

Fitting Attitudes Towards Deprivations

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There is a simple Epicurean argument that we should not worry about death. Death marks the end of existence. If you don't exist, you can't experience any pain. So it is not bad to be dead, and your death won't bring about anything else bad for you. If something isn't bad for you in itself, and it doesn't bring about anything else bad for you, then it is not bad for you in any way. If something is not bad for you in any way, you shouldn't worry about it. So you shouldn't worry about death.

A standard reply to Epicurus is to adopt a *deprivation account* of the badness of death. According to this account, death is bad in virtue of depriving its victim of a good future life; the better the future that is deprived, the worse the death. Thus death can be bad for us without being bad in itself and without causing them pain. bringing about anything bad for us.

This reply blocks the Epicurean argument, but it does not show that any negative attitude is appropriate to feel towards death. If the deprivation account is true, as I believe it is, what attitude should we have towards death? I will defend the view that we should prefer a good life to an early death, but that no further negative attitudes towards death are warranted.¹

The paper will proceed as follows. First I will clarify the question I am attempting to answer. Then I will present the argument for my view. Finally I will discuss some possible objections.

Clarifying the question

I am asking what response to death is fitting – not what response would make someone feel better, or would make someone mentally healthier, or would be good in some other way. Compare with belief: there are beliefs that might make you feel better despite being false, like believing that you are above average in some respect even though you are not. These beliefs are not fitting, though they might be advantageous. I am asking, with respect to death, which responses fit the facts about death. That attitudes or emotions can be fitting in such a way might be denied. Some might think that there is nothing wrong with having whatever kind of feelings you want. But that would be a surprising view. When Donald Trump falsely claimed that thousands of Muslims in the U.S. were cheering the September 11 attacks, the emotional response he ascribed to those Muslims was unfitting – that was the whole point of his false claim. While we may accept some latitude in emotional responses to events, there are some responses that are morally beyond the pale, such as taking pleasure in the pain and suffering of others. As long as we think it is possible to be wrong about anything at all, we should accept that it is possible to be wrong in our attitudes and emotions.

I am concerned in this paper with the question of how to respond to death *for the sake of the one who dies*. I am not concerned here with the question of how concerned to be about death for the sake of *other* people. It is natural to be concerned about one's own death because of the effects it will have on one's friends and family. That sort of concern is less interesting philosophically, because some of the effects of death on other people are bad intrinsically, such as the pain one's death causes others to feel. It seems clear that some negative reaction is warranted towards intrinsically bad things like pain. It is less clear what reaction is warranted towards a mere deprivation of good things.

Relatedly, I am granting the Epicurean assumption that death marks the end of an individual's existence. If there is an afterlife in which dead people continue to have conscious experiences, then our attitude towards a person's death for that person's sake should track the nature of that conscious experience. If they are enjoying the afterlife then we should not feel bad for them; if they are being jabbed with pitchforks then we

should.² Again, the question becomes philosophically less interesting. The interesting question arises on the supposition that there is no afterlife. If a person goes out of existence upon death, then death cannot cause that person any bad experiences. This puts important limits on the ways in which death can harm its victim, and makes the question of what attitude to have towards death more challenging to answer.

I am assuming that death is often bad for its victim. If the Epicureans are right that death is never bad for anyone, it is hard to see how it could make sense to be troubled by death.³ I am assuming that the Epicurean arguments about death's badness can be answered by deprivation theorists; I won't try to respond to those arguments here.

An important thing to emphasize is that according to the deprivation account, death is *instrumentally* bad, not *intrinsically* bad, for its victim. To say that something is intrinsically bad is to say it is bad in itself; it is bad in a way that does not depend on what else it brings about. To say that something is instrumentally bad is to say that it is bad in virtue of its effects. Many, including Epicurus, have thought that pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad. Pleasure seems good, and pain bad, even if they don't lead to any further valuable effects. Most things that are good are good merely in virtue of what they bring about. For example, eating healthy food seems pointless unless it leads to some good effects in the future. Death row inmates having their last meal do not eat kale. Being dead cannot be intrinsically bad for you, since (as I am assuming) you don't exist when you are dead. Nor is it plausible to say that the event of your death – the thing that happens at the moment you stop living – is intrinsically bad for you. That event is bad for you, according to the deprivation account, solely in virtue of the good things it prevents you from getting. Thus it is instrumentally bad, supposing that it deprives you of more good than bad.

