

Better than the alternative? Epicurus and the harm of death.

Philosophy MA Dissertation

Peter W. Jones

University of Wales Trinity St. David

July 2021

Introduction

This essay will defend Epicurus' (341 – 270 BCE) view that death is not a harm to us. This view is well captured in the following lines from Epicurus' letter to Menoeceus

...death means nothing to us, since every good and every evil lies in sensation;
but death is the privation of sensation.

(Epicurus, 2012, p. 156)

And a few lines later:

This, the most horrifying of evils, means nothing to us, then, because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are non-existent. For the former it is non-existent, and the latter are themselves non-existent.

(Epicurus, 2012, p. 156)

Epicurus' purpose was therapeutic: popular religion had the gods as prime causal agents whose whims held out terrible things for men in life and great torments after death. By espousing a material causal theory such that the world is in fact a "fortuitous concourse of atoms" (Strodach, 2012, p.44) that has no overall design Epicurus sought to dispel these fears. People's lives need not be tormented by anticipating the actions of the vengeful gods in this life or the next. Such things stood in the way of the happy lives that Epicureans sought to promote. Epicureans were hedonists but their version of pleasure was primarily one of avoiding physical pain and mental anguish rather than indulgence. The best state for man was *ataraxia* (a state of tranquillity free from mental and physical distress) that was best facilitated by cultivating an indifference to worldly concerns, a state that has clear links to the Buddhist *nirvana*.

It is an argument that Steven Luper (2004, p. 63) calls "absurd" mostly because death deprives us of whatever is good in life. Others might go further and say that bad things can happen to us after our death, perhaps if our reputation or life's work is damaged. And, of course, we just do not want to die. The privation of sensation, unless we are in great suffering, is not a comforting thought. The Epicurean argument does seem to go against our intuitions about death. Nevertheless, there are some ways in which it does not: we do recognise death as an end to suffering and we do recognise that the burden of a tragic death falls on those left behind. And we do see creating new life as optional, not something we have to do for the benefit of those who would otherwise be unborn. But it is fair to say that the Epicurean argument does have some ground to make up to overcome our intuition that death is a terrible evil.

That argument can be summarised as follows:

A 'Every good and evil lies in sensation'

This is hedonism. For it to be plausible sensation must be taken as implying something experienced, not just physical sensations. So there can be goods and evils that arise from mental states such as jealousy, disappointment, pride, love and so on. A more complete way of expressing this would be to say that for anything to be good or bad for someone it has to result in their experience of their life being better or worse.

In fact A breaks down into two claims:

A (i) Someone's well-being and nothing else is what is good or bad for that person

A (ii) For something to change someone's well-being it has to change their experience of their life

A (i) rejects the theory that there are some objective goods such as knowledge, beauty, piety or perhaps achievements in life. Instead it is only well-being that is good for people.

A (ii) restricts things that can affect our well-being to things we experience. This is a rejection of desire-fulfilment theories which have well-being dependant on the satisfaction of desires which may or may not involve experiencing things. On this theory desires could extend to things after death so that posthumous harm is possible.

B When we are dead we can have no experiences

Of course anyone who believes in an afterlife would reject this claim and insist that we continue to have experiences after death.

C Once dead we no longer exist

This is a separate argument. If we cease to exist after death then there is no subject for things to be good or bad for. When talking about death being bad for us this is a statement about the state of being dead, not about dying, which, of course, can be bad for us.

There are two main ways these arguments are attacked. One is by denying that A is true. The other is by arguing that, whether or not A is true, the harm in death is that it deprives us of whatever is good in life. So it need not be that bad things can still happen to us after death but just that we can no longer experience good things after we are dead and that this is enough to make death bad for us. This is usually referred to as the deprivation theory.

The first section will attempt to defend A. The second section will consider the deprivation theory and here C, the lack of a subject *post mortem*, will become central.

Section 1: 'Every good and evil lies in sensation'

Epicurus' argument requires A (i) and A (ii) and B to be true.

A (i) would be rejected by someone who supports what Parfit (1984, p. 499) refers to as "Objective List" theories. On these sorts of theory a wide range of things could be said to be objectively good for a being. Knowledge, beauty, piety and achievements have already been mentioned but generosity, courage, wit and many other qualities could be added to the list. One of the problems with this sort of theory is in fact that it is hard to specify what the criteria might be for inclusion on this sort of list. Indeed if there were such a criterion it might constitute an over-arching theory of the good. Some things are more plausible inclusions than others but cruelty and selfishness would seem out of place on such a list. In the end this perhaps comes down to an appeal to our intuitions as to what is good or bad.

Parfit (1984, pp. 493-502) identifies hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories as the alternatives to objective list theories. Hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories can perhaps be classified as subjective or even "internalist" (Singer and De Lazari-Radek, 2014, p. 215) in that what is good for someone is how their life is for them, something that the notion of well-being is intended to capture. This is opposed to externalist theories like objective list theories which, as Singer and De Lazari-Radek (2014, p.215) put it, have good as "...external to the perspective of the being whose good it is."

To defend hedonism the first step is provide positive reasons for accepting it. Next, Nozick's experience machine thought experiment must be considered since it is often considered a knock-out blow against hedonism. Thirdly, this section will consider the challenge to hedonism from desire-satisfaction theories, and lastly some of the difficult implications of hedonism. Full exploration of the alternatives offered by objective theories, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

The case for hedonism comes from consideration of what constitutes the moral universe, or what classes of things it makes sense to make normative statements about. That class is sentient creatures. Simply, it does not make sense to talk about things being good or bad for inanimate objects, to talk about things being good or bad for a pile of rocks or dust, or to ask whether you can be better off than your shoe (Luper, 2012, p. 5). Non-sentient things can have no feelings, interests, or preferences so things cannot be good or bad for them. Only with sentience do such terms start to make sense.

There is perhaps a question about where the boundary lies between sentient things and non-sentient things but not that there is such a boundary. A hedonist need not be troubled by the claim that plants or amoeba have feelings. If so, they can be accommodated within the moral universe. And if we can accept that it is the ability to feel and have experiences that defines whether something can be the subject of goodness or badness then that seems to imply that goodness and badness is strongly bound up with sentience. The *prima facie* case for hedonism is that it does provide a coherent and largely intuitive boundary for what can and cannot affect us for good and ill.

There seem to be plenty of reasons to think the boundary provided by hedonism is plausible. If we drop a brick and it lands on the ground we see no harm done. If it lands on someone's foot then we do see harm. If a tree falls down in a field then no harm is done; if it falls on a car and maims its

occupant then we do see harm. If I write a fictional story about a fraudster for a magazine I have done no one any harm; if I falsely accuse someone of fraud so that they lose their job then I have done someone harm, and so on. It does seem reasonable to say that for something bad to have happened to someone their experience of their life must have changed for the worse. The challenge for those who reject this boundary is to provide a plausible alternative. And there do seem to be direct grounds for seeing these things as good or bad. If we want to know if pain is good or bad we can drop a brick on our foot and we will get an answer of sorts; we will get an immediate and direct appreciation of the badness of the thing that at least provides us with an understanding of what it means to say that something is bad for us. Nagel (2021, p. 5) acknowledges that “Each of us has direct access to the goodness or badness of certain things in our own lives, such as pleasure and pain, freedom and coercion, survival and death.” This does not give us sufficient grounds to equate this perception with the notion of an ultimate good or to invest it with the moral authority that we require from such a concept, but it at least it allows the idea of something being good or bad to get a hold. And from there it can be plausibly extended to the more nuanced experiences that contribute to our well-being. This cannot be done with objective goods for which, as Bradley (2014, p. 227) puts it “...the only explanation of what it is that makes that thing good for us is *that it is the sort of thing that it is.*”

And hedonism can provide an explanation of how all things are good and bad for us. While our experiences are varied they all have a dimension which is the extent to which they are agreeable to us. It is this that contributes to our well-being. Whether it is a walk in the park or love, or music, or the theatre there is always an aspect of the experience which is how agreeable we find it. The experiences may seem so different that they cannot be compared but it is in fact always meaningful to ask whether we enjoyed one experience more than another, whether we might enjoy seeing *King Lear* more than a walk in the park or going ice-skating, even if the answer is not always easy to find. And this sort of view seems to be consistent with modern psychological theories. Berridge and Kringelbach (2008, p. 459) explain that pleasure: “comprises the positive dimension of the more general category of hedonic processing important to survival, which also includes other negative and unpleasant dimensions such as pain.” Their finding is that pleasure, rather than being a sensation in itself, is a ‘hedonic gloss’ that attaches to our experiences. This goes some way to refuting the argument that the things we find good are just too diverse to be accounted for by a single quality.

