145–162.
- Epicurus (1966). Letter to Menoecus. J., Saunders (Ed.), *Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle*. Free Press.
- Feldman, F. (1992). *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death*. Oxford University Press.
- Fischer, J. M. (1994). Why immortality is not so bad. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2, 257–270.
- Haraldsson, E. (2006). Popular psychology, belief in life after death and reincarnation in the Nordic countries, Western and Eastern Europe. *Nordic Psychology*, 58, 171–180.
- Harman, E. (2009). 'I'll be glad I did it' reasoning and the significance of future desires. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23, 177–199.
- Harman, E. (2011). Fischer and lamenting nonexistence. *Social Theory and Practice*, 37, 129–142.
- Harman, E. (2015). Transformative experience and reliance on moral testimony. *Res Philosophica*, 92, 323–339.
- Heathwood, C. (2016). Desire Fulfillment Theories. G., Fletcher (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Well-Being* (pp. 148 – 60). Routledge.
- Hurka, T. (2011). *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters*. Oxford University Press.
- Kagan, S. (2009). Well-being as enjoying the good. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23, 253–272.

- Kagan, S. (2012). *Death*. Yale University Press.
- Kamm, F. (1998). *Morality, Mortality: Death and Whom to Save From It*. Oxford University Press.
- Luper, S. (2004). Posthumous harms. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 41, 63–72.
- Moore, A. (2000). Objective Human Goods. R., Crisp, & B., Hooker (Eds.), *Well-Being and Morality: Essays in Honour of James Griffin* (pp. 75 – 89). Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, M. (2001). *Natural Law and Practical Reasoning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nagel, T. (1970). Death. *Noûs*, 4(1), 73–80.
- Nussbaum, M. (1994). *The Theory of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2000). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Olson, E. (2013). The epicurean view of death. *The Journal of Ethics*, 17, 65–78.
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
- Paul, L. A. (2016). *Transformative Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Rabenberg, M. (2014). Harm. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 8, 1–32.
- Rosenbaum, S. (1986). How to be dead and not care: A defense of epicurus. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 23, 217–225.
- Silverstein, H. (1980). The evil of death. *Journal of Philosophy*, 77, 401–424.
- Smuts, A. (2013). Less good but not bad. In defense of epicureanism about death. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 93, 197–227.
- Williams, B. (1973). The makropulos case: Reflections on the Tedium of immortality. B., Williams (Ed.), *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wolf, S. (1997). Happiness and meaning: Two aspects of the good life. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14, 207–225.
- Woodward, C. (2012). Classifying theories of welfare. *Philosophical Studies*, 165, 787–803.
- Woodward, C. (2016). Hybrid theories. G., Fletcher (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-being* (pp. 161 – 174). Routledge

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.