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Eternalism and Death's Badness

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Suppose that at the moment of death, a person goes out of existence.¹ This has been thought to pose a problem for the idea that death is bad for its victim. But what exactly is the problem? Harry Silverstein says the problem stems from the truth of the “Values Connect with Feelings” thesis (VCF), according to which it must be possible for someone to have feelings about a thing in order for that thing to be bad for that person (2000, 122). But in order for a person to have feelings about a thing, the person and the thing must coexist in some way. Thus Silverstein feels compelled to endorse a metaphysical view he calls “four-dimensionalism,” but which I prefer to call “eternalism”: the view that purely past and purely future objects and events exist.² I agree with Silverstein that the badness of death entails eternalism. But the reason is different. Eternalism must be true in order for there to be a time at which death is bad for its victim. Death is bad for its victim at all those times when the victim is worse off for having died: namely, the times when he would have been living a good life had that death not occurred.³ Silverstein rejects this view; he thinks there is something wrong with the very question of when death is bad for its victim. In what follows I argue that Silverstein has not shown the relevance of eternalism to VCF or the badness of death, and I defend my view about the time of death's badness against Silverstein's arguments.

I. Eternalism, Values and Feelings

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Epicureans hold that death is not bad for us; they point to the fact that death does not cause its victim to feel bad. Thus they assert a connection between values and feelings: something is bad for a person only if it causes that person to feel bad. Though Silverstein rightly rejects this strong thesis, he thinks it contains a nugget of truth; he accepts a weak version of the "Values Connect with Feelings" thesis (VCF) according to which, in order for something to be good or bad for A, it must be *possible* for A to have a good or bad feeling about that thing. And "if a posthumous event does not exist, it can hardly be an object of feeling or experience" (Silverstein 1993, 110). This is where eternalism enters the picture. The eternalist holds that past and future objects and events coexist with present ones in a four-dimensional manifold. Other times are treated relevantly like other places; objects and events that exist in the past or future, but don't exist *now*, nevertheless *exist*, just in the way that objects that don't exist *here* nevertheless exist if they exist in a faraway place. By contrast, presentists hold that only present things exist. If we adopt eternalism, we can say that people coexist with their deaths, and therefore that our deaths can be the objects of our feelings.

But there are three things puzzling about this. First, why accept VCF? Silverstein briefly suggests one reason. He says that VCF explains the difference between posthumous harm and posthumous reference: "those who reject VCF owe us an explanation of why, for example, the problem of posthumous harm seems to be a 'real' problem in the way that posthumous reference is not" (Silverstein 2000, 122). This demand for explanation is puzzling for two reasons. First, there is an obvious way in which posthumous harm is more problematic than posthumous reference: unless we accept a certain sort of axiology (e.g. preferentism), posthumous harm involves

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backwards causation. Posthumous reference does not. Perhaps Silverstein had in mind not posthumous harm, but the harm of death itself, which need not involve backward causation no matter what axiology we accept; perhaps Silverstein thinks the harm of death seems more problematic than posthumous reference. But posthumous reference *does* seem to be a problem, at least for presentists, since at least some presentists take their position to entail that we cannot refer to purely past things (Markosian 2004). Posthumous reference and the harm of death seem equally problematic to a presentist.

Suppose we accept VCF. The next puzzle is, why think that an event must exist in order to be the object of feelings? Stephen Rosenbaum points out that people often fear events that never transpire (Rosenbaum 1993, 130). Silverstein admits that nonexistent events can be the objects of feelings in one sense, but insists that in the sense he has in mind, what he calls the *de re* conception of objects of psychological states, events must exist in order to be the objects of feelings (Silverstein 2000, 123). But this merely relocates the problem: why think that VCF is any less plausible given a conception of objects of thought that doesn't require objects of thought to exist? If the problem is that events exist only if they actually occur, then why not formulate VCF in terms of states of affairs, understood as necessarily existing, abstract objects that can obtain or fail to obtain, rather than events? States of affairs can be the objects of feelings at a time whether they obtain at that time or not.

Finally, suppose we admit that there is a true version of VCF according to which the objects of thought must exist or obtain. It is not clear that this commits us to eternalism. A presentist can say that while the event consisting of my death does not exist, since it does not exist now, there is nevertheless a related fact that obtains now: the

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fact that *it will be the case that I die*. And this fact can be the object of feelings such as fear or grief.⁴ There may be independent reasons to think that this answer is insufficient - e.g. that tensed facts must be "grounded" in non-tensed facts -- and that presentism is therefore unacceptable. But such reasons do not derive specifically from VCF or any problem having to do with death or posthumous harm.