Another argument in favour of hedonism is that many modern philosophers already accept hedonism when it comes to animals. Peter Singer writes:

For a merely conscious being, death is the cessation of experiences.... Death cannot be contrary to an interest in continued life...whereas with self-aware beings, the fact that one may desire to continue living means that death inflicts a loss for which the birth of another cannot be a compensation.

(Singer, 2011, p.112)

For the moment it is worth noting that if this divide between self-aware beings and non-self-aware beings cannot be maintained in this way then either non-self-aware beings must be granted the same well-being affecting preferences as self-aware beings, or hedonism must apply equally to both. By the same token if there are objective goods for people then there must be objective goods for

animals. A hedonist would not recognise Singer's distinction since moral consideration is determined only by the capacity for pain and pleasure in all its forms. Death in this case is no more a harm to humans than to animals.

Next is the question of whether Robert Nozick's (1974, pp. 42-45) experience machine thought experiment is fatal to hedonism? His argument is mainly an argument against A(i). What it aims to reveal is that people do not think all that matters is what we can experience. Our intuition seems to be that other things matter as well, to the extent that we might forego blissful experiences to attain other goods. If such intuitions are upheld by an overwhelming majority of people who reflect on the matter then this suggests that hedonism is wrong. If reality or authenticity matter then they must be objective goods.

In the thought experiment people have the option of living life in an experience machine or life in the real world. By connecting to the machine we disconnect from real life and can instead experience whatever we want. Nozick suggests an infinite library of experiences from which we can choose. Every couple of years the program ends and we reconnect with reality long enough to choose a new experience and then switch on again. He suggests we would not want to plug into the experience machine. This is because "...we want to do certain things, and not have the experience of doing them" and in addition "we want to be a certain way" and to "live in contact with reality". In other words there are things that matter to us other than the experience of them.

As Weijers points out (2014, p. 515) a strength of Nozick's experience machine experiment is that it concedes a lot to hedonism in that it offers 'a lifetime of bliss' to those who do plug in, yet it still produces the intuition that we would not want to plug in. The force of the argument comes from the overwhelming agreement that we would not want to plug in. If such an intuition is so widespread then hedonism seems very hard to accept. But if it becomes less obvious that we would not want to plug in then the experience machine conclusion is greatly undermined. Kolber (1994, pp. 10-17) suggests that if the question is rephrased so as to eliminate status quo bias by assuming we are already plugged into the machine and have to decide whether to unplug then it becomes much less certain that we would not plug in. It is, by the terms of the experience machine experiment, quite possible that we are in fact plugged into an experience machine, so the question is then whether we would wish to continue our present life or unplug in favour of a different life. That life will involve worse mental states, one where we will be less happy. Considered like this it seems very unlikely that the response to the question would be overwhelmingly to unplug. De Brigard (2010, pp.43-57) conducted a psychological experiment to put this to the test. Volunteers were asked to assume they were already connected to an experience machine and asked if they wished to remain connected. When the alternative to the machine was a life in prison 87% preferred to remain connected to the machine. Told only that life would be different outside the machine 59% opted to remain connected. Weijers (2014, p. 521) went a little deeper by incorporating questions about reasons for participants' answers in his experiment. When asked if participants would plug in for life only 34% said they would. But when reasons were analysed many of the reasons were 'irrelevant' in that they were due to fears of computer failure, the need to care for others that would be left behind as well as an aversion to the imagery of electrodes and tanks. These considerations are irrelevant since they conflict with the specification of the experiment. Weijers also identified risk aversion as a factor with the result that when asked to decide for a stranger, and when the 'irrelevant' factors were eliminated, 54% opted for the machine.

These studies cast much doubt on the conclusion that people would overwhelmingly choose not to plug in. Consider also a variation on the experience machine experiment: suppose a (bad) poet is consumed by a desire to win the Nobel Prize for her poetry. In real life she is doomed to a life of disappointment and humiliation. But by some accident she comes to be connected to a lifetime experience machine where she experiences the life she wants. Her experience of life on the machine is everything she hoped for. It would be very difficult to argue that she had been harmed by the accident or that she would be benefitted by someone unplugging her.

These considerations undermine the authority of Nozick's experience machine experiment. It is often regarded as a knock-out blow against mental state theories of well-being. But if the intuition is questionable then the experiment has little force. In that case mental state theories remain unscathed. So, of course, do theories based on objective goods so the experience machine does not resolve A (i) either way. The immediate point here is not to resolve that question but just to establish that Nozick's experiment is not fatal to mental state theories as it is often assumed to be.

The third question to be resolved is whether desire satisfaction theories are preferable to hedonism. If they are then this opens the way for *post-mortem* harms, perhaps to our reputation, children, or life's work. But since hedonism and desire-theories are both theories that have well-being as the ultimate good and that can be understood as subjective theories, the first question is why the conflict has arisen? Why might desire theory be considered an improvement on hedonism?

For some one of the problems with hedonism is it can seem to make what is good for someone strangely detached from anything that person wants or thinks is good for them. It can seem paternalistic in that someone could be made most happy by surrendering control of their life to someone who knows what is best for them. In this case someone's loves, hates, projects and ambitions all turn out to be irrelevant. It can have a sense of making someone a bystander in their own life and seeing them as just a vessel to be emptied of pain and filled with pleasure. This sort of view sees hedonism as failing to do justice to human beings as creatures who have agency and whose lives have purpose and meaning. It seems to offer a rather debased version of human life. Peter Railton identifies an 'internal resonance' as a requirement for anything being good for someone and explains:

...what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.

(Railton, 1986, p.9)

This line of thought, together with some influence from economics (which can analyse revealed preferences more easily than utility) led to a rejection of simple hedonism in favour of preference hedonism or preference utilitarianism, and subsequently, desire theory. Now what is good for someone is maximal preference or desire satisfaction. What matters to someone is that they get what they want; that their projects and ambitions are successful; that the choices and desires they make for their lives are realised, so that the things that make someone's life go best are the things that resonate most with them. In this case human agency and purpose is restored and the good in what we make of our lives is recognised.

That is not to say that a hedonist would accept the view that pain and pleasure can only provide a rather debased account of human life, rather that the capacity for pain and pleasure, in all their forms, including perhaps that which comes from fulfilling an ambition, is enough to ground the idea of moral value that we see in human life.

But for a desire theorist what is good for us is that our desires are satisfied. Heathwood (2017, p. 1) states this as: "According to the desire theory of human welfare, human welfare consists in the satisfaction of desire" which theory "recognizes no other fundamental sources of benefit and harm". So far Parfit's (1984, pp. 493-502) categorisation of theories of the good into objective goods, hedonism and desire satisfaction has been followed. Loosely, hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories can be classed as subjective, in contrast to objective theories, in that they depend on people's individual attitudes, desires and tastes. But it is a loose classification since, while hedonism is genuinely an internal theory in that it is wholly about mental states, desire-satisfaction theories depend on some relation holding between internal states (desires) and external states (of affairs) and so are not entirely subjective. As well as that subjective goods such as pain and pleasure and desire-satisfaction could equally well appear on a list of objective goods. It is quite possible to argue that pleasure (a subjective state) is objectively good and similarly with desire-satisfaction. Some criticisms of the Epicurean position could be interpreted as insisting that hedonism is neglecting objective goods (as Nozick's experience machine is best understood) but could also be interpreted as saying that hedonism is neglecting the value of desire-satisfaction (perhaps that we have a desire to have a real life). Despite the imprecisions in these classifications hedonism and desire theories do go together as primarily agent-centred theories that offer competing accounts of what constitutes well-being. Since desire theories open up the possibility of harms after death it contradicts Epicurus. The question then is whether desire theory is a more plausible account of well-being than hedonism?

Thomas Nagel's essay 'Death' (1979, pp. 1-10) is specifically directed against Epicurus. Nagel argues that things can be good or bad for us that do not affect us experientially and indeed which might occur physically or temporally remotely from us, even perhaps after our death. One example he uses is that of betrayal. In his example:

... a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face, none of it can be counted as a misfortune so long as he does not suffer as a result. It means that a man is not injured if his wishes are ignored by the executor of his will...

(Nagel, 1979, p4).

