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Why Death is Not Bad

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Abstract

James Stacey Taylor is an Epicurean who argues that death cannot be bad for the person who dies. He is also a Hedonist and believes that “everything good or bad lies in sensation, and death is to be deprived of sensation.” (Taylor 179). Assuming death results in the cessation of experience, it follows that death has no value at all (it can neither be bad or good for the person who dies). By contrast, Neil Feit defends Deprivationism, which is the view that death is bad for the person who dies because it deprives him/her of intrinsic goods that he/she would have experienced had death not occurred. In this paper, I will argue against Feit’s Deprivationism and in favor of Epicureanism. I will first review how Feit’s view depends on a notion where the value (goodness and badness) of death is relative to other events that can affect the state of well-being of the person who dies. I will argue that the considerations in favor of Epicureanism reveal this assumption about death to be limited. Additionally, I will argue that recognizing the limitation of this claim and the soundness of Taylor’s arguments for Epicureanism show that death cannot be bad for the person who dies. Finally, I will evaluate both arguments in the context of hypothetical real-life scenarios.

1. Introduction

Epicurus believed that death is not bad for the person who dies because death means the cessation of that person’s existence, and thus the end

of any sensations that might cause that person any negative well-being. The latter point is based on the premise that, “everything good or bad lies in sensation, and death is to be deprived of sensation.” (Taylor 179). James Stacey Taylor adopts this Epicurean point of view and elaborates on the Hedonic Variant of that argument. The Hedonic Variant states that: only events or states of affairs that affect a person’s experiences can have any effect on his well-being (Taylor 179). He takes this point further and asserts “The Hedonic View of harm” which allows that an individual can be harmed by an event or state of affairs if said individual’s experiences would be better off had such an event or state of affairs never took place. With these ideas in mind, one can conclude that death is not bad for the one who dies because the subject of death has no experiences whatsoever after death. In other words, once death occurs, there is no longer an agent by which “harm” can be experienced, so death is not bad for the one who dies. Neil Feit pushes back on this argument and asserts that death is bad, at least extrinsically, for the person who dies because it deprives him/her of any intrinsic goods that he/she might have experienced had death not occurred (Feit 193). This thought process is known as the “Deprivation Account” of death. By that account, he develops a merely relevant relationship in which the goodness or badness of death depends upon: a) the well-being of the subject after death and b) the different times at which that well-being might be, on balance, negative or positive. In this paper, I will argue that Feit’s argument is based on developing the notion of a relative value (goodness and bad-

ness) of death to other events that can affect the state of well-being of the person who dies. Therefore, his argument is both weakened and limited by a crucial tenet of Taylor's argument (i.e. the Epicurean view), which is that death has no value at all. For this reason, death cannot be bad for the person who dies. I will use the Hedonic Account of death and harm to support my claim.

2. The Epicurean View on Death

Before delving into the distinction between the arguments of Taylor and Feit, I will clarify the Epicurean view on death in relation to good and evil. For Epicurus, the death of a person means the cessation of that person's conscious awareness. In other words, when people die, they lose the ability to be aware of their surroundings and feelings. In this way, they become no longer capable of experiencing good and evil. In his "Letter to Menoecus," he writes, "Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness." (Epicurus 156). If death deprives the individual of any awareness of good and evil, then it cannot be deemed evil (or good) for the person who dies. By that same token, death deprives the individual of the ability to experience any pleasure or harm, an important premise for Taylor's Hedonic View. Death, however, is not simply the cessation of awareness for Epicurus. In fact, he describes it as "the most awful of evils." (Epicurus 156). Nevertheless, it is an evil that shouldn't occupy one's mind because, following the notion that it cannot coexist with one's awareness, it can only exist in the prospect. Therefore, Epicurus asserts, "whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation." (Epicurus 156). Thus, the fear of death, for example, causes nothing to the individual but pointless pain. Following this idea, Epicurus further describes death by asserting, "It is nothing then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no

longer." (Epicurus 156). Not only does death hold no value to the dead, but it should also be of no value to us, the living. According to Epicurus, this attitude towards death allows the individual to enjoy the mortal life by removing any desire for immortality or fear of death. In other words, it allows the individual to experience pleasure in life.

The Epicurean view resists the notion to contemplate about the goodness or badness of death. It simply asserts that death has no value at all because the person who dies lacks conscious awareness and sensation to determine its value. At the same time, those who think about death (or similarly fear death) cause groundless pain for themselves. If death has no value at all, then it cannot be bad (or good) for the person who dies. It is important to note, however, that the Epicurean view does not oppose mourning the loss of loved ones. An individual can be disturbed by the loss of a loved one and still be aligned with the Epicurean view if his own death is nothing to him/her.