Summing up these clarifications, the question is: given that death is bad for me solely in virtue of the fact that it deprives me of some goods in life, what is a fitting attitude to have about my death, for my own sake?

Fitting Attitudes

According to a much-discussed view about value, what it is for something to be good or bad is for it to be the fitting object of a pro- or con-attitude such as love or hate (Brentano 1969; Ewing 1948; Jacobson 2011). This has been called the “fitting attitude” analysis of value. The fitting attitude analysis provides a reduction of other value concepts to the concept of fittingness. Thus if someone were to ask, “why should I care about goodness?”, the defender of the fitting attitude analysis can say: “because *what it is* to be good is to be a thing that is fittingly cared about. If you acknowledge that this thing is good, you are thereby acknowledging that loving it is fitting.”⁴

Whether the fitting attitude analysis of value is true is a controversial matter.⁵ But it does seem true that there is, at least, an important connection between value and our attitudes. Someone who takes pleasure in an innocent’s suffering is wicked because their attitude towards disvalue is incorrect; likewise the person who becomes angry at others enjoying deserved happiness. For our purposes it is sufficient to say that other things being equal, it is fitting to love what is good and to hate what is bad, and unfitting to hate what is good and love what is bad; it is fitting to have a neutral attitude to what is neither good nor bad.

One important feature of the fitting attitude analysis is that it concerns *intrinsic* value. For something to be intrinsically good is for it to be the fitting object of a pro-attitude *for itself*, or considered in itself. Nonexistence is, intrinsically, neither good nor bad. So the fitting attitude analysis requires us to have a neutral attitude towards our future nonexistence for itself. What is a fitting attitude to have towards something, not for itself, but for what it precludes or prevents or deprives us of? That is the question that concerns us here, and fitting attitude theorists have said little about this.

My suggestion is that we should not have a negative attitude towards something in virtue of the good things it prevents. Our attitudes should be directed only towards the intrinsic goods and evils. If our attitudes towards things depended on what those things prevent us from getting or deprive us from having, we would have inappropriate attitudes. I will give two examples to show why this is the case.

The first is an example adapted from one given by Kai Draper (2013, 78). Suppose for the sake of argument that your attitude towards something should be a function of both its intrinsic value and its non-intrinsic value, such as what it prevents from happening. Suppose you go to Bjorn and Sven's house of massage and get a pleasant massage from Bjorn. You get 10 units of pleasure from this massage. But if you hadn't got the massage from Bjorn, you would have got one from Sven. That one would have also given you 10 units of pleasure. How should you feel about your massage? Well, you should have a pro-attitude corresponding to the 10 units of pleasure you got from the Bjorn massage. But given our supposition, you should also have a negative attitude based on what the Bjorn massage prevents: an equally pleasant Sven massage. So you should have a negative attitude corresponding to the 10 units of pleasure the Bjorn massage deprives you from getting from Sven. In sum, your attitude towards the Bjorn massage should be neutral, since it does not make you any better off than you would have been otherwise. But that cannot be correct. You should have a pro-attitude towards the Bjorn massage. It should make no difference to your attitudes that you would have received a valuable Sven massage if you hadn't got the Bjorn massage.

Here is the second example.⁶ Suppose you know your nemesis will murder you today. He is a skilled assassin who never fails. If he were not to kill you, you would have years of happiness to look forward to. You are dismayed at this fact. You decide to hire a backup assassin to kill you tomorrow. The backup won't be needed due to the certainty that your nemesis will succeed. But his presence changes what your death deprives you of. Instead of being deprived of years of happiness, you will be deprived of just one day. Supposing your attitude towards your death should depend on what

you are deprived of, you should feel much less upset about your death now. But that seems wrong. Your attitude towards your death should not change as a result of hiring this backup assassin.

These examples lead me to think that our attitudes should be confined to the intrinsic goods and evils. Suppose someone has all the appropriate attitudes, of the correct magnitudes, towards intrinsic goods and evils. Suppose they have all the relevant associated preferences – they prefer the better to the worse, and they are indifferent between equally good things. And suppose they have no attitudes at all towards things that are merely instrumentally valuable. What would they be missing? I suggest the answer is: nothing. To the extent that their behavior is guided by their attitudes, they will make all the correct choices, prudentially speaking (though see Objection 1 below). That is some evidence that their attitudes are correct. But this means they would have no negative attitude towards death, or to their future nonexistence. They would prefer a continued good existence to going out of existence, but they would regard future nonexistence as neutral, and they would have no negative attitude towards death. If this is the case, then it is possible to have a perfectly fitting set of attitudes that is, in an important respect, Epicurean.⁷

Here is one more, slightly more complicated example to show why it cannot be fitting to have attitudes corresponding to instrumental values. There is a tendency to focus on cases that have only two outcomes, but this can lead us to overlook some potential difficulties.