There are two different arguments here. One is the view that it is just bad to be ridiculed and betrayed in this way even if this never affects us experientially. The other is that it is bad for us that our wishes are not fulfilled, as in the case of our executor ignoring our wishes, which will clearly not affect us experientially. The latter question - about desire-fulfilment - is discussed below. But the first argument is just that "...it is bad to be betrayed..." (1979, p. 5) independently of the experiences or desires involved. We should probably accept Nagel's view that this is what our intuition actually is, that we would consider ourselves to have been harmed if our friends betrayed us in the way he describes; that we do see it as a good thing that our friends are true to us and are not just pretending to be so. But whether that intuition is correct is a different matter.

Warren (2004, p. 26) suggests that this intuition is unreliable since we fail to accept the premise of the experiment that no experiential harm can accrue to the victim. We have to believe that at no stage will the victim ever become aware of the betrayal; that he is never overlooked for promotion; that his friends still seek his company; that his work is widely read, and he never hears a snigger in the corridor as he passes. Warren changes the terms of the example slightly. In his version the subject is a writer whose books are read thousands of miles away and disparaged by people who he is never likely to have any professional or social contact with. Now the possibility of discovery, or the victim's career suffering, disappears and our intuition that harm is suffered is rather weakened. Warren argues that our intuition that the victim of this ridicule is harmed stems from the possibility of discovery; we may simply find it difficult to ignore the possibility that the truth will at some point come out, or that the actions of others will affect our life experience indirectly even if we are never aware of the cause, if, for example, we are passed over for a promotion. In other words our intuitions are misled because we cannot help thinking some harm must accrue to him in some way.

Another possible objection is that our imagination may not be up to the job of imagining our friends betraying us while at the same time imagining our not knowing of it.

But if these objections shed some doubt on Nagel's argument they are not conclusive. There is a difference between people we meet every day and count as our friends betraying us and people we do not know thousands of miles away speaking ill of us. We simply care much less about the latter. And just as the Epicureans can stick with their intuitions Nagel can insist on his. It is not immediately clear how such a clash of intuitions is resolved.

But there is a more telling objection to Nagel's insight. Regarding the betrayal case he goes on to explain (Nagel, 1979, p. 5) that "...the discovery of betrayal makes us unhappy because it is bad to be betrayed – not that betrayal is bad because its discovery makes us unhappy". But in this case what is the relevance of the discovery of the betrayal? If the harm lies in the fact of the matter then the discovery does not matter. But the discovery clearly does matter. If it did not, why would we ever shield an unpleasant truth from someone? Would we tell someone close to death of a tragedy that had befallen their dearest friend or relative? No, since in a few hours they will die unaware and so avoid the harm of the tragedy. Nor would we tell them that the masterpiece they want us to publish is devoid of any literary merit. And we would not tell someone that the gift we have received from them is not to our liking, or that we already have three of them.

This seems to suggest, contrary to Nagel, that it is the discovery of the facts of the matter that constitute a harm and not the facts of the matter. Another consideration confirms this: suppose that our friends and colleagues had not betrayed us, they are just as respectful and kind towards us behind our backs as they are to our face. Only a supposed friend who harbours a secret grudge against us convinces us that in fact all our friends and colleagues are betraying us in the way Nagel envisages; undoubtedly we have been harmed in this case. From this it emerges not that our awareness of the matter is irrelevant, but that it is all that matters.

Questions of betrayal and reputation perhaps have complex overtones. Instead what if we have a Gauguin on our wall? It was handed down from a distant seafaring relative. It is our pride and joy. Its authenticity is beyond question but we will never sell it and it will be handed down to our descendants. We get great pleasure from looking at it and from showing it to others. In fact it is a fake. Nobody knows this or even suspects it and its provenance is such that its authenticity will never

be questioned. It does not seem right to say that we are harmed by the fact of its being a fake. We would only be harmed if we came to know it was a fake. Suppose now that the painting is not a fake but that one day an expert comes to our house to look at it and says that he thinks it is a fake. Other experts follow and too decide that it is a fake. We come to believe it is a fake. We still look at the painting on the wall but derive no pleasure from it; in fact it now distresses us greatly to see the painting that we once thought was a genuine Gauguin. Even though the painting is genuine we have clearly been harmed. If we can be harmed by a genuine painting and not harmed by a fake painting it seems very much that the perception, or our experience of the thing, is what makes a difference to us.

Another possibility suggested by Hetherington (2001, p. 9) is that the harm to the victim lies in a form of a "...basic discrepancy, one that can exist between the person and the world as a whole...". In other words it is bad for us if our understanding of how the world is at odds with how the world is, if our beliefs about it are wrong, especially where things that matter to us are involved. And, of course, we would not be aware of this discrepancy and so would not experience it directly.

The argument here could be that the accuracy of our perceptions is objectively good for us or that it is subjectively good for us. But in either case it seems implausible. At any time there will be enormous differences between our understanding of the world and how it actually is and these cannot all constitute harms for us. And in the case of things that do matter to us – how our colleagues, friends and loved ones think of us – would it really be good for us to align perfectly our understanding with reality? To eradicate all our illusions? That we usually go to some lengths to hide our true appreciation of other people for fear of hurting them suggests otherwise.

Nagel has another argument which involves considering the subject of a life in a different way. Instead of considering "...the goods and evil that might befall a man..." (1979, p6) we should realise that "A man's life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind" so that:

A man is the subject of good and evil as much because he has hopes which may or may not be fulfilled, or possibilities which may or may not be realized, as because of his capacity to suffer and enjoy.

(Nagel, 1979, p. 6)

The example Nagel uses is that of a brain-damaged man. An accident has reduced him to the state of a contented infant. To recognise the harm we must consider "... the person he *could* be now, then his reduction to this state and the cancellation of his natural adult development constitute a perfectly intelligible catastrophe." (1979, p. 6). The fact that the man is content in his infantile state complicates the picture in this case. If he were instead confined to a wheelchair and unable to do many of the things that made his life worthwhile then it is clear that he has been harmed. But if he is in fact content in his infantile state to at least the extent he would have been as an undamaged adult then it is not clear that he has been harmed. Perhaps the suggestion is that he would have been more content if he had not been brain damaged. If this is so then the hedonist would not disagree: the infant may be content but if his experience of his life would have been better as an undamaged adult then he has been harmed. But if Nagel's argument is that the contented infant is happier than the undamaged adult then the hedonist must reject the idea that it is the infant has been harmed.

Further, it cannot be the man that might have been that has been damaged as that person never exists; if we accept a potential person as a subject – which we should not – then should the man avoid brain damage and live to be a malcontented middle-aged man then the contented infant would have been harmed. The image of a once intelligent adult now content in “...a full stomach and a dry diaper.” (Nagel, 1979, p. 6) is rather grotesque and the suggestion might be that his arrested development is some sort of offence against the natural order of things but it is not obvious where the harm lies in this case. The accident may well be a catastrophe for the man’s friends and family but that is not the point at issue. Another problem with accepting the idea that the person someone might have been is capable of being harmed is that it admits anything that comes between us and our best possible life as a harm. Apart from the problem of who is the subject of the harm this is too wide a definition of harm.

Feldman (2011, Ch. 8) makes a similar point in trying to make a distinction between intrinsic harm and extrinsic harm. Intrinsic harm is something we experience while extrinsic harm is something that is instrumentally bad for us. Poisoned candy is not intrinsically harmful – it might taste quite nice so the experience of eating it is pleasant. But it is extrinsically harmful in that the subsequent pain that results from eating it is bad. Feldman reminds us that Epicurus raises the possibility of extrinsic harms in the case of gluttony which maybe pleasant at the time but not in the long run. Feldman then considers a situation in which a college student goes to college A which goes well for him. But he never realises that had he gone to college B he would have discovered a talent for poetry which would have resulted in a much better life. Feldman contends that while he has suffered no intrinsic harm by going to college A he suffered extrinsic harm since his life would have been so much better if he had gone to college B. As with Nagel’s case this is too wide a definition of harm. On this view living anything other than our best possible life is a harm to us. But it is not an objection to the Epicurean thesis since Feldman is arguing about the relative merits of different lives seemingly based on the experience of them. The Epicurean can happily concede that the student may have experienced a better life had he gone to college B.

Despite these criticisms of the views of Nagel and Nozick what does emerge from their accounts is that we are clearly capable of having desires for states of affairs which we can never experience. We even make elaborate provisions for matters after our death (as indeed Epicurus did, earning a charge of hypocrisy from Cicero¹). We would prefer that our friends and colleagues thought well of us, that our reputation was good and that our loved ones thought only good things of us. But the hedonist’s view is that the satisfaction of these desires does not affect our well-being independently of our experiences.