Feit's Deprivation Account takes the leap and considers the state of well-being that a deceased person might have experienced at that time had death not occurred. This notion gives rise to an important distinction between his and Taylor's arguments about death.

3. An Important Distinction Between Feit's and Taylor's Arguments

To account for the idea, propagated by Epicurean philosophers, that existence ceases at the time in which death takes place, Feit develops the "Time-Focused Deprivation Account", which states: "An event is bad for a person at any given time if and only if that person would have had a higher well-being level at that time if the event had not occurred." (Feit 200). With this account, he reserves the fact that death is not bad (i.e., good) for the person who dies if and only if his/her well-being would be generally negative had death not occurred. He argues, following his Time-Focused Deprivation Account, that an event can be bad for

a person if it deprives him/her of an intrinsic good that he/she would have otherwise acquired at any time had such an event never happened. An intrinsic good is the positive feeling that results from a state of positive well-being. That is, a state of being that is good in and of itself. For example, a conscious, terminally ill patient who gets a chance to see his family before he dies will experience an intrinsic good which would be the comfort that results from seeing his family (not seeing his family on its own), making the event of seeing his family good for him. The comfort of seeing his family is an intrinsic good for him because it is a state of well-being that is good in and of itself. If he dies before he does so, Feit would argue that death is bad for him because it deprived him from that positive state of comfort that he would have otherwise experienced had he not died. Before delving more into the topic of death, I will illustrate an important distinction between Feit's argument and that of Taylor's through a thought experiment. Feit gives the example of a baseball-fan individual (I will call her Ms. C) whose surprise baseball tickets were stolen from her mailbox. In this case, he argues that the theft of the tickets is bad for her because she would have enjoyed going to that baseball game had the tickets not been stolen from her. Thus, the event of theft is bad for Ms. C because it deprived her of a positive state of well-being at some future time. However, if we make the assumption that Ms. C ended up going to the baseball game, and due to unpleasant events, she eventually hated being there, then Feit (by that same logic) would argue that the event of theft was actually good (i.e., not bad) for her because it protected her from a negative state of well-being. An important detail of this example is the fact that Ms. C never knew about the baseball tickets being in her mailbox in the first place. For this reason, Taylor, according to the Hedonic Account of Harm, would argue that the theft event had no effect (neither good nor bad) on Ms. C because it did not affect any of her experiences whatsoever, if her life after the theft had happened was bal-

anced in terms of positive or negative events and that the baseball event might have tipped the scale toward one side over the other. Meaning, the theft of the tickets did not at all impact her mental state or level of well-being. Based on this premise, we can say that the theft event was not bad for Ms. C.

Going back to the topic of death, if we replace the event of theft with the event of the sudden death of Ms. C before she finds out about the tickets, then we can explore what each argument would conclude in this case. Feit would argue that death would be bad for her because, at the time of the game, Ms. C would miss out on a positive state of well-being. However, if we assume that she gets into a car accident that causes her a permanent disability right after the game, then he would argue that death was not a bad thing (i.e. good) for her because Ms. C's permanent disability caused her a critical predicament and strain (i.e., a prolonged negative state of well-being) on her daily life. Thus, at the time of the game, death would be bad for her, and after the game death would be good for her. Therefore, the Time-Focused Deprivation Account of death makes the value of death (good or bad) dependent on the well-being of Ms. C relative to the time in which her well-being would have been impacted by a certain event. Proponents of the Hedonic Account would argue against this view by stating that Ms. C's death ends her existence and thus her ability to become subject to any future feelings or experiences (like harm). At the same time, she can no longer be subject to relative comparisons between pre-death and post-death states of well-being because she cannot experience anything after her death. Thus, death has no value in relation to Ms. C because she is no longer a "subject" to whom values can be attributed. It is important to note that Hedonists are saying that Ms. C's death is not bad only in relation to her. Meaning, her death can be bad for her relatives and friends who loved her and will be negatively impacted by her departure. According to the Hedonic Account, however, death cannot have a value at all to Ms. C

herself. So, it is plausible to state that death was not bad for her.

It, so far, seems that there is a distinction between Feit's Deprivationist view and Taylor's Hedonic Account; the former makes the value of death relative to time and a state of well-being, while the latter strips death of any values altogether. Furthermore, the Hedonic Account negates the existence of any subject after death, and thus any relativity (to values, time, or well-being). In the following section, I will discuss how Feit counterargues the previous point.

