

Death's Shadow Lightened

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I. Introduction

Epicurus famously argued that “death is nothing to us.” In claiming this, he meant to exhort his reader to abandon our typical responses to dying - fear, dread, angst, perhaps even the rituals that often accompany death. His argument? Death does no harm, because “when we are here, death is not; and when death is here, we are not.” Thus, there are two components to the Epicurean perspective on death. First, death is nothing to us. We should not fear or dread it. Second, death’s harm is nothing special. The reason that death is nothing to us is that its harm is mundane or non-existent.

My objective is to provide a defense of the Epicurean position through a kind of argument by cases. Following Korsgaard (1983), we can divide the kinds of value properties a thing or event might instantiate along two axes. The properties might be intrinsic or extrinsic, the value might be final or instrumental. This gives us four categories to explore in search of an adequate harm for death: extrinsic instrumentalist views, extrinsic final views, intrinsic instrumentalist views, and intrinsic final views. After looking in each of these corners, I will conclude that we have yet to identify something that can play the role the harm of death should play.

An important clarification before we begin. I will assume that death leads to non-existence. This is historically a minority position, and there is an interesting philosophical literature on immortality and/or post-mortem life that we will not have time to delve into here.¹ If death is just another part of life, then a whole different suite of moral and metaphysical considerations become relevant.

Once we regard death as the final end of life, it becomes clear that the Epicurean position runs counter to intuition. Non-existence doesn’t sound very fun. It precludes all experience, emotion, enjoyment. It is therefore plausible that the event that leads from existence to non-existence, death, is a harm. Nevertheless, I will argue that once we think about what kinds of value-properties an event like death might have, we will see that it cannot be a serious harm to the one who dies.

We will begin with some preliminaries to clarify what is at stake in this investigation, then move on to the most common explanation for the harm of death in the literature, a view where death’s harm is extrinsic and instrumental, known as *deprivationism*. Deprivationists argue that death is bad for us when it is because we miss out on good things we would have had by living. After addressing deprivationism, I will argue that its flaws extend to all extrinsic instrumentalist views. We will then

¹ Williams (1973), Rosati (2012), Gorman (Forthcoming) discuss the issue from the perspective of risk and agency, Climenhaga (2018) and Rubio (Forthcoming) from the perspective of axiology.

turn our attention to intrinsicalist views. Once we have identified the flaw in views where the harm of death is intrinsic, we will move on to views where it is extrinsic but final. We will conclude that none of these types of view is adequate.

2. Preliminaries

Before we launch fully into our exploration, it is worth taking a moment to clarify what is at stake in the debate over the badness of death. Epicurus's challenge is to the way we treat death in our emotional lives and moral reasoning. To meet the challenge, the anti-Epicurean must provide an account of the badness of death that is up to the task. Just finding something bad and associated with dying isn't enough.

We can see this by recalling that 'harm,' like 'tall,' is a gradable adjective. That means that it renders, in the context of utterance, a binary judgment on a phenomenon that comes in degrees. Facts about who or what is tall depend on facts about height combined with context. In the context of a 4th grade basketball league, a guard who stands six feet is tall. Very tall. In the context of the National Basketball Association, a guard who stands six feet is not only not tall, but downright short.

In fact, given the right context, any height can count as 'tall.' Even heights, such as twelve inches, that are in most normal contexts not remotely tall. As with height so with harm. By correctly massaging context, we could make an event that in normal contexts does not count as a harm into one by finding some bad thing associated with it. What matters is not whether, when context has been sufficiently shifted, death can count as a harm. What matters is that it count as the right kind of harm in order for it to play the role that it does in our emotional and moral lives.

And what role is that? One of the worst events that can befall a person. We go to efforts large and small to avoid dying, from altering our course as we walk across town to avoid being hit by cars to allowing surgeons to cut into our bodies and remove our organs (inflicting considerable pain, despite their best efforts) in order to postpone death, even only for a few years. The penalty of death is assigned only to the worst crimes, and is routinely called the ultimate punishment. The harm of death must typically be very great to warrant its role.²

² This is not uncontroversial. McMahan (2002) argues that some of the role death occupies in our moral reasoning, such as the wrongness of killing, it occupies because of other factors such as killing showing a lack of respect for persons. But he does grant (p. 95-96) that it occupies *some* of its roles in virtue of the harm it causes, and this will be sufficient.

