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Reviving concurrentism about death

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1 Introduction

Epicurus claimed that we are worse off because of death neither before it happens nor after, and he was right about that. But he went wrong in supposing on that basis that death is no harm at all, because he neglected a third possibility. Death may be bad for its victim just when it happens. I'll argue that this maligned alternative is the most plausible view about the times when our deaths are bad for us. Call it *Concurrentism*. The aim is to show that Concurrentism should be brushed aside no longer. There are two key premises: (a) we are worse off due to harms when the relevant events are occurring and, (b) that one must exist at time t to be worse off at t . If (a) and (b) are true, Concurrentism emerges as an especially natural theory of the deprivation of death.

This fact has gone mostly unnoticed by philosophers responding to Epicurus. To date, Julian Lamont is the only other philosopher I'm aware of to have defended Concurrentism in print.¹ Two recent books on the subject, by Ben Bradley and Steven Luper, suggest that Concurrentism is either confused or easily dismissed.² Given the view's unpopularity, my aim is modest. I hope to rehabilitate Concurrentism into a serious answer to Epicurus.

Epicurus noticed that death is unique among harms in that it marks the end of existence for those who are harmed by it. This generates a problem about when death makes its victim worse off: unless people can be worse off when they no longer exist, death cannot be bad for a person after she dies. Yet a natural attitude toward death is that no one is worse off because of it while they are alive. These considerations led Epicurus to the mistaken view that death cannot be bad for the person who dies. Those who think death can harm us need a way out of the Epicurean dilemma. That is, they need to specify a time

¹Lamont (1998).

²Bradley (2009), p. 86-87; Luper (2009), p. 134.

during which the victims of death are made worse off. Call this the *Timing Puzzle*.

Our deaths harm us by deprivation. Like other kinds of deprivation, death deprives us of goods we would have otherwise enjoyed. But because it does so by ending our existence, it constitutes a special case of deprivation that is importantly different from the non-lethal cases. So although a good solution to the Timing Puzzle should fit nicely with a good theory of non-lethal deprivation, I'll argue that forcing lethal and non-lethal cases under the same view leads to trouble. We'll focus on deprivation, but the same arguments will go for benefits too—both lethal and non-lethal.

2 Non-lethal deprivations

Some claim that good approaches to the Timing Puzzle should be independent from ideas about non-lethal deprivation. William Grey and Thomas Nagel defend this view, citing the fact that death ends the existence of its victims and the puzzle that results as the key difference between them.³ Yet it's unclear why this should justify preferring solutions to the Timing Puzzle that ignore relevant comparisons with ordinary deprivations when we can account for the difference by treating death as a special case of deprivation. To view death as wholly separate kind of deprivation is to play right into the hands of skeptics about the harm of death like Epicurus. The more unlike everyday deprivation the evil of death becomes, the more suspicious it's liable to appear.

What's more, timing questions do confront non-lethal deprivation. Suppose that spraining my ankle yesterday causes me to miss out on the enjoyment of playing tennis tomorrow. It's easy to identify the time when the spraining of my ankle occurred, and it's easy to identify the time when the fun I would have had playing would have taken place. But it's not so easy to determine when I am actually worse off for having missed the fun on account of the sprain. Am I worse off while I have the desire to play that the sprain frustrated? Am I worse off when the sprain happens? Or is it when the game I'm sitting out takes place? None of these possibilities is antecedently obvious, and a skeptic about non-lethal deprivation could raise worries about each of them. So, a good theory of non-lethal deprivations should also involve an answer to the Timing Puzzle.

I submit that our answer to the Timing Puzzle should be motivated by our theory for non-lethal deprivations, even if the non-lethal view isn't exactly the same the the lethal one. Other things equal, having two entirely independent

³Grey (1999), p 360; Nagel (1993), p 63.

approaches where a more unified approach would generate adequate results for both is gratuitous. Grey and Nagel are right to the extent that we may have to accept some differences in the answers we give to the different timing questions due to the significant fact that death ends our existence while other deprivations do not. But that need not require radically diverging views. Apart from the loss of a subject for harm, the only difference between lethal and non-lethal seems to be magnitude. Deaths, particularly early ones, can deprive their victims of much more than ordinary deprivations. Yet this is not always so. An especially grievous harm in life can deprive a person of much more than a benign death. Justifying an independent answer for death requires a reason to think that it is different not just in magnitude but in kind as well. Absent such a reason, the bifurcated approach appears unmotivated.

I don't think any answer to the timing question for non-lethal deprivation is obvious, but reflecting on cases lends support for the view that we are worse off on account of deprivations at two times: when the event that deprives us occurs, and when the events of which we are being deprived would have occurred. These times may be overlapping, contiguous, or they may be separated. Call this the *Relevant Events View*, or *REV* for short.

