

MORTAL HARM

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The harm thesis says that death may harm the individual who dies. The posthumous harm thesis says that posthumous events may harm those who die. Epicurus rejects both theses, claiming that there is no subject who is harmed, no clear harm which is received, and no clear time when any harm is received. Feldman rescues the harm thesis with solutions to Epicurus' three puzzles based on his own version of the deprivation account of harm. But many critics, among them Lamont, Grey, Feit and Bradley, have rejected Feldman's solution to the timing puzzle, offering their own solutions in its place. I discuss these solutions to the timing puzzle, and defend the view that while we are alive we may incur harm for which death and posthumous events are responsible.

We might state Epicurus' well known argument concerning death as follows: the *harm thesis*, on which death may harm the individual who dies, can hold true only if there is a *subject* who is harmed by death, a clear *harm* which is received, and a *time* when the harm is received. As to the timing issue, there seem to be two possible solutions: death harms its victims either while they are alive, or later. If we opt for the second solution, we appear to run head on into the problem of the subject, for assuming that we do not exist after we are alive, no one is left to incur harm. If we opt for the first solution – death harms its victims while they are alive – we have a ready solution to the problem of the subject, but we face the problem of supplying a clear way in which death is bad: death seems unable to have any ill effect on us while we are living, since it has not yet occurred. Concluding that there is no coherent solution to all three issues, Epicurus rejects the harm thesis. He focuses on death, but his argument applies more generally, to include all events that follow death, so that in addition to the harm thesis, Epicurus rejects the *posthumous harm thesis*, that posthumous events can harm those who die. For convenience, I shall call any harm for which death is responsible 'mortal harm'.

Fred Feldman has attempted to rescue the harm thesis with solutions to Epicurus' three puzzles.¹ Thomas Nagel and many other theorists had

¹ See F. Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper* (Oxford UP, 1992), and 'Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death', *Philosophical Review*, 100 (1991), pp. 205–27, repr. in J.M. Fischer (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford UP, 1993), pp. 307–26.

claimed that the harm concerned is a form of deprivation;² with certain qualifications, Feldman agrees. This harm can be made clear by comparing the actual world, in which I have just died, to the closest possible world in which I live longer. If the latter is more valuable for me than the former, dying has harmed me. The *subject* of this harm is the living breathing person who has yet to die. As for the *time* when death is bad for its victim, Feldman says ‘it seems clear to me that the answer to this question is “eternally”’ (‘Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death’, p. 221). His suggested solution appears to be *eternalism* – if I am harmed by my death, I am always harmed – in that the assertion ‘The world in which I live on is more valuable to me than the world in which I die’, if true, is true whenever it is uttered.

But many critics, among them Julian Lamont, William Grey, Harry Silverstein, Neil Feit and Ben Bradley, reject eternalism, offering their own solutions in its place.³ In this paper I shall argue that their proposals, like eternalism, all fail. I shall then discuss an alternative solution, namely, *priorism*, which says that we may incur deprivation harm for which death is responsible while we are alive. Relying on priorism, I claim to be able to supply plausible solutions to all three of the issues Epicurus raised (this is not to address all of the issues which contemporary Epicureans raise).⁴

I begin with an explanation of why Feldman’s critics reject eternalism.

I

Suppose I stubbed my toe yesterday. If we ask when the stubbing is bad for me, what exactly do we want to know? There are two possibilities. First, we might be asking ‘When is it true that the stubbing is bad for me?’. Here the answer is ‘Eternally, if ever’. Secondly, we might be asking ‘At which times *t* is it true that the stubbing is bad for me at *t*?’. Here the answer is not ‘Eternally’, but rather something like ‘The stubbing is bad for me at all and only those times when it hurts’. The same ambiguity arises when we ask about the timing of mortal harm. Feldman seems to take ‘When is Lincoln’s death bad for him?’ to mean ‘When is it true that his death is bad for him?’.

² See T. Nagel, ‘Death’, in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge UP, 1979), pp. 1–11.