3. Argument

The central argument is a kind of argument by cases. Using the twin axes of intrinsic/extrinsic and final/instrumental, we can map out the space of possible value-properties. There are four possible types: extrinsic instrumental value, extrinsic final value, intrinsic instrumental value, and intrinsic final value. Because the most common view falls under the extrinsic instrumentalist banner, we will start there. Next we will discuss intrinsic instrumentalist views, because in so doing we will learn some things that will be useful in discussing extrinsic instrumentalist final views, the discussion of which is reserved for the end. Since these exhaust the possible types of value property, an argument that the harm of death (more precisely: a harm adequate to the role of death in our typical theorizing) is not in any of them is an argument that death is not harmful. That is our conclusion.

3.1 Against Extrinsic Instrumentalist Views

First I will argue that extrinsic instrumentalist views don't deliver an adequate harm for death. I will begin by attacking deprivationism, the premier account of the harm of death. Once I have argued that it is inadequate to play the role the harm of death must play for death to occupy the role it does, I will argue that the flaw in deprivationism generalizes to views where the badness of death is extrinsic.

3.1.1 Deprivationism

What is now the majority response to the Epicurean challenge came to contemporary attention in Nagel's classic (1970) "Death." There, Nagel argued that death is bad and to be feared because dying deprives us of potential future goods. Thus death's harm is a kind of opportunity cost; there are so many better things we could be doing while we are busy being dead. Later authors have developed Nagel's suggestion into the view now known as deprivationism. Deprivationists locate the harm of death in the loss of the goods that the deceased would have gained, had she failed to die.

I think the deprivationist response is mistaken. Loss of goods one would have had, even modulated by any of the various epicycles that have been built into deprivationist views, may in some contexts amount to harm. But simply finding something that is in some contexts a harm and associated with death is at best a pyrrhic response to the Epicurean challenge. Death has a distinctive role in our emotional life and in our moral thinking. The Epicurean challenge is, in its essence, a challenge to whether death really should occupy that role. A response to the Epicurean that finds something harmful and associated with death but not fit to fill death's distinctive moral role does not successfully meet the challenge.

Deprivationism comes in various flavors. Feldman's Total Life View asks us to compare the total value of the life actually lived with the value of the life the person who died would have lived had they not died, with the harm of the death being the difference between the lives.³ Jeff McMahan's Interest

³ Feldman (1992).

Relative view takes into account Parfit's argument that as the R-relations tying our present to our future selves thin, our present interest in future benefits diminishes. Thus, unlike Feldman's version of the view, McMahan's modulates the value of the goods one would have received but for dying by psychological connectedness to the potential future self who would have enjoyed them.⁴ These are not the only flavors, but they are representative.

What they have in common is that they regard the harm of death as a kind of opportunity cost. Opportunity costs are those costs we incur by refraining to do things that would be beneficial. For example, I might have two opportunities for spending my afternoon: I could pay to go to the concert, or I could visit the art exhibit for free. Even though visiting the art exhibit has no direct cost, it does involve an opportunity cost. The concert is a one-off event, and if I skip it I won't be able to experience it. By going to the exhibit I forfeit my opportunity to go to the concert. I incur an opportunity cost.

Almost everything we do carries opportunity cost. Time and resources are limited; by choosing to do some things, we exclude ourselves from doing others. We are deprived of them. If, as deprivationists contend, this is a kind of *prima facie* harm⁵, the badness associated with dying is no different in kind from a very mundane sort of badness. A badness associated with many events in our lives, since all choices involve opportunity costs. The only difference may be in degree. Of course, if the things we give up as opportunity costs are not as good as the things we give them up for then the *prima facie* harms are not always all-things-considered harms. They may be compensated or canceled out by the goods we only gained by incurring them.

This means that death only harms an individual if the life they would have lived had they not died is an improvement on their actual life. Depending on the details of the deprivationist view, anyone whose total life value, or interest-relative life value, or remaining life value, would be worsened by surviving is benefited by their death. Deprivationists claim this as a feature of the view:

Deprivationism implies that when death takes a good life from its victim, that person's death is bad. Conversely, it entails that when death keeps a person from living a bad life, it is good for that person. It also gives us an extent to which death is good or bad: the more of a good life it takes away, the worse it is; the more of a bad life it takes away, the better it is. These are intuitively the right answers to the questions: under what circumstances is death bad, and when it is bad, how bad is it?⁶

⁴ McMahan (2002).