4. The Timing Argument in The Context of Hedonism

The Hedonic Timing Argument is one that goes against the Time-Focused Deprivation Account because it holds the Epicurean premise that, "Nothing can be bad for a person when that person does not exist." (Feit 198). Feit argues against that premise and attempts to prove that even though a person does not exist, death can still be bad for that person. He utilizes the "subsequentism" argument which states that things can be bad for a person after they happen. By the nature of death itself, it can only be bad (or good) for a person after it takes place. Following that logic, any times (which is not necessarily all times) that death has caused that person to be deprived of positive states of well-being are times when death is definitely bad for that person. Thus, Feit achieves his goal and proves that although a person no longer exists, death can still be bad for him/her relative to the timing and the state of well-being that follows death. In other words, he proves that after the event of death, and despite the fact that the person no longer exists to experience anything, missing out on events that might have conferred positive states of well-being on the person who dies (relative to other states of negative well-being that might have happened before or after death) is bad for that person. Since death is the reason that caused that person to miss out on these pos-

itive states of well-being, it is bad for the person who dies. However, in the context of the Hedonic Account, his argument seems implausible because his conclusion must follow from the premise that death occurs. At the moment that death occurs, relativity or the value of death becomes irrelevant to the dead person. Meaning, the occurrence of death denies any values or relativities (e.g., comparison between positive and negative events) in time and space that can be attributed to the person who dies because he/she can no longer be a subject to them.

Going back to Ms. C. If we stretch our imagination and create a parallel world in which Ms. C was the only human being alive. She lives in a "scientific vacuum" that maintains all requirements of life. To clarify, she is the only human alive with no knowledge of language, emotions, sounds, etc. Accordingly, she has no past, present, or future (time is irrelevant) and also no experiences whatsoever (besides basic human functions). How can her death, then, be evaluated by both the Hedonic and the Time-Focused Deprivation accounts? I think that the Time-Focused Deprivation Account would fail to provide any evaluation because the account rests on the premises that:

1. A person lives a life with a baseline state of a well-being (good or bad)
2. Death can be evaluated as good or bad if a hypothetical post-mortem life is better or worse than the pre-mortem one.

Since relativities/comparisons and values like good, bad, positive, or negative have no context in Ms. C's life in the vacuum, as she is the only person alive with no relativity to a certain point in time, a Deprivationist would be stuck on how to evaluate her death in this case because the vacuum prevents Ms. C from having any comprehension of good and bad due to the fact that there are no contrasts that exist in the vacuum whatsoever. To elaborate more on this idea of contrasts, we can

know the goodness and badness of things by experiencing one or the other. To illustrate, Jack was told by his mother to not touch the hot stove because it will cause him pain. Let us assume that he defies his mother's instructions and still touches the hot stove. When he does so, he experiences pain. At that moment, Jack registers touching the hot stove as bad (because it leads to pain) and not touching the hot stove as good (because it does not cause pain). One might even expand the lesson as to say that Jack might have learned that listening to his mother is good and not listening to her is bad. Accordingly, his experience of a bad action revealed to him what a good action might be like. In Ms. C's case, however, she would not be able to comprehend the goodness or badness associated with touching a hot stove or listening to her mother because these aspects are not part of her world. Similarly, if she dies, no positive state of well-being can be attributed to her after death because there are no events that can be good to her, particularly if all the events before her death were neutral events (i.e., normal body functions like eating, etc.) that conferred no negative value on her well-being. Meaning, a Deprivationist would not be able to say that death is bad for Ms. C due to her missing out on positive/good states of well-being that would take place after her death because Ms. C simply never experienced any bad/negative states of well-being that would allow her to comprehend the difference before her death. Thus, she cannot be attributed any positive or negative experiences whether before or after her death because the contrast simply cannot be established in her case. A proponent of the Hedonic View (and the Epicurean argument), however, would simply argue that since Ms. C's existence ended with her death, she can no longer be a subject to any experiences. In other words, comparisons between her states of well-being before and after death have no value to Ms. C because her well-being physically came to a halt after death. Thus, death would be nothing to her and therefore it cannot be bad for her. Feit's argument, unlike Taylor's, becomes

limited to the relativity between the baseline state of well-being before the person dies and the potentially better ones that might take place after that person's death, making it the weaker argument specifically in a case like Ms. C's vacuum where her pre-mortem states of well-being (i.e. her baseline well-being) are as much neutral—holding no value of good or bad—to her as the post-mortem ones if her life were to be evaluated after her death.