³ J. Lamont, ‘A Solution to the Puzzle of When Death Harms its Victims’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76 (1998), pp. 198–212; W. Grey, ‘Epicurus and the Harm of Death’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (1999), pp. 358–64; H. Silverstein, ‘The Evil of Death’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (1980), pp. 401–24 (repr. in Fischer (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death*, pp. 95–116), and ‘The Evil of Death Revisited’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24 (2000), pp. 116–35; N. Feit, ‘The Time of Death’s Misfortune’, *Noûs*, 36 (2002), pp. 359–83; B. Bradley, ‘When is Death Bad for the One Who Dies?’, *Noûs*, 38 (2004), pp. 1–28.

⁴ For a recent study of Epicurus’ project, see J. Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford UP, 2004).

The answer is ‘Eternally, if ever’. But the question can also mean ‘At which times t is it true that Lincoln’s death is bad for him at t ?’. According to Feldman’s critics, it is the second version of the question that concerns the timing of death’s harmfulness. And its answer leads us away from eternalism.

But where does it lead? There are many possibilities. If death and posthumous events are responsible for deprivation harm, this might be incurred by its living subject at the following times (or some combination thereof):

- (a) at the times when death and posthumous events occur (concurrentism)
- (b) after they occur (subsequentism)
- (c) before they occur (priorism)
- (d) at all times (eternalism)
- (e) at an indeterminate time (indefinitism).

While Feldman’s critics reject eternalism, they disagree about which view should take its place. Lamont opts for concurrentism; Silverstein opts for indefinitism, as does Grey (who combines it with subsequentism); the other two favour subsequentism.

Many philosophers will reject indefinitism out of hand because of the mysteriousness of the timing of the harms it posits. My own suggestion is that in the present context, where we are attempting to meet Epicurus’ challenge, we should consider indefinitism to be an option of last resort. In effect, indefinitism rejects Epicurus’ challenge: it says that death or posthumous events can harm us even if there is no definite time when we incur the harm. I also suggest that the strongest way to respond to indefinitism is to answer the question it rejects – to explain *when* we may incur mortal harm, as options (a)–(d) purport to do. For now, then, I shall put indefinitism aside, and return to it after discussing how the other options fare.

On Lamont’s version of concurrentism, we incur deprivation harm at the time when some event ensures that we shall not retain or attain some otherwise available good (I shall call such events *ensuring events*). Death is itself an ensuring event, so death and at least many deprivation harms occur simultaneously. Similar reasoning might even lead to the concurrentist story about when posthumous events harm us, for, like death, posthumous events ensure that we shall not attain some goods we otherwise would have had, such as not being slandered posthumously. The upshot is a unified story about when death and posthumous events harm us.

Like the others, Feit and Bradley accept the deprivation view of harm. However, unlike Lamont, they opt for subsequentism. Feit’s defence is based on examples of things we say about ordinary (not mortal) harms. In the stubbed toe example, the answer to the question ‘At which times t is it true

that the stubbing is bad for me at t ?' is that the stubbing harmed me after it occurred. Roughly, it is bad for me at all and only those times when it hurts. On Feit's view, to determine whether dying at time t would harm me, we compare the nearest possible world w in which I do not die at t to the actual world in which I die at t . In w , I eventually die, albeit after t . Suppose that I would fare well in this world after t . Eventually I shall cease to fare well in w , if for no other reason than that I eventually die. The interval of time after t which starts when I begin to fare well in w , and ends when I cease to fare well, is, roughly, the period of time during which I accrue the harm for which death is responsible, according to Feit.

Ben Bradley refines Feit's version of subsequentism. According to Bradley, S 's death at t is bad for S at t' if and only if the intrinsic value of the state of affairs at t' for S in the nearest world in which S does not die at t is greater than zero. Hence 'death is bad for the person who dies at all and only those times when the person would have been living well, or living a life worth living, had she not died when she did' (Bradley, p. 1).

So much for the proposed corrections to Feldman's solution to the timing puzzle. What I shall do now is suggest an objection to subsequentism.

First, a concession: if we rely on ordinary language, citing the way 'harm' is used in everyday speech, subsequentism looks plausible. The stubbed toe example is perhaps not ideal, since it does not turn on a good of which I am deprived; but certainly it is natural to say that the harm from a toe-stubbing occurs immediately after the stubbing, while the toe is throbbing. Still, one can easily cite cases of deprivation harm in favour of subsequentism. Your enemy gives the order that you are to be drugged into unconsciousness for the next month. When does your enemy's order harm you? Arguably, after it is given – while you cannot conduct your life as usual. However, even though such cases suggest that we ordinarily speak in line with subsequentism, subsequentism cannot rest solely on this kind of argument. If we cannot make clear sense of the idea that people incur harm while they are dead, subsequentism must go, and we must conclude that many things we commonly say about posthumous harm are in error.