⁵ See Broome (2012), Timmerman (2019), and Bradley (2009) for explicit endorsement.

⁶ Bradley (2009) p. 51-52.

However, this gives rise to some problem cases for the deprivationist that it will be good to examine before we deliver our objection, since it will allow us to put the various nuances and refinements deprivationists have used to supplement their core view on the table, which we state here:

CORE DEPRIVATIONISM: an individual's death harms them by (and to the extent it does) depriving them of the goods that they would have obtained had they not died.

The first problem comes from the context-sensitivity inherent in conditional claims. Consider the following case adapted from from McMahan (2002):

YOUNG PEDESTRIAN: Phillip is an unfortunate 20 year old. At around noon, he crossed the street. Unfortunately, halfway across the street, he is hit by a careless driver and instantly killed. Unbeknownst to Phillip or anyone else, he also had an aneurysm building that would have burst and killed him a week later. The presence of the aneurysm was casually irrelevant to the way Phillip actually died.

In young pedestrian, what should a deprivationist say about the harm Phillip's death inflicted on him? For simplicity, we will assume that Phillip has been enjoying an average-valued life, and nothing noteworthy (good or ill) would have happened to him in the final week.

A natural thing to do here is to consult theories of the semantics of counterfactuals. Robert Stalnaker's (1968) theory bids us look at the nearest possible world where Phillip is not hit by a car at noon and see what happens.⁷ However, nearness is generally reckoned by something like objective similarity, and in the most objectively similar worlds to actuality when Phillip is not killed by a car at noon, he's killed by that same car - moving a bit faster or slower - right around noon. Thus, his death will be of almost no consequence to him. A few moments makes little difference.

Of course, this isn't what we were after. The goal is to remove any car accident during the street crossing, not just one that happens precisely at noon. But even so, this buys Phillip an extra week at most. And yet his death seems more tragic than that.

At this point deprivationists point to the variability and context-sensitivity of both event-individuation⁸ and counterfactuals.⁹ Perhaps the relevant counterfactual ignores the specific way in which Phillip dies and focuses instead on his dying young. Perhaps a friendly context selects a custom similarity relation between worlds so that a world missing both the accident and the aneurysm counts

⁷ David Lewis's (1973) view is similar, but allows for both ties for nearest world and cases where there is no nearest world, a complication we wish to ignore for now.

⁸ Feldman (1991), McMahan (2002).

⁹ Bradley (2009).

as closest. There are a variety of moves to make here, without a clear best option.¹⁰ The exact details won't be relevant, but it will be important to remember that we must do something to get around this problem beyond simply appealing to the best natural-language semantics for 'would.'

A second problem case was introduced by Kai Draper (1999). Draper noted that certain absences, certain non-events, that seem to carry the same kind of harm as death strike us as trivial. This is an important observation. Draper asks us to consider a case like the following:

THE LAMP: Alice is traveling on a plane to her tour of Europe. During her flight, she is served a mundane snack. Perhaps pretzels. With her snack, there is no lamp containing a benevolent genie who will grant her wishes. As a result of not being given a magic lamp on her flight, Alice goes on to have a perfectly acceptable but mundane life, far less good than she would have had had she been given a magic lamp.

On a permissive reading of what counts as a deprivation, Alice has suffered a grave deprivationist harm at snacktime. Comparing the total value of her actual life to that of her lamp-having life, even modulated by interest-relativity, yields a decisive judgment in favor of the latter. By not getting the lamp, she misses out on all sorts of goods that she would have had were she to have gotten it. Of course, there is no such lamp, but that's a contingent and empirical matter.

This is completely counterintuitive. Alice was not harmed by not receiving a magic lamp. But she did miss out on ever so many goods by not receiving it. It looks like it takes more than missing out on goods you would have obtained, had things gone differently, to be actually harmed.

Deprivationists have had different reactions to this example. Some embrace it as a harm and explain our intuition that it is not by appeal to a distinction between what is harmful to us and what it is rational to feel in response to an event. Perhaps some even very grave harms don't merit concern.¹¹ Others attempt to offer adjustments to CORE DEPRIVATIONISM so that not all deprivations count toward making an event harmful, but only a special class. This is Draper's proposed solution, restricting the goods deprived by dying to those goods the deceased had a reasonable expectation of enjoying.¹² Alternatives to this might include a restriction to goods the deceased had or would have had a right to, or goods that it was really possible for the deceased to receive (assuming that magical

¹⁰ McMahan (2002).