Suppose S is applying for a grant to attend summer camp. There are three events that could happen, each with an associated outcome:

Event A (max funding): S gets the maximum funding, leading to outcome A: S goes to the super-fun sports camp where she gets 50 units of sports pleasure.

Event B (good funding): S gets funded at a lesser rate, leading to outcome B: S goes to the pretty-fun music camp where she gets 40 units of music pleasure.

Event C (no funding): S gets no funding, leading to outcome C: S does not go to any camp, and gets no pleasure at all.

Let us also add the following details. Supposing that S actually gets the lower funding rate, this would be because a large number of people applied, making it more difficult to get the higher rate. Thus if S had not received the lower funding rate, she would have received no funding. On the other hand, supposing S actually gets the higher funding rate, that would be because a relatively small number of people applied, and thus her application would have been one of the strongest submitted. If she hadn't received the maximum funding, due to the lack of competition, she would still have received the lesser funding rate and gone to the pretty-fun music camp.⁸ In other words: if B obtains, then if B hadn't obtained, C would have; if A obtains, then if A hadn't obtained, B would have.

We know what attitudes S should have towards these outcomes for themselves. S should have a pro-attitude towards A of magnitude +50 in virtue of the intrinsic goodness S gets in A; etc. What attitudes should S have towards events A, B and C in virtue of their instrumental values? In three-outcome cases, it will be useful to distinguish between what an event *prevents* and what it *precludes*. Let us say that an event E prevents an outcome O if and only if O *would* have happened if E had not happened. Let us say that an event E precludes an outcome O if and only if, given that E happens, O does not occur (whether or not it would have occurred had the event not happened). So in this example, each event precludes both of the other outcomes. An event can preclude an outcome without preventing it. For example, my death tomorrow would *preclude* my becoming the first person to walk on Mars, but it would not *prevent* that from happening, since I was not going to be the first person to walk on Mars anyway. Getting a flu shot *precludes* me from getting the flu no matter where I happen to be, but it only *prevents* me from getting the flu if I am in an area where the flu exists.

Now let us apply this distinction to our example. Suppose *S*'s attitude towards an event should be a function of its value and the values of all the things it causes and *precludes*. On a simple way of developing this thought, we could just add the values of all the outcomes precluded by an outcome, and say that one should have an attitude that is equal in magnitude but opposite in valence to the sum. In this case, event A precludes outcomes B and C; the sum of the values of B and C is +40; so in virtue of what A precludes, *S*'s attitude towards A should be a negative attitude of strength 40. Event A also causes outcome A, which has positive value of +50; so all things considered, *S* should have a slightly positive attitude towards getting the maximum funding. Applying the same procedure tells us that *S* should have a slightly negative attitude towards event B if it obtains, and a strong negative attitude towards event C.

However, this cannot be right. Any actual outcome will preclude infinitely many other outcomes of positive and negative magnitudes. For example, my writing this paper right now precludes my being emperor of the world right now, and also precludes my being tortured to death right now. Any outcome inconsistent with what I am currently doing is precluded by what I am currently doing. Thus in any actual situation, we would be required to have the same neutral attitude towards every event that occurs. Since that is absurd, what an event precludes cannot be relevant to our attitudes towards it. It is simply too easy for an event to preclude an outcome.

The deprivation theorist thinks that death is bad in virtue of what it *prevents*, not what it precludes. Death precludes many outcomes without preventing them all; most of the things it precludes would not have happened anyway. Recall that in our example, on the supposition that *S* receives the maximum funding, if *S* had not received the maximum funding, she would have received the moderate funding; and on the supposition that *S* received the moderate funding, if that hadn't happened, she would have received no funding. Given these details, event A (max funding) prevents an outcome with value +40, while event B (good funding) prevents an outcome with value zero. So B is better than A with respect to what they prevent. So, on the view under

consideration, S should have a much stronger pro-attitude towards receiving the moderate funding than towards receiving the maximum funding. Such attitudes cannot be fitting. S should have a stronger pro-attitude towards receiving the maximum funding than towards receiving moderate funding. In S's deliberations about which outcome to choose, attitudes towards each outcome in virtue of what would be prevented by bringing about that outcome should be inert if they are held at all – otherwise, S may incorrectly choose the moderate funding on the grounds that it would be fitting for him to be happiest if he were to choose the moderate funding.⁹