Another concession: it is possible to make sense of how things can come to be true of a person, say Socrates, by virtue of events occurring after he is dead. But there is an obstacle, namely, the apparent truth of the claim that things may have a property at a particular time only if they exist at that time.

Here is one way of overcoming the obstacle. Along with Harry Silverstein and others, we might adopt four-dimensionalism, the metaphysical view that past and future objects are ontologically on a par with present objects, even though their temporal locations are different. Of each object, it is appropriate to say that it exists, where 'exists' is used tenselessly, so that 'Socrates

(tenselessly) exists' is true whether asserted in the past, present or future. On the four-dimensionalist view, it makes sense to say things like 'Socrates is now dead'. We can refer to Socrates (who exists in the tenseless sense), even though 'Socrates' refers to something temporally located wholly in the past, and we can say of him that he is no longer alive. Similarly, by virtue of certain events occurring centuries after his death, it comes to be true of Socrates that he was discussed in a philosophy class in 2006.⁵

Here is another way of overcoming the obstacle. David-Hillel Ruben suggests that we may correctly attribute properties to objects or persons who have ceased (or not begun) to exist.⁶ The statement 'Socrates was discussed in a philosophy class in 2006' appears to imply that Socrates changed: he acquired the property of being discussed in a particular class. The apparent change occurred in 2006. We can make sense of this appearance by saying that the change involved is a 'Cambridge' change. This is the sort of change a thing undergoes wholly in virtue of its relationship to something else. Socrates does not undergo any change in his intrinsic properties when discussed in the twenty-first century. It is we who change our intrinsic properties; but by virtue of his relation to us, he has come to be discussed. Things must exist at a particular time in order to have an intrinsic property at that time. Moreover, things must exist to undergo changes in their intrinsic properties. But they need not exist, or change intrinsically, to acquire properties in Cambridge changes. (Ruben hints that Cambridge changes are not 'real' changes, but I see no reason to follow him in this view. Why should real changes be limited to changes in intrinsic properties?)

Is it now clear that people may undergo harm while they are dead, as subsequentism avers? Of course not, if harm consists in being in some bad condition such as pain. After Socrates is dead, 'Socrates' continues to refer to the living Socrates. Hence 'Socrates was harmed at time *t*' can only mean that the living Socrates is what is harmed at *t*. Clearly the *living* Socrates does not undergo harm *while his life is over*, if the only harms are conditions like pain. But my topic is the deprivation account, according to which harm can consist in the absence of some salient good. So perhaps we can make sense of subsequentism by interpreting 'Socrates' death harmed him while his life was over' as 'The living Socrates lacked, during a stretch of time following his death, various salient goods which he would have obtained if he had not died'. This we could say whether we think, as four-dimensionalists, that the timelessly existing Socrates lacks goods while he is no longer alive, or, with

⁵ For further clarification, see M. Rea, 'Four-Dimensionalism', in M.J. Loux and D.W. Zimmerman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics* (Oxford UP, 2003), pp. 246–81.

⁶ D.-H. Ruben, 'A Puzzle about Posthumous Predication', *Philosophical Review*, 97 (1988), pp. 211–36.

Ruben, that Socrates lacks various goods while he is no longer existent. Nothing mysterious there!

Nevertheless, I shall argue that we have yet to make sense of people incurring harm while dead. I shall suggest that to be capable of harm, a thing must have certain properties, some of which the dead lack. In particular, the dead lack a property I shall call *responsiveness*.