¹¹ Bradley (2009).

¹² Draper (1999).

lamps are not, in fact, consistent with what science and history tell us about our world). Still others embrace it as a harm but without any sort of explanation for the intuition.¹³

Some of these responses seem reasonable. After all, it would be absurd to count each moment a grave misfortune simply because we are not receiving a genie's favor at that moment, a favor that would likely be much better for us than whatever it is we happen to be doing. There is something fantastical about the idea of missing the lamp as a deprivation that makes responses like Draper's and Bradley's seem apt. But the lamp problem points us to a structural flaw in deprivationism. Not all deprivations are equal, and we react much more severely to the deprivations of death than we do other deprivations, even those that are more severe by the lights of a total life or even an interest-relative view.

However, we do not need to countenance magical lamps to find mundane deprivations that match or exceed those of many deaths, yet which as humans we do not regard as nearly as terrible and as philosophers we do not regard as nearly as bad. We merely need consider the following cases:

REMOTE TRAGEDY: An epidemic strikes a remote village. All the villagers die, losing out on many years of life of middling quality (this is not a rich village). The village is sufficiently remote that there is no danger of the disease reaching others, and no one misses the villagers or their village.

A GOOD DAY FOR THE HOUSE: A group of card sharps detect a flaw in one of the casino's proprietary game. With 90 % probability, their card counting and betting strategy will not them millions. Only a few draws would ruin the plan. Unfortunately, the house gets lucky and the plan fails. That night, one of the casino employees realizes the flaw and the opportunity for an easy fortune passes. The sharps go on to live middling lives, but if they had won they would have lived high quality lives full of comfort, good relationships, and meaningful uses for their money.

A BAD CALL ON THE MARKET: The manager of a pension fund thinks he sees an opportunity to play the markets for an easy gain. He is wrong; some unlikely geopolitical developments in Central Asia spook the market and his easy gain turns into a major loss. As a result, the fund has to decrease the monthly payment to the retirees it serves by one fifteenth in order to stay solvent. The retirees all experience a smallish diminishment in the quality of their golden years.

TOO MANY LULZ: The dating website Online Match has a fairly good track record, connecting people so that on average it plants the seeds of many happy relationships every day. Bored one day, some hackers decide to take it out with a Distributed Denial of Service

¹³ Timmerman (2019) does not explicitly discuss this case, but it follows from his version of deprivationism that not finding the lamp is bad for Alice in the specific sense of 'bad for' that he is interested in, and that he argues is the most joint-carving one on offer.

attack. The website is off for 24 hours, and as a result lots of people miss out on what would have been a happy relationship. None of them go on to find anyone.

We may stipulate, by filling in the appropriate numbers, that each of these cases results in deprivations of the same total disvalue. I have not provided numbers of my own in order to remain neutral on such difficult questions as how to aggregate welfare and how to trade various goods off against each other. The starting case, of course, is the first one where people actually die. Each of the following cases provides some sort of contrast. The casino case involves a drop from what would have been a high level of well-being to something more middling; the retiree case involves a small drop in well-being spread over a large population; the dating case involves a loss not primarily in money (which, of course, is an instrumental good that may be used to gain or pursue final goods) but in relationships, plausibly a final good.

Even when we have filled in the cases so that the victims suffer deprivations of the same total disvalue, however that is reckoned, it should be clear that one of these is not like the others. Remote tragedy is considerably worse. If we could prevent only one of these, that would be the one. And yet by deprivationist reckoning, they should be equivalent.

It will do no good to appeal to knock-on effects of remote tragedy as an explanation for why it is worse. There are none. Although usually the destruction of a village will prompt sadness among those who hear of it and mourning amongst those who knew the victims, there are no such considerations at play here. That is why remote tragedy is remote. Appeal to harms to people other than the victims has no purchase. The badness here is the badness of death alone.