There are many ways things can be deprivationally bad for us. Some events are bad for a person's well-being, some are bad for a person's bank account, some are bad for a person's character, and some are bad for a person's reasoning abilities. Since there are a number of ways to be deprived, we should test REV against a variety of cases. Consider the following.

POISON — deprivation of well-being

Today I drink a poison that has no ill effects on me until next week, when I will feel tremendous pain for two days.

ASHAMED — deprivation of character

I lie by telling my family and friends I am a lawyer rather than a philosopher, and do nothing to redeem myself until the lie is no longer believable.

TIPSY — deprivation of common sense

Having another drink at the bar causes me to reason poorly for the rest of the evening.

If we ask when I am worse off in these cases, the most natural thing to say is that it's when the depriving event occurred, and again when the events I was deprived of would have occurred, just as REV predicts. In POISON I am worse off at the moment when I ingest the poison because I have just caused

myself a great deal of discomfort, and I am worse off again two weeks later during the two days when I otherwise would have been feeling much better. In *ASHAMED*, the depriving events and the events I miss out on overlap in time. As long as I maintain the lie I am causing harm to my character, and during that same period I would have had a much better character if I weren't lying. Suppose also that simply telling the truth does not sufficiently rehabilitate my character, so that there is a time when I am no longer keeping up the lie but am still suffering its effects on my character. In that case I am worse off from the time I initiate the lie until I redeem myself. In *TIPSY*, the depriving event and the period of deprivation are roughly contiguous. There is the event of the drink that causes my deprivation, and the period during which I am deprived follows closely. I'm worse off from the time I have the drink until my good sense has returned to where it was before.

If these assessments of the examples are plausible, then REV is at least a natural answer to the timing question facing non-lethal deprivation. They may not offer a decisive argument for REV on their own, but that's unimportant for present purposes. For REV to help make Concurrentism more attractive, it needs only to be a natural and attractive view itself. To the extent that REV gets our concept of everyday deprivation right, it gives us reason to prefer Concurrentism as an answer to the Timing Puzzle, as I'll explain in the next section.

3 Death as a special case of the REV approach

Extending REV to death directly yields the view that we are worse off on account of death both when it takes us and during the period afterward when we would otherwise enjoy more goods. But there is something odd about the idea of being worse off after death, when we no longer exist. As Steven Luper points out, the subject of the harm of death is a living, breathing person who is taken out of existence.⁴ This oddness led Epicurus and others to reject the possibility that we could be worse off after we are gone.⁵ Call this rejection the *No Subject Thesis*, or *NoSub* for short.⁶

(NoSub) For all persons S , there is no way things are going for S (good, bad, or the same) when S does not exist.

If NoSub is true, a direct extension of REV to the deprivation of death can-

⁴Luper 2009, p. 129.

⁵See Luper, p 239; Grey, p 360; Li, p 352; Nagel (1993), p 66.

⁶Harry Silverstein (1980) appears to have been the first to use this label.

not succeed.

All the same, we should preserve as much of the relevant events approach as possible in our answer to the Timing Puzzle. So, in light of NoSub we would do well to consider death a special case of the relevant events approach, in which the period when we would otherwise be enjoying goods is ruled out as a time when we are worse off. Instead, we are worse off because of death just when it—the depriving event—occurs.

We should accept NoSub because of an argument from *temporal well-being internalism*: the goodness or badness of how things are going for a person at time t is entirely determined by the intrinsic goods and evils the person receives at t .

(i) If internalism is true, then NoSub.

(ii) internalism is true.

Therefore, NoSub

The rationale for premise (i) is that a person receives no intrinsic good or evils when they don't exist, so internalism implies that there is no way things are going for them after death, good or bad. Some might suggest that people receive intrinsic value levels of zero when they don't exist, and so there is a way things are going for people after they've died: they're going neutrally. But this is a mistake. Approaches to intrinsic well-being should take it as a starting point that it supervenes on robust states a person is in, and non-existent people aren't in such states. They aren't instantiating any properties, except perhaps the property of not being around, and this is too thin a property to underpin well-being.

Indeed, the big three approaches to intrinsic well-being—hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, and objective list views—bear out this point. According to hedonism, people don't receive intrinsic goods or evils when they're gone because they don't experience pain or pleasure. The same looks to be true of desire-satisfactionism, because a desire that doesn't exist cannot be fulfilled. That need not mean, however, that it's never bad for us that desires we currently have will be frustrated after our death. Facts about what will happen after we die might be bad for us while we're still alive. Objective list views should also involve the idea that people don't receive intrinsic well-being after they've died. The sorts of things one paradigmatically finds on the list of values, things like love, friendship, knowledge, and integrity, can only be had by the living.

We ought to believe premise (ii) because internalism explains why a slab of

asphalt can't be deprived of goods, but people can.⁷ This difference should be explicable, and it's not clear that other explanations of it will do as well. Trying to explain the difference by appealing to the asphalt's lack of happiness, desires, or sentience, for instance, would be to give an explanation that not everyone can accept, since there is reasonable disagreement about which theory of well-being is the right one.