I shall say that a creature is 'responsive' at t if and only if its well-being may be affected at t – rising if certain conditions are met, and falling if certain other conditions are met. If nothing can be in its interests at t , a creature is not responsive at t . So defined, responsiveness is not entirely clear; unfortunately, further clarification of the notion of responsiveness will turn on precisely what is meant by 'well-being', and the notion of well-being is, of course, highly controversial. I cannot hope to defend an account of well-being here. What I shall do instead is sketch what responsiveness comes to on each of the three standard accounts of well-being. These accounts are classified by Derek Parfit into three types: hedonist, desire-fulfilment and objective-list accounts.⁷

On *hedonist* accounts, a creature's well-being at t is determined by the level of pleasure and pain it experiences at t . On this view, responsiveness at t consists in the capacity to experience pleasure or pain at t . For all known creatures, responsiveness in this sense requires having the sort of nervous system that generates pleasure or pain depending on prevailing circumstances. Hence, for example, a zygote, which entirely lacks any cognitive apparatus, is unresponsive. *Desire-fulfilment* theories say that well-being is a matter of the fulfilment of certain salient desires, and that, other things being equal, a creature's well-being is higher at t when the salient desires it has at t are or will be met, while its well-being is lower at t when the salient desires it has at t are or will be thwarted. For the fulfilment theorist, responsiveness at t consists roughly in having (or in the capacity to have) salient desires at t , and also requires having the kind of cognitive apparatus that sustains desires. Thus once again, on the desire-fulfilment theory, a zygote is unresponsive. *Objective-list* theories explain well-being in terms of various things that are *objectively* good: their goodness is not merely a matter of their pleasantness or their fulfilling desires (although pleasure and desire-fulfilment, perhaps with certain qualifications, might themselves be among the listed objective goods). Assuming that some things are objectively bad, such as pain, these too would bear on well-being. What goes on the 'list' of goods (and bads) is controversial, but any objective-list theorist is likely to include two of Aristotle's examples, friendship and knowledge. Thus, other things being equal, one's well-being is higher at t when one develops or

⁷ See D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 4.

enhances a friendship or one's knowledge (or some other listed good) at t , and lower when one's friendship ends or one loses knowledge at t . On this view, responsiveness at t involves the capacity for friendship or knowledge (or some other listed item) at t . Both friendship and knowledge require a very sophisticated mental life, and it seems likely that this will be a requirement for many of the things a list theorist includes as goods.

The possession of one listed item might well require quite different capacities from those needed for the possession of another. For example, it is reasonably clear that a creature may be capable of pleasure without being capable of having friends. I expect that crocodiles can enjoy themselves, yet lack the capacity for the complex emotional interactions involved in friendship. I shall say that a creature A is responsive relative to a good (or bad) g at time t if and only if A has the capacity for g at t , and that A is responsive at t if and only if there is some good (or bad) g such that A is responsive relative to g at t . Thus a crocodile is responsive relative to pleasure, but not relative to friendship. Still, in respect of the former, a crocodile is responsive *simpliciter*.

I claim that a creature may be harmed at time t only if it is responsive at t . Nothing is intrinsically or extrinsically bad for a creature at t unless it is responsive at t . In particular, lacking at t some good (or bad) g is not bad (or good) for a creature unless that creature is responsive at t .

If this claim is correct, then while a creature may be harmed by being made unresponsive, a creature may be harmed only if it *is* responsive. Like a crocodile, my shoe can and does fail to have friendship. Unlike the crocodile, my shoe cannot be harmed at all, no matter what goods it lacks. Its invulnerability is due to its complete unresponsiveness. (I ignore trivial senses of 'good' in which objects such as shoes may have goods, as when we say that an item is a good exemplar of its kind only if certain conditions are met: a car needs petrol in order to be a good car; trivially, we might say it is good for my car to have petrol.)

What are the implications for the dead? It is one thing to say that Socrates lacked various goods while dead, and another to say that his lack of various goods harmed him while he was dead. As a shoe does, a corpse (and the dust left when it decomposes) lacks goods, but is not incurring harm thereby. The unborn are not harmed while lacking life.⁸ For a subject A to be harmed at a time t it is not enough that A lacks a salient good g at t : A must be responsive at t . (Living) people meet the condition, and can be deprived of goods, with corresponding dips in well-being, while they are alive; shoes fail the condition and can never literally be deprived of goods.

⁸ Pace P. Yourgrau, 'The Dead', *Journal of Philosophy*, 86 (1987), pp. 84–101, repr. in Fischer (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death*, pp. 137–56.

The dead fail the condition too. Whether we understand well-being in the way hedonists, desire theorists or objective-list theorists do, no one is responsive *while* dead. This was basically Epicurus' point all along.