Although these cases press on the same weak point in the deprivationist theory that the lamp case does, they have advantages that the lamp case lacks. Rather than being fantastical events, they are all quite mundane. Casinos exist; stock markets go down; dating websites go down. Events like these happen all the time, and even though they inflict as much or more deprivationist harm upon their victims as death does, we do not count them as nearly as bad. Moreover, the goods that the people on the wrong end of those events are deprived of are ordinary goods: money, relationships, achievements, meaning.

I think this shows the inadequacy of deprivationist responses to the problem. It would be odd, as Bradley suggests, to think that it is fitting to respond in one way to a deprivation of some suite of goods due to death in one way and to an equally valuable suite of those same goods (perhaps, if we contrived the case carefully, the exact same suite of goods) due to a stock market crash, bad run at a casino, or the a website going down.

Furthermore, in some of the cases I've given, Draper's requirement that the harmful deprivations be those that the victim reasonably expected to receive is fulfilled. The card sharps reasonably expected to beat the house; the stock manager reasonably expected to do well, the pensioners reasonably expected that their benefits would not decrease, and the lovers-that-weren't reasonably expected at least that

the website would not be down. Since we are not relying on the fantastical or implausible, responses that trade on the fantasticality or implausibility of finding a magic lamp are no longer available.

3.1.2 Generalization

This flaw is not unique to deprivationism. It infects any extrinsicist instrumentalist account of death's harm. How? Since the disvalue in an extrinsicist instrumentalist view comes about because of a death's relation to other things - such as potential goods, plans, desires, etc - we should be able to find examples of events other than deaths that stand in a similar relation to those same things. We can then compare cases where those events occur but no one dies, and compare them to cases where there are deaths. That is essentially what the series of cases in §3.1.1 does for deprivationism. If what we have seen is representative, then we can predict that as above the death events will seem worst.

In fact, there is a body of research in psychology that confirms this prediction. Life is what psychologists call a "sacred value," and one of the characteristics of a sacred value is resistance to equivalences and tradeoffs.¹⁴ Thus we can expect that examples of events where lives are lost will consistently be viewed as worse than examples of events where other instrumental goods are lost, even when - by deprivationist lights - the other goods lost are of greater value than the lives.

3.2 Against Intrinsicist Views

With the most common kind of extrinsicist view out of the way, we will take a detour through intrinsicist views before discussing views where the harm of death is extrinsic but final. We will do so because a discussion of death's intrinsic properties and why its harm cannot be among them will teach us some lessons that will become important in discussing the extrinsicist final view. It will turn out that, if death is harmful, it is harmful partially in virtue of the arrow of time, and this will be significant throughout the rest of the discussion.

3.2.1 The Case for an Intrinsicist View

At first glance, there's a strong case for regarding the harm of death as intrinsic. This comes from comparing the behavioral-motivational profile of our approach to death with that of the classic intrinsic harm: pain. We regard pain as harmful in itself. We do not avoid pain in order to avoid some other harmful thing that accompanies pain. We expend other general-purpose instrumental goods like money in order to avoid pain. We do not tend to trade pain off against extrinsic harms, unless doing so serves to gain us intrinsic goods or helps us to avoid other intrinsic harms.

Likewise with death. We do not typically avoid death in order to avoid other unpleasant things; we typically avoid death because we do not want to die. In fact, we make considerable sacrifices to avoid death. We are not as a general rule willing to trade dying off to obtain other self-regarding goods

¹⁴ Tetlock et al (2000).

(although we may for other-regarding goods); it's difficult to pay someone to die, unless the money goes to some other person like a family member or friend. In fact, death is one of the few harms that we will trade pain, even considerable pain, to avoid. We behave as if death itself is bad, not as if there is something that tends to accompany death that we wish to avoid by avoiding dying.

This suggests, but does not demand, that death's harm is inherent to dying. The natural first step in looking for something bad about dying is to look at the intrinsic properties of death itself. To this investigation we now turn.

3.2.2 Intrinsicity

It is notoriously tricky to say what makes a property intrinsic. The contemporary discussion of intrinsicity begins with Lewis and Langton (1998). In an earlier exchange, Jaegwon Kim (1982) had suggested a definition of intrinsicity in terms of accompaniment: a property is intrinsic just in case it can be instantiated by an object that is all alone, i.e. the only thing that exists. Lewis (1983) replied that 'being alone' is not intrinsic, but it obviously fits the definition.