Additionally, in uncontroversial cases of well-being deprivation we find that the deprivation is manifested by the person's getting intrinsic goods that are worse than what they otherwise would have gotten. When I sprain my ankle and miss out on tennis, I am deprived precisely because I'm having less fun by not playing tennis than I would be if I were. Similar things go for the other cases we saw, POISON, ASHAMED, and TIPSYP. I'm intrinsically worse off in some respect than I otherwise would have been had I not ingested the poison, told the lie, or had the drink.

Together, REV and NoSub make a strong case for Concurrentism. Next we'll see how they tell against other responses to Epicurus.

4 Other views

The competing views about when death makes us worse off are:

- Death is bad at all times (eternalism)
- Death is bad at no time (indefinitism)
- Death is bad before it occurs (priorism)
- Death is bad afterwards (subsequentism)
- Death is bad at the first moment after death (Lamont's concurrentism)

If REV gets our concept of deprivation right, then all of these views make the difference between death and non-lethal deprivation a difference in kind rather than magnitude. That's unmotivated for the reasons we saw above, namely that it plays right back into epicurean skepticism about death's harm. Concurrentism thus looks uniquely well-motivated. On top of that, eternalism, subsequentism, and Lamont's concurrentism are threatened by NoSub. If it's true, then these three answers to the Timing Puzzle cannot be right.

⁷c.f. Luper 2009, pp. 132-133. Luper argues for NoSub in a somewhat different way, but the thought counts in favor here too.

5 Objections

Below are four likely objections to the argument from REV and NoSub.

1: *REV is false—non-lethal deprivations are not bad as early as the depriving event.*

Some will claim that deprivations can't be bad until the period of deprivation actually occurs. This is likely just a disagreement over the cases that motivate REV, as it's unclear how to argue for this without appealing to more examples. This kind of disagreement is acceptable present purposes. As long as the interpretation of the cases we saw above is not obviously mistaken, then REV should be a serious alternative to other ideas about when deprivations are bad, and that was the only goal. But it's worth noting that this kind of objection may result from thinking of one kind of deprivation case as representative of all. In the ASHAMED and TIPSYP cases above, the depriving events and the period of deprivation are roughly contiguous, and many other deprivations work this way. Focussing on such cases may lead people to believe that deprivations are bad only during the time of deprivation. I think cases like POISON show that's not the only way to think about it.

2: *REV implies that death is bad earlier than its arrival.*

Events deprive us by causing us to miss out on goods. But these events aren't causally isolated—my ingesting the slow-acting poison was caused by my enemy putting it in my drink ten minutes ago, for example. If we interpret REV as a view about when things that cause *periods of deprivation* are bad for us, it would then suggest that death is bad whenever it's caused, not just when it happens. But this is to get the view backwards. The Timing Puzzle doesn't ask us to say when the period of deprivation after death is bad, it asks when the event of death itself is bad. The explanation we get from REV is that in general, depriving events are bad when they occur, not when they are caused. Supposing that my poisoned beverage will eventually kill me, REV and NoSub tell us that my impending death is not bad for me now when I drink it, nor when it was poisoned ten minutes ago, but only later on when it kills me. The events of having it poisoned and having taken the lethal agent are also deprivations, so REV says these non-lethal events are bad in a different way: (a) when they happen, and (b) during any other times I'm missing out on goods because of them, perhaps during my slow process of dying. In this way we can avoid having to say that death is bad before it happens because of REV.

3: *NoSub and REV together wrongly imply that posthumous harm is impossible.*

Another worry is that if we cannot be worse off after death, then the way things turn out after we die won't ever be bad for us. But believing in NoSub and REV doesn't require taking a stand on this possibility. They do say that no one is ever extrinsically worse off because of death or any other depriving event at times after death, but it's still possible make sense of posthumous harm. REV is a view about when events are extrinsically bad for us, but it needn't be a view about when facts are intrinsically so. The fact that things will not go the way I want after my death could be bad for its own sake for right now even though the relevant events have not yet occurred, just as the fact that I'm going to die could be bad for me now.

4: *REV commits us to over-counting disvalue.*

Compare REV to a view saying deprivations are bad only during the period of deprivation. If we were to add up the harm of non-lethal deprivations by each time it occurs, REV would predict that deprivations are twice as bad as what "period of deprivation only" calculates. That would be objectionably strange. But I don't know of any reason for thinking the badness we experience at the time of the depriving event and the badness had during the period of deprivation should be counted separately just because they're temporally disjoint. To the extent that REV is a natural view, it suggests that one and the same occurrence of value for a person can be multiply located in time. This is an intriguing idea that might have implications for other counting problems in value theory, but this isn't the place to explore that question. It's interesting enough to consider the multiple-times result on its own.

References

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