Subsequentists do not say that deprivation harm consists in lacking some good. Roughly, they say that *A* is harmed while deprived of a salient good *which A would otherwise have had*. Shoes can never be deprived of goods they would otherwise have, for the simple reason that they cannot have any goods in the first place. So my argument may appear irrelevant. However, my point is that incurring harm entails lower well-being; this cannot happen while we lack the capacity for welfare, while we are not responsive. It is true that shoes cannot be deprived of goods they would otherwise have had; they cannot have goods at all. But it is also true that, *while dead*, we cannot have goods at all, and hence true that while dead we cannot be deprived of goods we would otherwise have had. Our responsiveness is a casualty of death.

By the same token, death cannot be responsible for deprivation *benefits* incurred posthumously. McDougall, who would otherwise have had nothing in her future except suffering and failure at all she attempts, dies in her sleep. Her death precludes events that would have harmed her had she not died. But 'She is better off dead' is not literally true. Just as a stone is not benefited by its lack of pain and failure, McDougall is not benefited while dead by her lack of suffering and failure, since the dead are not responsive. Moreover, from the fact that deprivation harms (or benefits) cannot be incurred while we are dead, a further consequence follows: posthumous events cannot be responsible for deprivation harms (or benefits) incurred after we are dead.

It might appear that my worries about the unresponsiveness of the dead are not serious, since subsequentists might argue as follows: it is true that Socrates is not responsive while dead, but this does not stop us from making good sense of the possibility that his death was bad for him while he was dead. It is obviously possible that for at least at some period of time *t* subsequent to his death, Socrates would have enjoyed a life having positive intrinsic value for Socrates during *t*, had he not died when he did. The unresponsiveness of the dead in no way interferes with that possibility. If the unresponsiveness of the dead is a problem at all, then, it must be because it somehow precludes our saying that Socrates's non-existence during *t* had an intrinsic value of zero for Socrates during *t*. Admittedly, when a person is dead at *t*, it is awkward to say that non-existence has a value of zero for that person during *t*. But given the plausibility of the resulting subsequentist account, it is reasonable to stipulate that this value is zero.

There is a way to make sense of the value of a future period of non-existence for a person. This is possible if we say that things that occur in my

future may advance or impede my interests now. (As for this latter position, we accept it if we also say that it is now in my interest for my life, as a whole, to go as well as can be, for doing well in the future helps my life go well, and hence my future flourishing is beneficial to me now.) If something like this is correct (despite Parfit's objections), then we can make sense of the idea that a state of affairs may have a certain value for people while they are alive, even if it does not hold until they are dead. In particular, zero may (or may not!) be the present value of not existing for someone who is now alive.

So if I am alive at t but dead at t' , my non-existence at t' may well have a value (perhaps zero) for me at t . But this does not help subsequentists. They insist that my non-existence at t' has a value for me at t' , that is, while I am dead. It is easy to confuse the one with the other. However, it is obviously impossible to make any sense of a state of affairs as having a certain value (whether intrinsic or extrinsic) for a person during some time if that person is dead during that time. People are no longer responsive – they are incapable of valuing – when dead.

I conclude that subsequentists cannot back their view that death can be bad for a person posthumously. What can be said is very different, namely, roughly the following: dying at time t is (extrinsically) bad for person A while A is alive if and only if on the whole the life A would have had after t , had A not died at t , would have been worthwhile. This position is a form of priorism, not subsequentism.

II

My criticism of subsequentism threatens concurrentism as well. Certainly a problem arises if we say that posthumous events and their deprivation harms can occur simultaneously. The problem, of course, is that by the time such events occur, nothing remaining of us is capable of incurring harm. One might argue, as indeed Feldman does, that we survive death as corpses, but a corpse is not responsive.⁹ We might also argue, as Yourgrau does, that we are real while dead, but once again we are not responsive during that time, so we cannot incur harm then. But why not say that death and its deprivation harm can occur at the same time?

The problem is that a unified account of deprivation harm as triggered by death and posthumous events is desirable; and as just noted, the concurrentist story for posthumous events is unacceptable. Lamont's version is based on the idea that ensuring events are harmful, which in turn suggests that we incur the harm simultaneously with the occurrence of the ensuring

⁹ See Feldman, 'The Termination Thesis', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24 (2000), pp. 98–115.

events. Since people cannot incur deprivation harm posthumously, Lamont might modify his view. He might distinguish between an indirect harm, which is not itself a harmful condition but is responsible for our incurring a harmful condition, and a direct harm, which is the harmful condition itself. Lamont might treat an ensuring event as *indirectly* harmful, and say that the direct harm is incurred earlier (while we are alive and responsive).