II. Eternalism and the Time of Death's Badness

So I do not think eternalism is relevant to the badness of death in the way Silverstein suggests. But I think it is relevant in another way. We must be eternalists if we want to say that death is bad for its victims at times after they die. Why believe such a thing? The main reason is a consideration about value theory more generally. Bad events other than deaths seem to have their bad effects at some times but not others. This holds for events that cause intrinsically bad things to happen, such as toe-stubbings; the time of the bad effect of the toe-stubbing is just the duration of the pain. Once the pain is gone, the toe-stubbing ceases to be bad. It also holds for events that prevent intrinsically good things from happening. Suppose that Ned secretly leaves tickets to a baseball game in my mailbox, that I would enjoy going to the game, and that were I not at the game, I wouldn't enjoy myself at all during the time of the game; suppose Hud steals the tickets without me ever finding out about it. Hud's theft causes me to be worse off during the baseball game than I would have been; its bad effects on me occur during the game.

It would be nice if we could treat death like these other bad events. Some say we can't: if death is bad, it is a timeless or atemporal evil.⁵ This view has a cost. It requires

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us to single out one particular sort of harmful event, and to say that it is bad in a different sort of way from the way other events are harmful. But the harm of death seems very similar to the harm in the baseball game example. If Hud had killed me instead of stealing my tickets, he would have harmed me in a similar way with respect to the game. (Of course, he would have harmed me in other ways too.) And I think similar harms should be treated similarly, so I say his killing me would have been bad for me during the game (and of course at many other times as well). But perhaps there is some reason to think the cases are different in a respect that matters.

Epicureans note one difference that might seem important: death marks the end of existence.⁶ Failing to enjoy a baseball game, because I'm bored at home instead, can be bad for me during the game, because I exist then; but nothing can be good or bad for a nonexistent person. The Epicurean says that in order for an event to be bad for a person, there must be some time such that the event is bad for that person at that time. But in order for an event to be bad for a person at a time, the person must exist at that time. Since people don't exist after they die, nothing can be good or bad for them then; so death is not bad for anyone. This is a version of the "no subject" problem.

Silverstein characterizes the Epicurean argument in the following way. He makes a distinction between "life-life" comparisons and "life-death" comparisons. A life-life comparison is a comparison between the values for a person of two lives: one that he actually lives, and one that he would have lived had he not died. Such comparisons are unproblematic. A life-death comparison is a comparison between the value for a person of being alive and the value for a person of being dead. That comparison is problematic, he says, because no value can intelligibly be assigned to being dead (Silverstein 1993,

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103). As before, the reason no S-relative value can be assigned to S's being dead is the no subject problem: when S is dead, S no longer exists.

Silverstein thinks Epicurus really does have a convincing argument against deprivation accounts of the evil of death that treat death like other deprivations, as my account does. Silverstein suggests that what is bad about being deprived of something good is *existing in a deprived state*, and that ordinary deprivations are bad for people at times because there are times when those people exist in a deprived state (Silverstein 2000, 120). But death is not like ordinary deprivations; since it causes nonexistence, it does not cause its victim to exist in a deprived state. The moral Silverstein draws is that death must be viewed as an atemporal evil, unlike other evils of deprivation.

I answer the Epicurean and Silverstein in the following way. Like Silverstein, I endorse eternalism. Unlike Silverstein, I deny that in order for an event to be bad for a person at a time, the person must exist at that time. It is necessary that the person *exist* in order for an event to be bad for him at a time, but not necessary that the person exist *at that time*.⁷ Death is bad for a person S at time t just in case the following proposition is true: If S had not died, S would have been enjoying a good life at t. Since this proposition is directly about S (perhaps S is a constituent of the proposition), its existence, and hence its truth, seems to require S's existence. Eternalism gives us S's existence. The proposition does not require S's existence *at t* for its existence or for its truth, in something like the way it can be true that I own property in Montana even if I do not exist in Montana.

I also reject Silverstein's account of ordinary evils of deprivation. It is question-begging to characterize those evils as causing their victims to exist in a deprived state;

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this rules out, by fiat, the possibility of depriving someone of goods by causing her not to exist. I say that in general, an event E is instrumentally bad for S iff E causes S to be worse off than S would have been if E had not occurred; more specifically, an event E is an evil of *deprivation* for S iff E is instrumentally bad for S, at least partly in virtue of the fact that E prevents some state of affairs that is intrinsically good for S from obtaining. This account of deprivation allows for the possibility that an event can be an evil of deprivation in virtue of causing someone to stop existing.

Thus, unlike Silverstein, I find life-death comparisons unproblematic. They are relevantly like the comparisons we make when thinking about ordinary evils of deprivation.