Lewis and Langton argued that with some work, Kim's definition could be modified into something satisfactory. In order to do so, they introduce the idea of a property being independent of accompaniment. A property is independent of accompaniment just in case four cases are met: it can be instantiated alone, it can be instantiated while accompanied, a lonely thing can fail to instantiate it, and an accompanied thing can fail to instantiate it.

This does well on the easy cases. Intuitively intrinsic properties, like shape properties, are rightly classified as intrinsic. And intuitively extrinsic properties, like 'being alone,' are rightly classified as extrinsic. However, independence from accompaniment alone is not good enough. As Lewis and Langton noted, certain disjunctive properties will still cause trouble. For example, 'being cubical and alone or non-cubical and accompanied' is independent of accompaniment, but intuitively not intrinsic. In order to deal with cases like it, they invoked the notion of naturalness in an effort that is widely considered a failure.

However, recent work on intrinsicity has still found the idea of independence from accompaniment useful. In particular, Witmer et al (2005) have made it the core of an analysis of intrinsicity that seems well suited to our context. Witmer et al begin, not with intrinsic properties, but with *having a property in an intrinsic way*. Since we are dealing with a property (value) that can be both intrinsic and extrinsic, this is a useful notion to have on hand. They define having a property in an intrinsic way as follows:¹⁵

INTRINSIC WAY: something has a property in an intrinsic way just in case (i) that property is independent of accompaniment, and (ii) any other property in virtue of which it has that property is

¹⁵ Witmer et al (2005 p. 333).

also independent of accompaniment

They then define an intrinsic property as one that such that all possible instances of it are had in an intrinsic way.

This may be adequate for the project of identifying the purely intrinsic properties. But in our case, we are interested in what it is to have a property like value that can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. The idea of having a property in an intrinsic fashion is useful, but we will need to relativize all of the definitions to instances of that property rather than to properties *simpliciter*.

This begins with independence of accompaniment. Lewis and Langton defined what it is for a property to be independent of accompaniment; how would this relativize to some object having a property independent of accompaniment? A first pass simply takes the Lewis and Langton definition and inserts relativizations:

INSTANCE INDEPENDENCE A: some object having a property is independent of accompaniment just in case: (i) the object has the property (ii) it can have that property while lonely, (iii) it can have that property while accompanied, (iv) it can lack that property while lonely, and (v) it can lack that property while accompanied.

This definition will work for some paradigm cases. When I am lying down, my shape is more-or-less straight. If I were the only thing in the world, it would still be more-or-less straight. But I can sit up, and doing so would make my shape bent. If I were the only thing in the world, it would still be bent. So it looks my instantiating my shape-properties fits instance independence'.

However, as it stands, this is not an adequate adaptation of the Lewis and Langton definition. I might have some of my intrinsic properties independent of accompaniment (and in fact this is likely the case with value properties), in which case they will fail clauses (iv) and (v) of the definition on account of my being unable to lack them. This suggests that we might be better off without those clauses, leading us to a second pass:

INSTANCE INDEPENDENCE B: some object having a property is independent of accompaniment just in case: (i) the object has that property (ii) it can have that property while lonely, and (iii) it can have that property while accompanied.

This definition now does not exclude essential properties from being had intrinsically. But it errs in the opposite direction: it now counts every essential property as being had independent of accompaniment, since a thing must have its essential properties whether or not it is accompanied. The original definition avoided this problem by allowing all possible instances of a property to count when testing for Lewis and Langton's clauses (iii) and (iv). Perhaps by borrowing this strategy, we can avoid the issue.

INSTANCE INDEPENDENCE C: some object having a property is independent of accompaniment just in case: (i) the object has that property (ii) it can have that property while lonely, (iii) it can have that property while accompanied, (iv) something can lack that property while lonely, and (v) something can lack that property while accompanied

Now we have a definition that looks well suited to handle essential properties. Unlike our second pass, it does not reckon every essential property as had independent of accompaniment. But it leaves the possibility open.

With a notion of independence of accompaniment that applies not to just to properties in general but to particular instances of property-having, we can now adapt the second step of the Witmer et al analysis of intrinsicity.

INSTANCE INTRINSICALITY: an instance of object having a property is in an intrinsic way just in case (i) the object having that property is independent of accompaniment, and (ii) for any other property such that the object has the property in virtue of it, the object has that property independent of accompaniment

Like the Witmer et al definition, this will fit both the paradigm cases and the problem cases. And it will allow us to test for when something has a property intrinsically, which will allow us to explore what (if any) properties a death has intrinsically.