III

Priorism is left unscathed by my critique. My claim was that nothing is intrinsically or extrinsically bad for us at t unless we are responsive at t . But this does not rule out the possibility that even if we are dead at t , lacking goods at t is bad for us *while we are alive*. For living beings are responsive. Priorists say that we may be harmed by death and posthumous events while we are alive.¹⁰

It would be impossible to be harmed by posthumous events while we are alive if the only way in which an event could affect us were by having a causal effect on us, assuming there is no backwards causation. But posthumous events need not change our intrinsic properties in order to contribute to the status of our well-being. They can be the truth-making conditions for propositions which hold while we are alive. Facts about the future can be against our present interests; when they are, our welfare is lower than it might have been. The fact that tomorrow we shall lack various goods, which is made true today by events that will not occur until tomorrow, may be against our present interest in having those goods tomorrow, so that our well-being today is lower than it might have been.

Future events can bear on our present interests if either or both of two assumptions hold:

1. All the while we are alive, it is in our interest for our lives to go as well as possible
2. At least some interests we now have may be advanced or impeded by states of affairs that hold in the future.

The second assumption is especially plausible; it may hold even if the first does not. As an illustration of (2), suppose I have made some project a central focus of my life. Surely it is in my interest now for my project to be brought to a successful conclusion in the future. Suppose that only I can

¹⁰ See G. Pitcher, 'The Misfortunes of the Dead', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1984), pp. 217–25, repr. in Fischer (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death*, pp. 119–34; S. Luper, 'Posthumous Harm', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 41 (2004), pp. 63–72; D. Scott, 'Aristotle on Posthumous Fortune', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 18 (2000), pp. 211–29.

complete it, but I die prematurely. My dying ensures that it is true of me that my project will not be brought to fruition, and I am harmed all the while I have an interest in finishing my project, for during this time my welfare is lower than it would have been had I succeeded at my project. Now suppose instead that I was nearly finished with my project when I died, and it would have been completed by my daughter if my son had not destroyed my work just after I died. Here my son's action, a posthumous event, has harmed me. Thus death and posthumous events may harm us while we are alive, in that our well-being may be lower than it might have been partly because of these events. But if (2) is true and (1) is false, the time when I am harmed by my failed project may be more focused: during such times as I have not taken on the project, my interests are not affected by the fact that I will fail at it, so my death does not harm me then.

On the priorist view, death and posthumous events fall into a group of occurrences that have two characteristics: the events occur at one time and we incur harm from them at another, and the victim is never aware of incurring the harm. This group is not really mysterious, as a familiar kind of example shows: I accidentally cut Spite-man off while driving, and Spite-man will get back at me next month by convincing my fiancée that I am a notorious international criminal who needs to be under constant surveillance. She will marry me in two months, but she will loathe me, pretending all the while that she loves me as much as she does now. In this example a future event greatly affects my present interests, assuming that it is *now* in my interest to have my fiancée's love two months from now; yet I do not notice the impact on my present well-being.

We can also be fully aware of the harmful upshots which death and posthumous events presently have. Suppose I am informed by my physician that I have only a week to live. Right now I am fully aware of the terrible impact which my death a week from now is having on my present interests. Suppose, further, that a colleague visits me on my deathbed and tells me she has stolen the book manuscript I mean to publish and she is going to destroy it a week after I die. I am now aware of a further blow to my present interests, and this time a posthumous event is responsible for it.

IV

I can now turn to indefinitism, according to which death and posthumous events harm us, but not at any definite time. Its most famous proponent is Thomas Nagel, whose position is criticized by Julian Lamont and Neil Feit on the ground that it implies that some events take place but at no particular

time. But William Grey defends Nagel, arguing that on Lamont's objection, indefinitism implies that there are ways of being harmed such that the harm is incurred at no time whatever. According to Grey, to say this is to misunderstand Nagel's (and Grey's) indefinitist position, which is that the mortal harm is incurred during a stretch of time that has blurry boundaries.