There is one sense in which this is not true, or at least is ambiguous. The achievement of an ambition or the realisation of an ambition can itself give rise to a good experience. Perhaps we form an ambition to run a marathon and pursue that goal determinedly. In fact we hate the training and the race itself is pure misery; and it takes us some time to get over the resulting injuries. As an experience it is unremittingly grim. But it is rescued by the fact that we take satisfaction from just

¹ ‘What I want to know is this: if all sensation is annihilated by dissolution, that is, by death, and if nothing whatever that can affect us remains, why is it that he makes such precise and careful provision and stipulation ‘that his heirs, [Aminomachus](#) and Timocrates, shall after consultation with Hermarchus assign a sufficient sum to celebrate his birthday every year...’ Cicero: De Finibus 2.101

having done it. Maybe we think better of ourselves as a result. There are in reality some complex relationships between our preferences and ambitions and how we experience life. The point here is that the experience of fulfilling an ambition can itself be a good one and hedonists must recognise this but what the desire theorists need is for the fulfilment of desires to be shown to improve our well-being independently of any experiential effect.

What will be argued here is that there are a range of problems that with desire theory and the modifications that are required to salvage it are such that it must inevitably collapse into hedonism if it is to be at all consistent with our intuitions.

Derek Parfit (1984, p494) highlights an important problem for desire-satisfaction theories in his example of the stranger on the train. In this we meet someone on a train who tells us they are on the way to have an operation to hopefully cure a fatal illness. We warm to the stranger and strongly wish the operation is a success; the operation is indeed successful but we never hear of the stranger again. In this case our strong desire has been satisfied but we never find that out. Our life experience is not affected by the outcome so it is hard to say that our life has gone better in any way. Parfit identifies this as a reason to reject Unrestricted Desire-Fulfilment Theory. Similar objections apply to Kagan's (1998, p. 37) example of a desire that the number of atoms in the universe be a prime number. This desire can clearly be satisfied without improving our well-being.

Problems of this sort prompt a move from unrestricted desire-fulfilment theory to a restricted theory. In this way the sorts of desires that can account for someone's well-being are restricted to those Parfit (1984, p. 494) describes as "...desires that are about our own lives." But, as Parfit says, it is not clear how the line is to be drawn so that it excludes desires that we see as too remote to plausibly affect our well-being. One of the main arguments for hedonism is that it does provide a realistic and coherent boundary for what does and does not affect our well-being.

Heathwood (2017, pp. 4-8) details a number of the strategies employed to rescue desire-fulfilment theories from these problems. Against these he offers the example of a football fan who we would regard as benefitting from their team winning. But it is doubtful whether the success of a football team would count as a desire about your life. This example also counts against the restriction that the subject be alive for the state of affairs desired to obtain and so exclude things that "... can obtain whether or not the agent exists at all, and thus would appear to be logically irrelevant to a determination of the agent's self-interest." (Overvold, 1980, p. 118). This is intended to ensure relevance. A desire to visit New York is only capable of being fulfilled if the subject is alive to do so. This requirement would deal with Parfit's stranger on the train as we do not need to be alive for the stranger's operation to be a success. But this condition would exclude unreasonably the football team's victory which would not require our being alive. The same example also counts against Scanlon's (1998, pp. 119-121) substitution of "rational aims" for desires to solve the problem of remote or irrelevant desires. On this theory only what we can rationally aim at can increase our welfare. This deals with Parfit's stranger since though we desire their cure we are not in a position to aim at it. But the football fan cannot aim at their team winning, only desire it, and yet they are still benefitted by its victory.

Heathwood's own solution "...is that desire satisfactions *must enter one's awareness, or one's experience.*" (2017, p. 8). This is clearly a step in the direction of the Epicurean position. This qualification deals with the case of Parfit's stranger on the train well (we are not aware of the

successful operation) and also with Kagan's prime number obsessive (she cannot experience the result). But it is also consistent with our intuitions in the football fan case. She is aware of her team's victory.

However, Heathwood notes the same problem with his theory identified in Nagel's case and the Gauguin example. The subject may have the facts wrong. She may believe her team won when it in fact lost, or in Parfit's case we might come to believe that the stranger has been cured when they have not. This is problematic since if for us to be benefitted by the stranger's cure we have both to believe, or be aware of, it *and* for it to be true that the stranger has been cured, then we are back to the situation where our benefit is dependent on matters unknown to us, whether our belief in the stranger's cure is correct or not. Our experience is the same whether our belief is true or not and some remote fact we are not aware of is now supposed to determine our well-being. This is no improvement on the original position in Parfit's experiment. To deal with this Heathwood suggests we: "...must drop the occurrence requirement and become a mental-state theory. " (2017, p.13). This is another move in the direction of hedonism.

Another consideration is that desire-satisfaction cannot require a pre-formed desire. In that case things we had never considered could never be good for us which would rule out a great deal of what does in fact make our lives good. Desire theorists insist that we do have to have the appropriate desires for something to be good for us, but the fact of our having a desire can be revealed in our reaction to an event that has the potential to be affective of our well-being. So if we have a long standing desire to play cricket and are finally picked for a team then what results is, for desire theorists such as Heathwood, an episode of affective subjective desire satisfaction. But the same can be true if we had never thought of playing cricket in our life but suddenly find ourselves asked to make up the numbers. In this case we spend a pleasant but uneventful afternoon wandering around a field until we catch a ball and win the match. We find that this has been a very happy episode in our life. This is so because we have discovered an affective subjective desire to play cricket which has now been satisfied. The hedonist can simply say that he enjoyed playing cricket and that made his life better.

The desire theorist also has a difficulty if the person in this example had an extreme aversion to playing cricket but found himself obliged to make up the numbers. Even if he enjoyed himself tremendously it would seem his life has been harmed as his desire has been thwarted. A variation on this problem is raised Johansson (2014, pp. 157-9). In his case I have a strong desire to play tennis tomorrow only to find that on that day I now have a weak desire to play soccer. But to make my life go best I am prudentially required to play tennis in order to make yesterday a good day for me by fulfilling my strong desire that day. Of course today is a rather miserable day because I did not enjoy playing tennis and would have been happier playing soccer. This is clearly absurd. There are various ways of avoiding this conclusion, for instance by making past desires conditional on no new contradictory desires emerging. But all this does is constrain relevant desires to what actually does make my life go better independently of any prior desires I had. This is another step in the direction of hedonism which can just acknowledge the pleasure as it occurs and count it as a good to us.

The various conditions attached to desires so that desire-satisfaction theory can plausibly explain what affects our well-being have all been in the direction of hedonism. The resulting theory requires no pre-formed desires; has to discount desires that turn out to be erroneous; has to accept that

desires held “...prior to the experiencing of occurrent happiness are in fact *never* relevant” (Heathwood, 2020, p. 5); that we must experience things in such a way that they affect us; that it is not essential that the state of affairs our happiness is attributable to actually obtains, only that we believe it does, and that the happiness, or well-being, we are trying to account for is a mental state. This sort of theory now seems quite close to an Epicurean one.

Heathwood (2020, p. 12) explicitly rejects “...the view that affective desire can be defined in terms of pleasure and enjoyment.” He rejects the idea that (2020, pp. 20-22) we can just feel happy, we have to feel happy about something and feeling happy about something means having a pro-attitude to it or a desire for it. To deny this is to say that we can be made happy by an experience which we do not have a pro-attitude to which is the equivalent of saying we can be made happy by something we are indifferent to, which is impossible. In this way a desire is essential for a contribution to our well-being to occur and the hedonist view that anything that causes happiness can be good for us must be rejected. But this argument is unsound. The only evidence offered that people have pro-attitudes to things that make them happy is that some things make people happy. That fact cannot support the conclusion that people need pro-attitudes to things that make them happy. A hedonist can simply say, of the cricketer, that the experience was an agreeable one, that it generated a certain mental state which we can call ‘happy’, something which ‘feels good’, and is as Heathwood agrees (2020, p. 21) is a well enough understood concept. To insist that happiness can only arise in the event of a pre-existing (albeit undisclosed) desire to play cricket is unwarranted. A hedonist can agree that for cricket to make someone happy that they must have a proclivity to be made happy by playing cricket but that just reduces to the claim that for someone to be made happy by playing cricket they must be the sort of person who is made happy by playing cricket. No new consideration is involved. A proclivity of this sort cannot operate in the same way that desire theorists want desires to: it cannot establish an interest the frustration of which itself constitutes a harm independent of any pain or pleasure involved in the experience, and cannot therefore establish the harm of death. There is no significant difference between the sort of proclivities that Heathwood establishes and the proclivities of animals. We might reasonably say that for a lamb or a rabbit to enjoy eating grass or gambolling in a field they must have certain sorts of pro-attitudes to grass or gambolling but we cannot get from these to any sort of harm that transcends death.