In "The Evil of Death Revisited," Silverstein says he won't defend his previous account of what it is to be deprived of a good, but still thinks we cannot compare a person's actual welfare level at a time after he dies with that person's welfare level at some other possible world where he continues to live. The reason is that no welfare level, even zero, can be assigned to a person at times after he dies (Silverstein 2000, 119). Silverstein is not alone in holding this view.⁸ But there are good reasons to reject it.

A theory of personal well-being should identify those states that are basically intrinsically good for a person S and those that are basically intrinsically bad for S.⁹ It should tell us how to determine the value of a person's life overall, and it should tell us how well things are going for the person at particular times. For example, a hedonist about welfare should say that states consisting of S experiencing some pleasure are intrinsically good for S, and states consisting of S experiencing some pain are intrinsically bad for S. We might say that the intrinsic-value-for-S function, IV_s , takes

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states of affairs as arguments and yields numbers as values; the hedonist says that IV_s maps S's pleasure states to positive numbers, S's pain states to negative numbers. The hedonist might add that S's overall welfare level is the sum of the values of IV_s for all arguments, and that S's welfare level at t is the sum of the values of IV_s for all arguments obtaining at t.

But this leaves open what we should say about states that are not S's pleasure or pain states. There are two possibilities for such states. Either IV_s is undefined for such states (the Undefined View), or it maps them to zero (the Zero View). So what reasons can be given in favor of one of these views against the other? Here is a quick and dirty argument: we should go the way that gets us the intuitively acceptable results in the case of death. The Zero View allows us to treat the evil of deaths like other evils, because we can derive S-relative values for times after S exists. (The value will always be zero if hedonism is true.) The Undefined View does not allow this. Better to go with the Zero View. It results in a simpler, more elegant and unified account of extrinsic value. In other words: in order to choose between the views, we must look at cases where they give different results, and see which gives better results. The Zero View and the Undefined View get all the same results, except in cases where a person goes out of existence. In those cases, the Zero View gets better results. So the Zero View wins.

I suspect that argument will leave some unconvinced. Some will insist (feet stomping, fist pounding) you just can't have a welfare level at times you don't exist! Not even zero! The Zero View is incoherent! So let me try another argument against, or perhaps rather issue a challenge to, the feet-stompers. IV_s cannot be undefined for *all* states that are not S's pleasures or pains. Consider the state consisting of me sitting in my

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chair. That state is neither a pleasure state nor a pain state. But on one point all agree: when I am sitting in my chair, I do have a welfare level, even if I am not feeling pleasure or pain. According to the hedonist, my welfare level is lower than it would be if I were enjoying myself, and higher than if I were in pain. So IV_{me} must be defined for the state consisting of me sitting in my chair; it must map that state to zero.

So hedonists must say that IV_s is defined for some states that are not S's pleasure or pain states. If IV_s is defined for states that obtain after S exists, then we can get a welfare level for S for times after S exists: namely, zero. The challenge, then, is to say just why IV_s should not be defined for states obtaining at times when S does not exist.

Perhaps it could be argued that IV_s should be defined only for states that are directly about S, or have S as a constituent. But this won't help Silverstein, for given the truth of eternalism, there are many such states that obtain at times when S does not exist, such as 'S once existed.'

Another possibility is that IV_s is defined only for states of affairs that involve S having some intrinsic property; since S can have intrinsic properties only when S exists, this proposal would entail that IV_s is undefined for all states obtaining at times when S does not exist. But there are many axiologies, such as preferentism, according to which how well someone's life goes depends on whether certain things happen outside her body. The intrinsic property proposal would force us to reject all such axiologies. Furthermore, consider the fact that S once had a mass of 50 kg. This sort of fact obtains at times when S no longer exists, but is not ruled out by the intrinsic property proposal.

I won't speculate further about ways one might try to draw the necessary distinction. I leave this as a challenge to those who deny that people have a welfare level

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at times after they die: draw a principled distinction between those states for which IV_s is defined and those for which it is not defined, such that IV_s is undefined for all states of affairs obtaining after S dies.

I now turn to one final objection. Silverstein denies that death is bad at a time; he thinks the question, "When is A's death bad for A?" is "inapplicable" (Silverstein 2000, 131n6). According to Silverstein, the "whole truth about time" concerning A's death is constituted by the following three claims:

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 (and its being an intelligible A-relative evil requires that it be capable of being such an object) is the time during which A is alive. (Silverstein 2000, 131n6)

If these claims exhaust the truth about time concerning A's death, then there is no room for truths of the form 'A would have been enjoying herself at t had A not died when she did.' And there clearly are such truths. On my view, those truths are the grounds for truths of the form 'A's death is bad for A at t.'