To sum up, the roughly Epicurean attitude that I recommend can be characterized as follows. You prefer more of a good life;¹⁰ you have pro-attitudes towards future intrinsic goods; you have no negative attitude towards future nonexistence (that's the Epicurean part). So consider the deaths of Kris and Joshua. Joshua has a lot of goods to look forward to at the time of his death, while Kris has only a modest amount. Joshua should have a strong pro-attitude towards his future goods, while Kris should have only a modest pro-attitude towards his future goods. Both Joshua and Kris should be neutral towards future nonexistence for itself. The strength of a preference should track a difference in strength of more basic pro-attitudes. Thus Joshua's preference for continued life should be stronger than Kris's, given his fittingly greater pro-attitude towards the goods in his future. But neither Joshua nor Kris should have a negative attitude towards death.

Objections

Objection 1: instrumental rationality. One might object as follows. It's irrational to have pro- and con-attitudes towards the intrinsic goods and evils, but no attitude towards things that bring them about. You'd violate a principle of instrumental rationality by desiring an end but not desiring the means to it.¹¹ The person wants to be

free but doesn't want to use the hacksaw to saw through the bars on his cell, so he remains in jail; the person wants to get in shape but doesn't want to go to the gym so she remains on the couch. Something is going wrong with these people. If someone has a pro-attitude towards their future goods, but no desire to avoid death, they will end up failing to do what is necessary to avoid death, and thereby act irrationally. So a negative attitude towards death must be required.

There is something to this objection, but it only goes so far. Let us make a distinction between two ways of thinking about desire. There is a behavioral sort of desire according to which we desire something just in case we are disposed to behave in certain ways towards it. There is also a warm and fuzzy sort of desire that we have towards something when we feel a certain way. (Imagine your favorite food being put in front of you when you are hungry, and think about how you feel.) You can desire something in the behavioral sense without having any good feelings about it. If you hear that one of your cars was stolen, you may desire that it was your Yaris rather than your Lexus, but you don't have warm fuzzy feelings about your Yaris being stolen. It may be possible to have desires in the behavioral sense without being able to feel anything at all, as when I say that my computer doesn't want to shut down.

The principle of instrumental rationality might hold for desire and aversion in the behavioral sense. Maybe you can't do an action without having some relevant desire, in which case you will need to have desires for non-intrinsically-good things in order for it to be possible to bring about the intrinsic goods. If to be averse to something is just to be disposed to choose to avoid it, then if you have correct preferences you will be averse to death when continued life would be good, and that is a kind of attitude.

But it can't be required to have warm fuzzy feelings about the instrumentally good things. Consider two people, George and Sandra, who are locked up against their will. Both want to be free, and freedom would be intrinsically good for them. Both have a positive attitude towards freedom. George finds a hacksaw and saws his way to freedom. Sandra gains her freedom via an elaborate plot involving several accomplices

and a number of lucky events. If we are required to be happy about instrumentally valuable things, Sandra should be a lot happier than George. Many more instrumentally valuable events happened to Sandra than to George. But it seems to me they should be equally happy, because both got only one thing they *really* care about: freedom.¹²

Objection 2: Draper's challenge. I am saying that both of the following are true: death is bad for you, but you have no reason to feel bad about death. How can that be? As Kai Draper has said, isn't it odd to call something bad for you and at the same time tell you not to worry about it? "It may be a conceptual truth... that all misfortunes merit emotional distress on the part of their victims. 'I know you've suffered a misfortune here, but there's no reason to be troubled by it' certainly invites the reply, 'I'm not sure you know what a misfortune is'" (Draper 2012, 301).

It would indeed be strange to say that something was harmful for you but you should be indifferent towards it. But indifference involves having no preference as to whether it obtains or not. That would be a more radical view than mine. I have not argued that you should have no preference concerning whether you live or die – in fact I have argued that it would be irrational. Correct attitudes towards the intrinsically good and intrinsically bad things require having a preference for what is better. What I have argued is incorrect is having a negative attitude towards death. Death's badness is merely instrumental, and I have argued that we should ignore that value in our attitudes.

It is also possible that having some negative attitudes towards death could be correct, provided they are merely ways of expressing a correct preference. Here I have in mind a distinction between attitudes that are directed at a single object and attitudes that are relational. For example, I might say that I fear I will die *rather than live to old age*. This is a way of expressing a relational fear of death. In saying this, I might just be expressing a strong *preference* to live to old age. That is a correct preference. What would be incorrect would be a fear of death that is not relational or contrastive in this way.