Heathwood’s claim (2020, p.12) to have analysed pleasure in terms of affective desire, rather than the reverse, seems unjustified. In the cricket example a hedonist can just say ‘he enjoyed playing cricket’ without the need for further explanation. The same cannot be said of the claim that he had an episode of affective subjective desire satisfaction playing cricket.

The aim in this section was to support a broadened version of Epicurus’ claim that ‘all good and evil lies in sensation.’ Broadened, that is, to include all the things we experience that make our life better or worse. Of the conditions Heathwood attaches to desire theory only the experience condition is necessary to find in favour of Epicurus on his point that all good and evil lies in sensation.

Section 2: Deprivation of the goods of life

The other challenge to Epicurus is the argument that death is a harm because it deprives us of the good things in life that we would otherwise have experienced. The argument is straightforward: there are good things in life and generally these outweigh the bad things and when death comes (prematurely) it deprives us of these on-balance good things. The 'prematurely' qualification is significant: if the ageing process (perhaps a better candidate for 'the most horrifying of evils') were left to run to its conclusion it would most likely deprive us of the ability to enjoy the good things in life. Death itself might deprive us of nothing except suffering. But a premature death is different. This deprivation constitutes a harm. We are robbed of the goods of life, or so it is argued. Lucretius (99-55 BCE) meets the issue of missing out on the *praemia vitae* [joys/sweets of life] head on:

No longer now a happy home will greet you
Nor loving wife, nor your sweet children run
To snatch your kisses and to touch your heart
With silent sweet content. Nor shall you prosper
In your life's work, a bulwark to your people
'Unhappy wretch,' they cry, 'one fatal day
Has taken all those sweets of life away.'

(Lucretius, 1997, 3.895-900)

But in the next line he adds:

But this they do not add, that the desire
Of things like these hangs over you no more.

In other words here are all the joys of life set out for us and in life nothing can matter more, or bring us more joy. But according to Lucretius once we are dead all these things will matter nothing to us; we will not be capable of missing out on them as we no longer exist. So there is no harm to us. There can be little doubt that Lucretius recognises the counter-intuitive nature of this view of death. Indeed the whole purpose of the Epicurean philosophy of death is to free us from the harmful effect of these intuitions; to persuade us by reason that our instincts about the harm of death are wrong. If 'C' above is true and we cease to exist after death then not only is there no subject to experience any harms after death but neither is there a subject for whom the absence of life can be a loss and no sense in which someone can be worse off by virtue of being deprived of the goods of life.

The problem for deprivation theory then seems to be establishing a temporal location for the harm to the subject. Deprivation theory generally relies on some form of comparativism which involves a comparison of welfare levels between one state of affairs in which an event takes place and the counterfactual state of affairs in which the event does not take place. Luper (2019) states this as follows:

$$V(S,E) = IV(S, W_e) - IV(S, W_{\sim e})$$

Where $V(S, E)$ is the value for S of event E and W_e is the world in which event 'e' takes place and $W_{\sim e}$ is the world in which event 'e' does not take place. Fred Feldman (1991) has a case in which an American decides to take a fatal trip to Europe. Up to this point his life has accrued a positive balance of 500 hedonic units. In prospect if he stays home are another 600 positive units. The harm of his trip is the 600 units the fatal trip deprives him of. This seems a very plausible account of the harm involved in death. But when does the harm occur?

One attempt to locate the time of harm, priorism, finds it prior to the occurrence of death. This has the advantage that it provides a living subject who is capable of being harmed. It does, however, have the disadvantage that it seems to make the harm of death unlike any other sort of harm which arises after the event that gives rise to it. But there are other more serious objections to priorism. The first is that it also relies on some form of desire theory in that the harm of death, according to priorism, lies in the frustration of desires that we have formed before we die. So if we have a desire to see Rome and die before we can fulfil that desire then the harm of our death is that we never satisfied our desire to see Rome. We have, however, raised a number of objections to desire theory in the first section and concluded that this collapses into hedonism. Priorism is not compatible with hedonism. But even if we set this aside there are serious objections to the way desire theory and priorism interact.

One of these suggested by Jens Johansson (2014, pp. 157-159) has already been mentioned. Our desires are changeable. The good things death deprives the deceased of may have been the satisfaction of long-held desires. Or someone's long-held desires may have been ones that if they had been fulfilled would have turned to ashes: perhaps the experience would have been miserable; perhaps the desire was for vengeance on the wrong man. Or I might miss out on joyful experiences but ones that I never expected or even thought for one moment might be joyful. What this shows, over and above the related objections already raised to desire theory, is that there are further problems with using desire theory as a basis for priorism that arise from the instability and incompleteness of our desires. If antecedent desires are irrelevant to whether something is good for us priorism seems implausible.

An alternative approach is subsequentism. This has the advantage over priorism in that at least it is consistent with the way in which we see harm occurring in cases other than death – after the event in question. It sits easily with comparativism in that it is in the period subsequent to event 'e' (in this case death) that the welfare deficit emerges. In Feldman's case the American traveller's life has the same hedonic (or other) value up to the point of his fatal trip. It is after his death that the value of his life in the different worlds diverges. If this sort of harm is to occur it seems natural to see this arising (though Feldman does not) in the period after his fatal trip.

But this runs straight into the Epicurean argument that after the fatal trip there is nobody to be deprived of the 600 units. If we use Luper's formula we cannot say that W_e has a certain value (zero perhaps) as Bradley does (2009, pp. 88-92) since at this time there is no S to have a welfare value. Where event 'e' is death we cannot apply the comparativist formula: there is no subject for there to be a value for. Some have attempted to deny this conclusion essentially by what amounts to widening the understanding of existence. Silverstein (1993, pp. 93 – 116) argues that we should think of things existing on a four dimensional plane so that something can be temporally remote and still

exist in the same way that something can exist spatially remotely and still exist. But this seems not so much as to extend our conception of the world in a necessary way but to abolish time. On this view the glass I smashed yesterday still exists in its unbroken form today and dinosaurs still walk the earth. But neither is the case.

Another view is that we have to acknowledge the existence of someone who has died because we can still make statements about them. We can say that the Duke of Edinburgh is greatly missed and for this to make sense the term has to refer and so in some sense the Duke of Edinburgh has to exist. But this is not so. We can make say many things about King Lear without claiming that he ever existed and we can say things about the glass I smashed today (that it was already cracked, perhaps) that do not require it to exist now. And we can say things about dead people which need not involve their continuing to exist.

The best conclusion is that subsequentism, though in some senses the natural view in that it follows the sequence of events as we would apply it to considerations of harm, cannot avoid the objection that there is just no-one to be harmed after death.

The other approach to denying Epicurus' argument is to say that it is the case that death is bad for someone but that need not involve it being bad for them at a particular point or points in time. Fred Feldman argues for eternalism which is to say that if it is bad for the American to take a fatal trip to Europe then it is eternally bad because:

...we are really expressing a complex fact about the relative values of two possible worlds. If these worlds stand in a certain value relation...they stand in that relation not only when Lindsay exists, but at times when she doesn't.

(Feldman, 1991, p. 221)

The argument here is that if we take the facts of a case such as Feldman's fatal trip to Europe and apply them to the comparativist formula then you will get a result. The formula will, with the same facts, generate the same result at all times which is to say that comparing two states of affairs will always produce the same result as long as the states of affairs do not change. That is not just to say that 1100 is always a bigger number than 500 but that if Root scored a century at Lords on a certain day then it will always be the case that he did so. But as Johansson (2012, p. 260) points out this does not quite address the question Epicurus poses which he rephrases as: "...At which time, or times, is S's well-being level lower than it would have been then if S's death hadn't occurred." The answer to this cannot be eternally as it would not be true long before my birth. Johansson favours a different version of this, atemporalism, which he defines (2012, p. 266) as "...death is bad for the deceased, but not at any time." This is perhaps an improvement on the eternalist idea that it is always the case that we are worse off in the event that death robs us of some good life, but there are problems with this view too.