3.2.3 The Intrinsic Value-Properties of a Death

The central question for an intrinsicist view of death is to find an answer to the question: “what are the intrinsic properties of a death, and is it reasonable to count ‘harm’ among them?” Now that we have a working definition for when something has a property intrinsically, we can begin to answer this question. And it begins by thinking about what a death is.

A death is the ending of a life. That tells us several things. First, a death is an *event*. The ontology of events is contentious, and we do not need to take a stand here, but it means that to think sensibly about what properties an event would have alone we must assume that we can think sensibly about lonely events. Second, a death sits at one temporal boundary of a sequence of events, a life. We can think of a life as a four-dimensional complex event that traces through spacetime. Crucially, a death sits at the *later* boundary of a life. The early boundary of a life, if one there be, is a birth. On the assumption that there is some harm in dying, this asymmetry is axiologically significant. Whatever else it may be, one’s birth is not itself a harm. This means that the harm of death partly depends on the arrow of time.

The point here is related to what is known as the Lucretian “symmetry” argument. Lucretius argued that death is not harmful because birth is not harmful and there is an axiological symmetry between

death and birth. I am going to proceed on the assumption that this premise is false, and that there is an axiological asymmetry between birth and death.¹⁶ Since the arrow of time is the difference between the earlier and later temporal boundaries of a life (it determines which is earlier and which is later), the arrow of time must partially ground this asymmetry.

What is the arrow of time? We can see the arrow of time in many things. At a physical level, things tend toward equilibrium. Gasses expand to fill open spaces; they do not bunch up in a corner. Entropy increases. Causes precede their effects. We have reliable memories but not reliable foresight, departments of history but not departments of prophecy. Time, unlike space, has a directionality to it.

Why does time have this feature? Nothing in our standard fundamental physical laws requires it. An intriguing proposal reduces Time's Arrow to the probabilities of statistical mechanics, plus the hypothesis that our universe began in a low entropy state.¹⁷ The details of this proposal aren't important; what matters is that the arrow of time itself depends on facts about the entropy of the boundary conditions of the universe and the physical grounds of the probabilities of statistical mechanics. When we place a death alone in a world, these things do not plausibly come with it. But without them, there is no arrow of time. Without an arrow of time, there is no death. There are merely axiologically symmetric endpoints to a life.

It is difficult to imagine what it would be like to live a life absent a direction to time. Much of how we conceive of ourselves involves before-and-after thinking. But we might be able to draw some inspiration from how we think of ourselves in space. Space, unlike time, has no inherent directionality. There is no absolute up or down, left or right. Our perception of these directions is relative. From the perspective of someone living in the United States, people living on the other side of the world are upside down, and vice versa. When Neil Armstrong stood on the moon, 'up' for him was very different than when he was on earth. More importantly, we do not attach axiological significance to any of the boundaries of our life in spacelike dimensions. 'The high point of a life' may occasionally serve as a metaphor for its best period, but it is not, except by accident, the literal boundary of the life in any of the spacelike dimensions.

If the way we perceive the spatial boundaries of our existence is a guide to how we would perceive its temporal boundaries if time, like space, had no inherent direction, then it looks like we cannot divorce the badness of death from the arrow of time. Consequently, death does not have its value-properties intrinsically because it does not have them independent of accompaniment. It must be accompanied by the physical grounds for the arrow of time. While the exact nature of those grounds is disputed, it is plausible that they involve the physical grounds of statistical mechanics and/or the entropy-properties of the boundary conditions of the universe. Not things that we will find when we

¹⁶ Kamm (1988).

¹⁷ Albert (2002), Loewer (2012), Chen (Forthcoming).

consider a death alone. So death's harm cannot be intrinsic; the arrow of time is required to create the birth/death asymmetry.