5. The Hedonic Argument, Deprivation Account, and Applied Ethics

Although I have shown that Taylor's Hedonic View on death can be more plausible than Feit's Time-Focused Deprivation Account in the case the mental experiment with Ms. C, the world does not exist in a scientific vacuum. Therefore, it is important to further evaluate the Hedonic View on death in the context of real-life scenarios, while at the same time evaluating the Time-Focused Deprivation Account in the same context. One question that comes to mind: if the Hedonic View states that death is not bad for the person who dies, does this have implications for our supposed duties to the deceased? The Hedonic View (and similarly the Time-Focused Deprivation Account) is exclusively concerned with the relationship between the event of death and the person who dies. It does not dictate, or limit, how individuals related to that person think or feel about his/her death in the context of each of their independent lives. At the same time, it does not deny any distress or events of disturbance that individuals might experience after the loss of a loved one. Consequently, we are free to act as we see fit, carrying out duties that we consider proper when it comes to the death of a loved one. Nonetheless, we ought to believe, according to the Hedonic View, that death is not bad for the deceased because they no longer exist to be ascribed any goodness or badness of events; we can believe, however, that their death is bad for us, since we are still alive and thus can experience goodness and badness. To demonstrate

this logic, let's assume that Mr. L, a loving husband and father, has passed away recently. Mr. L's death, from a Hedonic (or Epicurean) standpoint, is not bad for Mr. L because he no longer exists to experience good and bad. So, death has no value for Mr. L and therefore it cannot be bad (or good) for him. However, it can be bad for Mr. L's family because they might experience displeasure in grieving for him. Thus, Mr. L's death can confer a negative state of well-being on his family making his death bad for them. It follows, then, that they can carry out whatever duties they see fit to mourn the loss of their family member. Consequently, the Hedonic View has no particular implications on our supposed duties toward the deceased because it governs the view on death in relation to the person who dies only, without any consideration for the implications of such death on us. Feit's Time-Focused Deprivation Account follows a similar reasoning with the caveat that death is in fact bad for Mr. L because it deprived him from any states of positive well-being (e.g., enjoying more time with his family) that he might have experienced at some time had death not taken place. Similar to the Hedonic View, Mr. L's death is bad for his family because it also deprived them from enjoying more time with their beloved family member.

If we expand Mr. L's analogy and assume that he dies due to a painless murder. Would painless murder, according to the Hedonic View, in this case be wrong? If the Hedonic premise states that death is neither bad nor good for Mr. L because he can no longer be a subject to a harmful experience, then it follows that his painless murder is neither bad nor good for him. The act itself, however, can be bad (and therefore wrong), but the Hedonic notion does not lead to that conclusion. Even though Mr. L's death cannot be attributed any values in relation to him, the murder might have caused pain in different ways (i.e., emotionally) for his family. Thus, the painless murder of Mr. L caused a negative state of well-being for his family. The emotional distress and fear of Mr. L's family caused by

the murder is intrinsically bad. In other words, Mr. L's family would have been better off had the murder not taken place. Thus, it follows that the murder is harmful and therefore wrong in relation to his family, but not necessarily for Mr. L himself. An exception to this analogy comes to mind: What if Mr. L was a "John Doe" with no known relatives. In other words, what if Mr. L hypothetically lived in social isolation that caused him to have no relationships with anyone else, so much so that no one would notice his death. In this extreme scenario, Mr. L's murder, from a Hedonic standpoint, would in fact not be wrong (or right) because the premise that Mr. L's death is not bad (or good) for him still holds true because he no longer exists to be attributed any values of good and bad. At the same time, since no one alive would experience a negative state of well-being caused by his death by murder, then the murder cannot be harmful for anyone and therefore cannot be wrong (or right). It would simply have no value associated with it from a Hedonic perspective, although it can still be legally unlawful (i.e., legally wrong). This extreme scenario reveals a practical ethical limitation to the Hedonic View since it cannot on its own reveal whether the painless murder of Mr. L is good or evil. The Time-Focused Deprivation Account would more firmly assert, in any case, that the painless murder of Mr. L is wrong because it deprives him of any pleasure that he might have experienced had the murder not taken place. It thus seems that both arguments would agree on the fact the painless murder of Mr. L is wrong in some way, although the Hedonic View would not be applicable in all cases as demonstrated.