Taking Feldman's example again if we cancel out what Silverstein (1993, p. 99) calls the 'life-life' terms we are left with a 'life-death' comparison which is 600, against what? Bradley (2015, p 104) suggests zero and if that is true then the formula yields a result. But in the case of death we cannot assign a value as there is no subject to assign a value to. As Silverstein says:

...'A' cannot coherently use such a conclusion as the basis for a prudential choice between life and death, since, as no value on the scale (including 0, the "midpoint" value of neutrality or indifference) can be intelligibly assigned to A's death, there is nothing against which the value +2, however "rationally" derived, can intelligibly be weighed.

(Silverstein, 1993, p. 103)

Silverstein offers this argument against Bernard Williams (1973, pp. 83-88) who responds to Lucretius by saying: "...if the *praemia vitae* and consciousness of them are good things, then longer consciousness of more *praemia* is better than shorter consciousness of fewer *praemia*." Silverstein's argument does raise some significant issues but there is clearly some truth in William's observation that one world simply involves more joy than the counterfactual. It is hard to argue that we simply cannot record a value in these two scenarios; the real issue is who the deficit is going to be pinned to, and when.

The atemporalist approach seems to be the most promising way to resolve this. It does justice to the intuition that there is a harm done when a joyful life is ended prematurely; that it is better if that life is continued rather than if it is curtailed. On the comparativist view if Scenario A has 'S' enjoying a long happy life and Scenario B has 'S' enjoying a short happy life, Scenario A is the better of the two; there is more joy, or whatever makes life good, in Scenario A. The fact of a well-being 'deficit' can be identified in the world in which 'S' dies prematurely irrespective of when that deficit arises. By saying that the comparativist equation is in fact a 'complex fact' about possible worlds that does not obtain at a particular time the atemporalist is seeking to avoid the problem that there is no subject at what appears to be the relevant time.

Is this approach successful? In defending Epicurus we can concede the comparativist argument that the world in which 'S' continues to exist happily contains more happy life than one in which 'S' dies prematurely. It might even be possible to concede to Johansson that this relation obtains atemporally in that if the comparative value is higher in one world than the other then that relation obtains independently of any particular temporal location. But what the Epicurean cannot concede, and what Johansson does not seem to have proved, is that one world is better than the other *for 'S'*. In other words the atemporalist argument seems to be more of an argument that one world is better than the other from the point of view of the universe, it identifies a well-being deficit but does not succeed in pinning it on the subject of that life. To sustain the claim that this still involves a harm requires a notion of harm that is not directly attributable to the deceased subject.

McMahan suggests that in some cases death can be bad in a “quasi-impersonal way”. In these cases:

...Death would be bad in the same way that it is bad if a person whose life would have been worth living fails to come into existence. In both cases something which would be good for a person fails to occur, though in both cases the non-occurrence of the good is not bad for the person who would have experienced it, since the non-occurrence of the good involves – indeed perhaps consists in – the non-existence of the person.

(McMahan, 1993, p. 240)

To be clear an Epicurean would not accept that continuing to exist is good for a person because that would open the door to the sort of claim that McMahan is making. His argument in fact rests on the view (1993, p. 236) that “...if to be caused to exist with a miserable life can be bad for a person, then it should also be the case that to be caused to exist with a life worth living can be good for a person.” Some arguments against this will be offered below but the immediate issue is whether it is meaningful to say that if it is good for someone to be alive and happy whether it can be good in a quasi-impersonal way, which is to say that it would be good for him if he existed without saying it would be worse for him if he did not exist. The suggestion here is that this is not meaningful; that for something to be good or bad for Sasha it has to involve a comparison of two states of Sasha which is not possible if Sasha only exists in one state. The conclusion here is that these arguments, while identifying correctly the deprivation of the joys of life in the event of an early death, fail to locate a subject for any harm and so fail to identify a harm.

But there is a difficulty with this argument, the one that McMahan identifies in saying that if being caused to exist in a miserable life is bad then being caused to exist in a good life must be good. If we can make the life-death comparison one way surely we can make it the other way too. And it is the case that we do want to recognise some lives as too bad to be endured. Singer (2011, p. 162) suggests the lives of infants with Tay-Sachs disease as an example of lives not worth living and which we would consider it a harm to bring about. Or we could consider the last stages of lives which inevitably will involve great pain. In cases like these our intuitions are strongly that life is worse than death. To state this clearly, we do need to be able to say that some lives are worse than non-existence such that it would be a harm to that person to be brought into existence. In that case it would seem that some lives must be better than non-existence and so that the subject of that life would have been benefited by being brought into existence; that existence is good for them and so that ending that existence would be bad for them.

The argument goes like this:

D Life can be worse than death (no life)

In which case, either 'F' or 'G' must be true:

F Life is always worse than death (no life)

G Life can be not worse than death (no life)

We might also have to consider:

H Death is sometimes better than life

And:

J Life is sometimes better than death

The reason for rejecting McMahan's argument is that 'G' is the converse of 'D' not 'J'. We can say that D is true because in life there is harm to a live subject. It need not, perhaps, require a claim about the 'quality of death' to establish that life is worse than death, just that 'death is the privation of sensation' and that some sensations are so bad that none would want to endure them. Such a judgment might be akin to opting for an anaesthetic before an operation; it would not be a judgment about what it is like to be under an anaesthetic, just a judgement about the experience in question. Bernard Williams (1973, pp. 85-6) says something that is perhaps consistent with this. He writes, in the context of someone (rationally) contemplating suicide: "...a man might consider what lay before him, and decide whether he did or did not want to undergo it...". If this can be accepted then 'D' can be true without it involving any comparison between quality of life and quality of death that would open the way to validating 'J'. Both 'H' and 'J' are the sorts of life-death comparisons we cannot make due to the lack of a subject in the counterfactual.

'G' would seem to be a perfectly reasonable judgment. Most people enjoy their lives sufficiently to want to continue them. It is possible that some are wrong and overestimate the quality of their lives but as long as some people do genuinely enjoy their lives such that their lives are ones worth living then 'G' is true. And 'G', like 'D', is a claim about live subjects that we can make; they are claims about the quality of life. Claims about non-existent people are the ones that cannot be made ('H' and 'J') as they there is no subject to be evaluated.

The Epicurean argument that once dead there is no-one to be harmed seems to stand up. We can say in life that life is better than death in the sense that we prefer life to death; but if we die there is no person to suffer the harm that we see in death. In the case of 'D' if the subject dies then the same is true: there is no one to suffer the harm, or the benefit, of death. But in the event that the preference for death is not fulfilled there is someone to be harmed: the person still living. So death cannot be a harm but no-death can be.

The case for 'F' is made by David Benatar (2006, pp. 18-59) who argues that coming into existence is always a harm. He argues that avoiding pain by not existing is good whereas avoiding pleasure by not existing is not bad since there is no one to miss out on the pleasures of life. This asymmetry leads to the conclusion that coming into existence is always bad, even if the amount of pain experienced in life is minimal, though in this case the harm of coming into existence is also minimal. A full exploration of this argument is out of scope. But there are strong objections to it; the claim that the absence of pain is good is hard to sustain since it implies that the world is full of goodness on account of all the non-existent painful lives – a point Benatar acknowledges (2006, pp. 35-36) but

does not regard as significant. And it applies a different normative value to the same state, non-existence, depending on a hypothetical counterfactual. If, in the case of non-existence, there is no one for whom the absence of pleasure is a loss, then there is no-one for whom the absence of pain is a gain. Benatar seems to highlight this by saying that the absence of pleasure for non-existent persons "...are not neutral states of some person. They are no states of a person at all." (2006, p. 41). But, as Ben Bradley (2010, p. 4) points out this must also be true of the absence of pain for non-existent persons. Benatar may be right in that we do tend to overestimate the quality of our lives but this does not make 'F' true. It is, as Benatar subsequently states (2013, p. 126) ultimately a basic axiological claim, but it is not one that we need accept.