However, so understood, indefinitism does not compete with concurrentism, subsequentism or priorism. Grey's brand of indefinitism is correct only if subsequentism, priorism or possibly concurrentism is true as well (eternalism is an exception, since eternity has no boundaries to blur), for even a period of time with blurry edges must occur before, after or at the same time as death. Grey himself supplements his (blurry boundary) indefinitism with a version of subsequentism: he says we incur mortal harm during a period of time that occurs posthumously and has blurry boundaries. This position, I have shown, is untenable, but I see no objection to combining blurry boundary indefinitism with priorism.

Grey's is not the only sort of indefinitism. Another type says that while we do incur mortal harm, there is no clear answer to the question when we do so. Its most recent proponent is Harry Silverstein. But Silverstein does not make a convincing case for his (no-answer) version of indefinitism.

He has no argument against priorism. In fact, priorism is entirely consistent with all three of the basic assumptions Silverstein makes in his various criticisms of proponents and opponents of Epicureanism.

(a) Priorism is obviously consistent with Silverstein's assumption (labelled VCF) that an item e may have some value for a person A only if e exists at some time (i.e., if e is actual, not merely possible) so as to be a possible object of A 's feelings, positive or negative.¹¹ (Of course, as Silverstein expresses (VCF), it neither supports nor opposes the position that anything actual may harm us. It lays down a necessary condition which death and other actual events meet, and does not imply that things we might feel badly about, such as death, really are bad for us.)

(b) Priorism is also consistent with Silverstein's four-dimensionalism, which he uses to explain how a person A may take, as objects of A 's feelings, events that will not occur until A has died. Indeed, as I have shown, four-dimensionalism may be used to clarify how posthumous states of affairs provide the truth-conditions for facts that affect our well-being while alive.

(c) Finally, priorism is consistent with Silverstein's view that from A 's point of view *while dead*, assessments of value are impossible, since A 'does not exist to be the recipient of goods or evils' ('The Evil of Death', pp. 95–6). This is entirely consistent with the possibility that because of posthumous events, A is the recipient of goods or evils while alive. (Having rejected

¹¹ On 'exists', see Silverstein, 'The Evil of Death Revisited', p. 124.

assessments made from the standpoint of the dead, Silverstein concludes that we cannot make sense of the question ‘What is the value for A of the state of affairs in which A is no longer alive?’. But Silverstein’s conclusion does not follow. A ’s unresponsiveness while dead does not rule out assessments of A ’s lifelessness made from A ’s point of view *while alive*: if, e.g., A now wishes to finish a project tomorrow, he might now sensibly deplore his lifeless condition tomorrow, since it will make it impossible for him to continue his efforts.)

Yet Silverstein rejects priorism. After claiming (p. 121) that (VCF) commits us to saying that ‘the time of A ’s life’ has a ‘special status ... with respect to posthumous goods and evils’, he adds the following in a footnote (fn. 6, cf. fn. 13):

My endorsement of the ‘special status’ of the time of A ’s life is not intended to imply that my account’s answer to the question ‘When is A ’s death an evil for A ?’ must be ‘During the time of A ’s life’; I would prefer to say that my account supports the following more complicated view:

1. The time at which the evil itself – namely, A ’s death – occurs is immediately following A ’s life.
2. Since ascribing this evil to A requires the four-dimensional framework, it is an ‘atemporal’ evil in the sense defined in ‘The Evil of Death’.
3. The time during which this evil can be an object of A ’s negative feelings ... is the time during which A is alive.
4. (1), (2), and (3) comprise the whole truth about time in this case.

For in this way we retain, via (3), the crucial idea that the time of A ’s life has special status without being committed to the intuitively odd view that x can be bad for A before x itself exists.

Silverstein’s note suggests that the question ‘At what times t is death bad for A at t ?’ has no answer, yet A ’s death is bad for A none the less. But it turns out that his only defence for preferring indefinitism over priorism is that the latter is ‘odd’. No doubt priorism *will* seem odd. However, this appearance is due to the impression that it entails backwards causation. Since it has no such implication, its supposed oddness does not constitute a ground for rejecting it. And unlike no-answer indefinitism, priorism enables us to pin down a time when we incur mortal harm.¹²

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