Concluding remarks

The view I am defending here does not depend on the claim that death is not bad. I am saying that even though death is bad, it is incorrect to fear it. Thus my view is unlike many other views that defend the unfittingness of fearing death. The Epicurean argument at the start of this paper is one example of such a view. Another view is that it is unfitting for one to have a negative attitude towards death when one has already enjoyed a long and happy life.¹³ For such a person to lament death would be unfitting in something like the way it would be unfitting for someone to lament the end of a long and enjoyable banquet, when one is already full and tired. I think this view is mistaken. Related claims would be rejected. If someone has got a lot of good stuff in the past, we don't think that they shouldn't be too concerned about being punched in the face. Maybe the objection involves a justice-based thought: it's more unfair for someone to die when they have not received many goods in life, so we should lament those deaths more. Or there could be a related virtue-based thought: complaining about not getting even more goods, when you've already received plenty, shows a character defect to which we should have a negative attitude. Those considerations are supposed to be bracketed here, because we are interested in attitudes towards death that we have for the sake of the welfare of the person who dies, not for the sake of justice or virtue.

Finally, there is an important caveat to what I have argued here. I have argued that it is inappropriate to have negative attitudes towards death in virtue of what it deprives us from having. But my arguments would not establish that a negative attitude towards death could be warranted by some other feature of death. One particular feeling that people sometimes have about death is existential terror or angst. This feeling has nothing in particular to do with deprivation. It is the feeling some people get when thinking about the fact that in the future they will not be around; or, in

the more distant future, nobody will be around. It is not that they could be getting some good things in life but they wouldn't be; it's just their permanent extinction that is terrifying. Nothing I've said in this paper is relevant to the rationality of this feeling. Elsewhere I've argued that the feeling is likely tied to the belief that future nonexistence robs our lives of meaning.¹⁴ Whether I am right about that or not, there remains the question of whether existential terror can be rationally justified. There are two reasons I suspect it cannot. First, it is difficult to provide a defense of the rationality of the feeling (Bradley 2015b). Second, similar feelings can evidently be produced in people in experiments by, for example, changing the color/symbol combination on a deck of cards (Bruner and Postman 1949; Proulx and Heine 2006; Behrendt 2018, 23). Apparently, showing someone a black diamond makes them angsty. This doesn't prove anything, of course, but if we assume that there is obviously no good reason to feel bad in any way when seeing a black diamond, and yet people do anyway, we may wonder whether such feelings are more like reflexes that are not susceptible to reason.¹⁵

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¹ Here I depart from the views I defend in Bradley 2009 and Bradley 2015a.

² See Cyr 2016 for a defense of the view that death can be bad for someone who is paradise-bound.

³ However, see Ekendahl and Johansson (2016) and Timmerman (2016).

⁴ The fitting attitude analysis can be applied to different sorts of value, but we are here interested in value for an individual, or welfare value.

⁵ See Jacobson 2011 for an overview.

⁶ For more examples like this see Bradley 2009, 156 and Timmerman 2016.

⁷ There might be room for an intermediate position according to which some, but not all, instrumentally bad things are worthy of negative attitudes. For example, you might think that it makes sense to direct negative attitudes towards the causes of bad things, such as the traffic jam that makes you late for work, but not towards the preventers of good things. This raises complicated issues that I will not take up here.

⁸ The example is of course simplified; in any real case, we would speak of probabilities – "she probably would have received the lower funding rate."

⁹ Things get even more complicated when we realize that according to popular ways of thinking about causation (and hence deprivation), the truth of assertions of causality depend on conversational context, in particular what we are treating as the default state of a system (see e.g. Hall 2007, 126-7). I bracket those considerations here.

¹⁰ Epicurus might seem to be denying this when he says: "Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason" (Principal Doctrines, 19).

¹¹ See Kolodny and Brunero 2018 for discussion of various principles of instrumental rationality and their drawbacks. Those principles concern the rationality of actions rather than emotions.

¹² Thanks to Richard Galvin for pressing me on my reply to this objection.

¹³ McMahan (2002) argues that death is less bad when the person who died lived a long and happy life. One might think that whether or not death is less bad in such cases, feeling bad about death is unwarranted.

¹⁴ Bradley 2015b. See Behrendt 2018 for an argument that I am wrong.

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