Although beyond the scope of this essay there is one way in which Benatar's asymmetry might be valid: from a game-theoretic perspective. Imagine (fancifully) a person standing on the brink of existence, if they take the step into life they may step into a life of pain and misery which none would want to endure, or they might step into a life of pleasure which all would want to continue. If they step into a life of pain they will regret having been born; they may long for death and may bring their death about if their life is bad enough. But if their life is pleasurable they may well not regret being born and just get on with enjoying their life. Now, given this choice it is perhaps rational not to step over the threshold of life. It involves the possibility of life being bad whereas remaining non-existent does not. Where Benatar's analysis is right is that there are no cases where we can say life is better than non-existence whereas there are cases where life is worse than non-existence. This makes getting born a bad strategy prudentially. But it does not mean that life is always worse than non-existence. It is quite possible that most people enjoy their lives.

The only remaining possibility seems to be the idea that a happy life is a good thing objectively, from the point of view of the universe rather than the point of view of the subject. The problem with dropping the requirement that to be good something must be good for someone is that it seems to involve a claim that things can be good for non-sentient things, that one arrangement of inanimate matter can be better than another. If this is a claim that inanimate, non-sentient things can be subjects for which things can be good or bad, then it is hard to accept. If, on the other hand, it is a basic claim about how a world should be then it is coherent; it is like saying that mountains should be high and rivers should be deep and worlds populated. It is a basic intuition. It is perhaps one easily explained by our evolution but, nevertheless, one that cannot be rejected on that account. Peter Singer (2011, p. 117) seems to subscribe to this sort of intuition in saying:

It seems obvious to me that both the Peopled Universe and the Happy Sheep Universe is better than the Nonsentient Universe, but at this point we are dealing with such basic values that it is difficult to find an argument that would persuade someone who denies this.'

(Singer, 2011, p. 117)

It does indeed seem that it is difficult to establish how we might reject or accept such a view. But one way is to see what might flow from accepting the objectively good view. One problem with this standpoint is that if life is good then more life is presumably better. Or if not we need a theory that explains at what point more life ceases to be good. But if that point has not been reached it would seem there must be a moral requirement to produce children, and even perhaps that this becomes

an overriding moral imperative. Derek Parfit follows (1984, pp. 381-390) this line of reasoning to reach his 'Repugnant Conclusion'. This is that the addition of more people to the population can increase total well-being even if the average well-being of the population is reduced. This might happen due to overcrowding or where resources are limited. But until the point at which the quality of life is no longer worth living is reached, total well-being is still maximised by adding more people to the population. Well-being is then maximised where there is an enormous number of people living barely worthwhile lives. This is the repugnant conclusion.

What emerges is that on the one hand we seem to have a firm intuition that life is just a good thing but what that view entails seems to be very counter-intuitive. We do not recognise an obligation to have children and we do tend to think that fewer people having good lives is better than very many people living not-so-good lives.

A related issue is our obligation to future persons. To maximise well-being we need to maximise not just the numbers of the present generation but the numbers of future generations as well. Most of whatever is good in life will accrue to future people so it becomes the duty of present people to ensure that there are future people, and as many of them as possible. Therefore any trade-off between the welfare of present people and the existence of future people must be resolved in favour of future people. So if there is a risk of some future disease, nuclear conflagration, or asteroid strike eliminating the human race then everything possible must be done to avert it even if it reduces the present population to a life of misery, to a life not worth living. But if we take the Epicurean view that future people who fail to exist are not subjects who can be harmed by non-existence, and that their existence has no value from the point of view of the universe, this problem disappears. It is good that future people who will exist have good lives and we have an obligation to them, but not to ensure their existence.

The view that life is objectively good also presents problems at the micro level as well. McMahan (1993, pp. 263-266) invites us to consider the issue where a doctor has to choose between saving the life of a 35 year old mother or her imminent baby. The comparativist formula clearly favours the baby: by saving the baby more presumably happy life can be preserved than saving the mother. Yet our intuitions are not clear on this point. McMahan in fact suggests that our intuitions favour saving the mother; we have not as an infant, and perhaps not in our early days, developed a fully vested interest in our own lives: "It is only when a person becomes fully real that death is normally worse for him the earlier in his life it occurs." (McMahan, 1993, p. 261). But this is clearly at odds with the comparativist view whether it is considered from the point of view of the subject or objectively. If life is good then the more life that can be saved the better.

McMahan also suggests that one reason we might not see the death of an infant as a loss as great as that of the mother is because the relation of personal identity between the infant and its potential future self is weaker than that between the mother and her future self. If we consider personal identity as a matter of mental states then the degree of connectedness between the barely formed mental states of the infant and the later adult is quite limited, whereas those of the mother are fully developed and are now more strongly connected with her future mental states. On this basis a person's interest in their future mental states has to be discounted by the degree of connectedness with them, a calculation that results in a very limited interest in the case of an infant. This argument,

though, whatever its validity, only has application in considering the harm to the deceased that arises due to death. Even if someone's present mental states are only slightly connected to their future ones – or even if they are not connected at all – this makes no difference if the value of their life is being considered from an objective point of view. In fact neither considering personal identity nor the question of when somebody 'becomes fully real' can avoid the issue that an objective standpoint has to favour the life of the baby since this is how most life can be preserved. To the extent that this conflicts with our intuitions it counts against the objectivist view.

These considerations suggest that there are some problems with the idea that a good life has an objective value. Apart from the fact that it is hard to accept that something can be good without being good for somebody it seems that, even if this is so, there must be some limits to goods of this sort. That there must be some consideration that tells against the maximisation of this good such that we are not committed to creating more lives, overpopulation and sacrificing mothers to their offspring.

But if there are problems with the idea that life has an objective value there are clearly some difficulties with the Epicurean view. If we accept the main points of Epicurus' argument (A,B and C in the introduction) then these clearly do not sit easily with some of our intuitions. As we have seen the point of Epicurus' teaching was therapeutic: to free people from their intuitions about the badness of death that threatened to make people miserable in life. But if Epicurus' arguments are successful in showing that our fear of death is misplaced he seems to have removed the basis for prohibitions on killing that are fundamental to most societies and one of our strongest intuitions about what is right and wrong. If anything is wrong surely it must be killing another person. But if death does not harm its victim then what is wrong with killing someone?

One answer is that others are harmed, the victim's friends and family and anyone who benefits from his or her existence. But this does not quite provide the comfort we are looking for; killing a hermit would be unobjectionable; killing a miserable hermit might be mandatory, as might killing someone whose death might benefit others, their legatees perhaps. The only answer in fact available to the hedonist is that while death is not a harm to the deceased, the fear of death for the living is. Relaxing prohibitions on killing would increase our fear of death and so make our lives less secure and that in itself would be a harm to us. Even if it is an irrational fear it is nevertheless a fear and there is no doubt that for the most part people do not want to die. The hedonistic justification for a prohibition on killing relies substantially on the fact of our fear of death and our desire for the security of our lives. This is perhaps an odd sort of justification; Epicurus' teaching aims to remove the misplaced fear of death from us and at the same time seems to rely on this misplaced fear of death to explain the need for a prohibition on killing, at least from the perspective of the victim. Of course, the concerns of those who would be harmed by the death of another, and in most cases it is safe to assume there would be such people, would still provide a strong reason for a prohibition on killing, but it is still not quite the solid grounds we might look for. Nevertheless this fear of death is the only option open to the Epicurean as grounds for a prohibition on killing from the perspective of the victim. That it is an odd argument is perhaps a part of the paradox that while death may not be a harm for the deceased it is still the thing the living most fear, a fear so rooted in our nature that the Epicurean argument against it, however sound, has little chance of dispelling.

Ultimately, however, this perhaps comes down to a conflict between intuitions. Someone who holds to the intuition that the deprivation of life is a harm will not accept the intuition that harm requires somebody being harmed and that, as a consequence, there can be no objective harms. The Epicurean can suggest that the intuition that death is the harm is a product of our evolution and so unlikely to be direct appreciation of a moral truth. But this is hardly conclusive. As Nagel (2021, p. 6) says: “Psychologically reductive or debunking accounts of our moral intuitions are not self-validating; they are contributions to the process of reflective equilibrium...”. But the fact that our intuitions with regard to animals are somewhat different might suggest an anthropocentric bias to our intuitions. We are generally more ready to judge dispassionately that the life of an animal should be ended when it seems likely to contain more pain than pleasure. And we are less likely to recognise the deprivation of the future joys of life for those animals dispatched when young. But we do recognise the importance of the quality of their lives (and deaths) while existing. To this extent our intuitions are more in line with Epicurean teaching. Yet, if desire theory is wrong there is no relevant point of difference: both human and animal lives consist of a series of experiences that end with death.