If Mr. L was a terminally ill patient who got into a coma recently, would euthanasia be considered bad for him? The Hedonic View would render death that follows euthanasia to be of no value to Mr. L. Therefore, it cannot be bad (or good) for him because he becomes no longer a subject to whom harm (or no harm) can be attributed. However, if euthanasia ultimately prevents Mr. L's family to continue seeing him in

pain, then it confers a positive state of affairs on his family making his death by euthanasia good for them. On the other hand, if Mr. L's euthanasia causes too much pain and suffering for his family, then it would be bad for them. Differently, the Time-Focused Deprivation Account would evaluate Mr. L's well-being before and after euthanasia on a larger scale. The goodness and badness of euthanasia in relation to Mr. L would be based on his state of well-being before and after death with the latter being relative to the former. That is, if most of Mr. L's life was spent suffering in pain from the symptoms of his illness, then he will most likely continue suffering had his euthanasia never happened. In other words, there would be no higher levels of well-being that he would have been deprived of had death not occurred. In this case, euthanasia would be good for him from a Deprivationist point of view. On the other hand, if Mr. L experienced the symptoms of his illness toward the end of his life and most of his life caused him a positive state of well-being, then euthanasia would be bad for him because it would deprive him from any positive states of well-being that he might have experienced, like enjoying more time with his family or listening to music, had death by euthanasia not occurred, granted that he can experience some form of pleasure during his coma.

We can also attempt to evaluate both the Hedonic View and the Time-Focused Deprivation Account in the context of abortion. Would the death of a fetus by abortion be considered bad for the fetus? Proponents of the Hedonic View would assert that the death of a fetus by abortion would lead to the end of its existence and therefore it becomes unable to experience any values of good or bad. In this way, death would be of no value to the fetus. Consequently, abortion cannot be bad (or good) for the fetus. Proponents of the Time-Focused Deprivation Account, on the other hand, would argue that since abortion would deprive the fetus of any positive states of well-being that it might experience at a time had abortion not taken place, then it would be bad for the fetus. What

if the fetus ends up having a genetic disorder that would lead to him developing a painful, terminal illness after birth? What stance would a Deprivationist take in that case? According to Feit's Deprivation Account, if the fetus is expected to not have a higher level of well-being after birth due to its illness, then abortion would not be bad for the fetus. In other words, if the fetus is expected to have a life of pain, or a life where the baseline is a negative state of well-being, then abortion would not deprive it of any higher states of well-being at any time had it not been carried out. Here, the relative notion of the Time-Focused Deprivation Account becomes particularly clear since the goodness or badness of abortion would be relative to the potential goodness or badness (i.e., quality) of the fetus's life before and after abortion. Thus, proponents of the Hedonic View would assert that abortion is not bad (or good) for the fetus, and the proponents of the Time-Focused Deprivation account would base their argument on the quality of fetus's before and after abortion.

6. Conclusion

Relativity to a hypothetical future and a state of well-being is a crucial factor in the Time-Focused Deprivation account to evaluate whether death is good or bad for the person who dies. If death deprives one of a higher state of well-being at a time had it not occurred, then it is bad for the person who dies. However, if that person's life, on balance, confers an overall negative state of well-being (due to an illness, for example), then it can be argued that death is not bad for that person because it will end his negative state of well-being that will continue had his death never happened. Differently, the Hedonic Account follows the Epicurean argument and assigns no value (good or bad) to death and thus asserts that death cannot be bad for the one who dies. Additionally, Hedonists (like Taylor) would expand the argument that a person's death is the end of his/her existence and thus the end of his/her capacity to be-

come subject to any future emotions or experiences. Accordingly, I have shown that Neil Feit's argument is undermined by the no-value account of death propagated by the Hedonic View. Therefore, it is implausible, from a Time-Focused Deprivationist standpoint, to argue against the Hedonic View. Additionally, I have demonstrated (with the "vacuum" instance) that Feit's Time-Focused Deprivation Account of death is very limited and cannot be applied to all instances of death, unlike Taylor's Hedonic View, which makes the latter a stronger argument for how death is not bad (or good) for the person who dies. Moreover, I have evaluated both Taylor's Hedonic View and Feit's time-focused Deprivation account in the context of multiple real-life scenarios. In each case, the Hedonic premise that death has no value for the person who dies and, therefore, death cannot be bad (or good) for that person still holds true. Nevertheless, the death of that person can be good or bad for others, depending on whether that death confers a state of positive or negative well-being on them. Thus, to evaluate the value of death for a person, the Hedonic View forces the viewer to expand the evaluation of death from its exclusive relation to the deceased, who can no longer experience good or bad, to its relation to those who are still alive and related to the deceased; those who can still experience the goodness and badness of events. If death can only be evaluated in relation to the deceased, then the Hedonic View might be limited in its real-life practical and ethical applications because it would simply be unable to assign any values to the event of death on its own. On the other hand, Feit's Time-Focused Deprivation account would state that in each of these cases death deprives the person who dies from a higher level of well-being at a time had it not occurred making it bad for the person who dies, with the reservation that said person's life did, on balance, grant an overall state of positive well-being before death.

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