Before we depart this discussion, it's worth anticipating an objection. One might be tempted to object that I have assumed a controversial four-dimensionalism about persons. According to the four dimensionalists, persons are 4D spacetime worms (or series of stages, but we can ignore that wrinkle) that exist at specific times by having temporal parts at them. This is indeed controversial metaphysics, but I have not assumed it. I am assuming that *lives* are four-dimensional events spread out in time. But I have said nothing about the relationship between persons and lives. For all I have said, persons might be 4D worms spreaded through the extended events we call lives, or they might be 3D objects that sweep through their lives without having parts at different times. On that I am neutral.¹⁸

3.3 Against Extrinsicist Final Views

Now that we have explored the relationship between the harm of death (if any there be) and the arrow of time, we are in a position to evaluate proposals where the harm of death is extrinsic but final. This view incorporates many of the insights we have already encountered. Unlike instrumentalist views, it is not vulnerable to parody cases where it predicts that a number of deaths are both quantitatively and qualitatively equally as bad as other losses of instrumental value as might be found in a casino or a stock market. Unlike intrinsicist views, it concedes that death does not have its harm independent of accompaniment. A defender of the extrinsicist final view can acknowledge that a death has its value properties partially in virtue of the arrow of time. This makes it the most challenging account of the badness of death for an Epicurean to deal with.

How might we object to an extrinsicist final view? One line of objection might co-opt a common argument for extrinsicist instrumentalist views: the fact that not all deaths are equally bad for the ones who die. The death of someone who has lived a full life, seen their great projects to successful conclusion, and can look forward only to diminished capacities may still be bad for them, but the death of a young person in the prime of life with many hopes and dreams unpursued and unfulfilled seems worse for them. If death is a final bad, this kind of asymmetry is a mystery. Unlike pain, deaths do not come in duration or intensity, so a view according to which not all deaths are equal but death is a final harm has some explaining to do. It already must dismantle many of our intuitive judgments about death's harm. Why not one further, the judgment that death is a harm?

Another line of argument might point to some of the things that turn out to ground the harm of death as providing a bad explanation. We might begin this objection by noting that if the extrinsicist final view is true, we get some odd counterfactuals, such as: if the initial entropy of the

¹⁸ I have spoken as if *presentism* about time is false, by characterizing lives as complex 4D events spread out in spacetime. But that is just for ease of exposition. Taking the time we could translate everything into presentism-friendly terminology.

universe had been much higher, my death would not be harmful. This is because the arrow of time is partially explained by the initial entropy of the universe, and the harm of my death is partially explained by the arrow of time. Odd counterfactuals are often the canary in the coal mine for bad explanations. It is part of the role of explanations to explain not only what does happen, but what would happen under plausible suppositions. When these start going wrong, it's a clue that we haven't quite gotten the explanation of the actual phenomenon right. And yet if an extrinsicist final view is right, the badness of death is explained by the arrow of time. Might we then instead reject the proposal which ties the arrow of time to statistical mechanics and the entropy at the boundary conditions of the universe? It is controversial. But other substitutes are not much better. One rival, for instance, simply takes the arrow of time as a brute fact about the universe.¹⁹ This adds mystery to mystery. Another takes it as a feature of how similarity works in evaluating counterfactuals.²⁰ This will support similarly support strange counterfactuals about how, were the behavior of 'would' in English somewhat different, my death would not be harmful. Another wrong explanation.

Alone, neither line of argumentation is conclusive. Advocates of the view could find ways to explain or explain away the intuition that some deaths are worse than others. They could also appeal to the controversial nature of attempts to account for the arrow of time, holding out for future research to provide a solution that does not give rise to the odd counterfactuals that point to it as a bad explanation for the harm of death. But these moves together seem a significant cost. They leave the view holding that death is an extrinsic final harm, but that we neither have a good grasp on which properties in the world are those in virtue of which it is a harm nor on what about death, beyond its seeming harmful, our account of death's harm is in a good position to explain. We have at best a pyrrhic victory.

4. Conclusion

Thus concludes our exploration. We have mapped out the possible kinds of value property into four categories: extrinsic instrumentalist, extrinsic final, intrinsic instrumentalist, and intrinsic final. In each category we have searched for a harm associated with death that is fit to play the role death plays in our moral theorizing and emotional lives. We found none. We are not exactly in a position to say, with the strongest form of Epicureanism, that death has no harm whatsoever associated with it. But the harms we have found are mundane, un concerning in contexts that do not involve death. Perhaps

¹⁹ Maudlin (2007).

²⁰ Lewis (1979).

they prevent us from saying that death is nothing to us. But if they are all that's bad about dying, we should find death's shadow considerably lightened.²¹

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