The Epicureans do face some difficulty in explaining how long life should be. If death is not a harm then we should be indifferent as to its timing, whether it occurs in infancy, mid-life or old age. In fact the Epicureans thought it was desirable to exist long enough to reach a state of *ataraxia*. Philodemus (ca. 110-30 BCE) wrote:

But a sensible person, one that has learned that it is possible to acquire everything sufficient for a happy life, from that point on walks about as one already laid out for burial and enjoys each single day as if it were an eternity.

(Philodemus, 2009, p.89)

From the point of attaining *ataraxia* every day is, as it were, a bonus which neither adds to the value of a life, nor its absence detract from a life. It is not clear that the Epicurean view is coherent on this point: if death is not a harm and if all good and ill does lie in sensation there seems to be no reason for preferring a later death to an earlier one whether or not *ataraxia* has been reached.

Lucretius (1997, III 972:978) has another argument to convince us that death is not a harm: the symmetry or mirror argument. Lucretius tells us that the period before we were born mirrors the period after our death. Both are periods in which we are non-existent and our post mortem non-existence should not be any more terrifying than our ante-natal non-existence. This is best interpreted as underscoring the therapeutic nature of Epicurean teaching; helping to convince the unpersuaded that non-existence really is not something to be feared. If we see nothing traumatic in the period of non-existence before our birth then we should not be fearful of what comes after our death. As such it is not central to the argument. But it can be interpreted as posing a challenge to those who reject the Epicurean view that death is not a harm to the deceased; if death is a harm then either the symmetry must be rejected or there must be a harm in not being born earlier than we were. If bringing forward our death is a harm then delaying our birth has the same effect. Both deprive us of some life.

There are some ways in which this symmetry can be rejected. The obvious way is to point out that Sasha, say, could not have been born earlier since in that event Sasha would not have been Sasha. So

in that sense it is impossible for someone to have been born earlier, whereas it is possible to consider different options for the time of Sasha's death as Sasha is now an existing, determinate person. Or we can accept the symmetry but just point out that we generally operate under what Parfit (1984, pp 165-170) refers to as 'Future Bias.' On this view our intuition that late birth is less of a harm than early death is explained by a bias towards future rather than past concerns. On that view both an early death and a late birth deprive us of life but it is future life that we are concerned about, not past life. We would not be reconciled to what we thought was an early death if we learned that we had been born earlier than we thought. On this view we can uphold the harm of a late birth but put our lack of concern for this compared to our concern about an early death down to future bias. Perhaps the main point, however, is that the symmetry argument is not central to the Epicurean thesis. It is, as noted, best interpreted as an attempt to shore up the idea that being dead is not experientially bad for us.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to argue that far from being absurd, Epicurus' view of death is plausible and hard to refute. If we can reject desire theory, then we need to find objective reasons for the possibility of *post mortem* harms. It is not impossible that there such reasons but the onus is perhaps on those who want to establish the possibility of post mortem harms to supply those reasons. In its favour hedonism has the evidence of direct experience: we can feel pain and pleasure and so understand what it is for something to be good or bad for us subjectively. This cannot establish a claim about it being normatively good for us but it perhaps counts as a reason why it might be, and it is at least a parsimonious explanation of the normatively good.

If there are no *post mortem* harms then there might still be harm in being deprived of the joys of life. But if 'C' is true then this cannot be a harm for the deceased as they no longer exist to be harmed. The only way to refute Epicurus' on this point is to establish the deprivation of life as an objectively bad thing. Again this is not impossible but it is hard to find reasons to accept this view.

Any absurdity in Epicurus' argument is simply in its conflict with our intuition that death is the greatest of evils that can befall us, the very intuition Epicurus was trying to dispel for therapeutic reasons. Even if Epicurus is right we might still agree with Cicero that this fear is unlikely to be dispelled:

Well, then, I now own that the dead are not miserable, since you have drawn from me a concession, that they who do not exist at all, cannot be miserable. What then? We that are alive, are we not wretched, seeing we must die? for what is there agreeable in life, when we must night and day reflect that, at some time or other, we must die?

(Cicero, 1877, p. 4)

References

- Benatar, D. (2006) *Better Never To Have Been Born: The Harm Of Coming Into Existence*. OUP: Oxford
- Benatar, D. (2013) *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics*. *The Journal of Ethics*, June 2013, Vol. 17, No. 1/2, Special Issue: *The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-Existence* (June 2013), pp. 121-151, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42630950>
- Berridge, K. & Kringlebach, M. (2008) *Affective neuroscience of pleasure: reward in humans and Animals*. *Psychopharmacology (Berl)*. 2008 August; 199(3): 457–480. doi:10.1007/s00213-008-1099-6.
- Bradley, B. (2015) *Well-Being*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bradley, B. (2014) *Objective Theories of Well-Being*, in Eggleston & Miller (eds.) *Utilitarianism*, pp. 220-238. Cambridge: CUP
- Bradley, B (2010) *Benatar and the Logic of Betterness*, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, March 2010
- Bradley, B. (2009) *Well-Being and Death*. Oxford: OUP
- De Brigard, F. (2010) *If you like it, does it matter if it's real?* *Philosophical Psychology* Vol. 23, No. 1, February 2010, 43–57
- Cicero (1931) *De Finibus* 2.101. tr. Harris Rackham, H. <https://bit.ly/DeFinibus2> (Accessed: 9th July 2021)
- Cicero (1877) *Tusculan Disputations*. tr. Yonge, C.D. Great Britain: Amazon
- Epicurus (2012): *Letter To Menoecus* (tr. Strodach, G.) in *Epicurus: The Art of Happiness*. New York: Penguin Books
- Feldman, F. (2011) *Confrontations with the Reaper: a philosophical study of the nature and the value of death* OUP: Oxford
- Feldman F, (1991) *Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death*. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. C, No. 2 (April 1991)
- Heathwood, C. (2017) *The Problem of Remote Desires* (draft) <https://tinyurl.com/yv33fxvm> (Accessed: 9th July 2021)
- Heathwood, C. (2020) *Happiness and desire satisfaction*. *Noûs*. 2020; pp. 1–27. [tps://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12347](https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12347)
- Hetherington. S. (2001) *Deathly Harm*. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38: 349-62

- Johansson, J. (2012) *The Timing Problem* in Bradley B., Feldman F., Johansson J, (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*. Oxford: OUP
- Johansson, J. (2014) *When do we incur Mortal Harm?* in Luper, S. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death*. Cambridge: CUP
- Kagan, S. (1998) *Normative Ethics*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press
- Kolber, A. (1994) *Mental Statism*, *Bard Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol III, Nos. 3-4
- Lucretius (1997) *De Rerum Naturae*. tr. Melville, R., Oxford: OUP
- Luper, S. (2004) *Posthumous Harm*. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 1, Number 1, January 2004
- Luper, S. (2012) *Retroactive Harms and Wrongs* in Bradley B., Feldman F., Johansson J, (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*. Oxford: OUP
- Luper, Steven, *Death*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/death/>>.
- McMahan, J. (1993) *Death and the Value of Life* in Fischer, J. (ed.) *The Metaphysics of Death*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Nagel, T. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: CUP
- Nagel, T. (2021) *Types of Intuition*. *London Review of Books* Vol. 43, No. 11, 3 June 2021, pp. 3-8
- Nozick, R. (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books
- Overvold, M. (1980) *Self-Interest and the Concept of Self-Sacrifice*. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Mar., 1980, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Mar., 1980), pp. 105-118 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40231134>
- Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: OUP
- Philodemus, c. (2009). *Philodemus, On death* Henry, W.B. (tr.) E-book, Atlanta: SBL Press. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.08825>.
- Railton, P. (1986) *Facts and Values*. *Philosophical Topics*, FALL 1986, Vol. 14, No. 2, *Papers on Ethics* (FALL 1986), pp. 5-31
- Scanlon, T. (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press
- Silverstein, H. (1993) *The Evil of death* in Fischer, J. (ed.) *The Metaphysics of Death*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Singer, P. (2011) *Practical Ethics*, 3rd ed. Cambridge: CUP
- Singer, P. and De Lazari-Radek, K. (2014) *The Point of View of the Universe*. Oxford: OUP
- Strodach, G. (2012) *Epicurus: The Art of Happiness*. New York: Penguin Books

Warren, J. (2004) *Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics*. Oxford: OUP

Weijers, D. (2014) *Nozick's experience machine is dead, long live the experience machine!*
Philosophical Psychology, 2014, No. 4, pp. 513-535,
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2012.757889>

Williams, B. (1973) *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge: CUP