Why does Silverstein deny the existence of such truths? Perhaps the answer can be found in his discussion of an example given by David-Hillel Ruben:

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Suppose that someone now (in 2000) is eulogizing Napoleon... and consider the question: “*When* does Napoleon exemplify the property of being eulogized?” The puzzle is that (a) since the eulogy is occurring in 2000, the “natural” answer to this question seems to be “in 2000”; yet (b) Napoleon does not exist in 2000 -- and how can A exemplify properties at a time when A himself does not exist?... My solution... [is] to say that the question “When does A exemplify property P?” is inapplicable where P is a posthumous property. Specifically, my response to the question about Napoleon is:

Napoleon lived from 1769 to 1821; he is being eulogized in 2000; and that’s the whole truth about “when” in this case. There *is* no further question as to “when” Napoleon exemplifies the property of being eulogized. (Silverstein 2000, 133n13)

This is a puzzling response to the question. Silverstein must be making heavy weather over the word “exemplifies,” because he is happy to say that Napoleon is being eulogized in 2000, but not that Napoleon exemplifies the property of being eulogized in 2000. I wonder what the difference between these two claims is supposed to be.

In any case, it seems as if Silverstein is suggesting that it is problematic to say that something can exemplify a property at a time when it does not exist. (“How can A exemplify properties at a time when A himself does not exist?”) My proposal evidently entails this problematic sort of property exemplification. But I cannot see why

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Silverstein thinks this is a problem. Recall that Silverstein thinks that the time during which A's death "can be an object of A's negative feelings... is the time during which A is alive" (Silverstein 2000, 131n6). This seems to suggest that A's death exemplifies a property -- namely, the property of being an object of A's negative feelings -- at a time when A's death does not exist -- namely, during A's life. So Silverstein does not really have a problem, in general, with things exemplifying properties at times when they don't exist. He must think that there is some important difference between the property of being extrinsically bad for S and the property of being an object of S's negative feelings, in virtue of which the latter can be exemplified by S's death at times when S's death does not exist but the former cannot be exemplified by S at times when S does not exist. I do not see what the difference could be.

There is an interesting issue here, even if it is not quite the one Silverstein is interested in. How can something exemplify a property at a time without existing at that time? I do not have a good answer to this question. Perhaps it is misleading to talk of people *exemplifying properties* after they die. What I really want to say is that there are relations between people, deaths and times. In particular, there is the "is-bad-for-at" relation, which relates a death D, a person P and a time t if and only if D is P's death, and P would have been living a good life at t if D had not occurred. In order for this relation to hold, must P exemplify any properties at t? To be sure, when a death D, person P and time t instantiate the is-bad-for-at relation, we can also say that P exemplifies the property of being an x such that D is bad for x at t. P exemplifies this property in virtue of not existing at t (and, therefore, having a welfare level of zero at t), and in virtue of the

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truth of counterfactuals involving D, P and t. That sort of property exemplification does not seem problematic.

I conclude that there is no good reason to deny that a person's death harms her at times after she dies, and that insofar as we care about theoretical unity, we have reasons to treat the harm of death as a timeful harm like other ordinary harms. So the balance of reasons supports the claim that death is bad for us after we die. It is the acceptance of this claim, not VCF, that requires us to accept eternalism.

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Notes

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1. Feldman denies this, on materialist grounds, in (Feldman 2000a), but I won't take up this controversy here. For the purposes of this paper I assume Feldman is wrong.
2. See Silverstein (1993), Silverstein (2000), and Bradley (2004). "Four-dimensionalism" is at least sometimes used to name the view that objects have temporal parts (Sider 2002, xiii). That view is not relevant to the issues in this paper, which is why I prefer not to use that term.
3. I defend this view in Bradley (2004). Similar views have been defended by William Grey (1999), Neil Feit (2002) and Kai Draper (2004). It might be tendentious to say that the times when a person would have been better off are the times when he would have been living a good life, for this presupposes that one cannot have a non-zero welfare level at times when one is not alive. Some believers in posthumous benefits and harms might disagree. This dispute should have no serious impact on the arguments of this paper.
4. Andre Gallois made this point to me.
5. See Nagel (1970, 77) and Feldman (1991, 221) for views of this sort.
6. For a much more detailed exposition of an Epicurean argument along these lines, see Johansson (2005). I cannot do justice to Johansson's intricate argument in this brief paper.
7. See Bradley (2004). Also see Draper (2004, 102) for a similar view.
8. Bigelow, Campbell and Pargetter (1990, 120) and Draper (2004, 95) are among those who hold this view.

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9. On basic intrinsic value, see Harman (2000) and Feldman (2000b). Henceforth I will drop 'basic' for convenience.