

How Death is Bad For Us as Agents

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Abstract

According to the deprivation account, a person's death is bad for her if she would have lived a better life had she not died when she did in fact die. While the deprivation account rightly draws our attention to the fact that a person's death can be *overall bad* for her in this way, there are also other ways in which a person's death can affect her adversely. In this chapter, I explore two of these other ways, both of which are related to the fact that we live our lives as agents. I argue that as agents, the prospect of our death sometimes puts limits on what enjoyable activities we may reasonably pursue. I also argue that when a person's death frustrates her plans, it is to that extent *absolutely bad* for her: it provides a correct explanation for the presence of intrinsic badness in the person's life. I conclude by showing how focusing on agential value can help us make sense of the judgment that the deaths of infants and adolescents can be similarly bad in a way that is relevant for policymaking.

Keywords

Agency, agential value, practical reason, overall badness, absolute badness

1. Introduction

Most people think that a person's death can be bad not only for other people, but for the person who died as well. Among philosophers, the most favored explanation of what can make a person's death bad for her is offered by the *deprivation account*.¹ According to the deprivation account, a person's death is bad for her if it deprives her of good life, which it does just in case the person would have lived a better life had she not died when she did in fact die.

The deprivation account rightly draws our attention to the fact that a person's death can be *overall bad* for her, so that she would have lived a better life had that particular death not occurred. But a person's death can be bad for her in other ways as well. In this chapter, I aim to contribute towards a more comprehensive understanding of the badness of death by investigating how our death can affect us adversely specifically insofar as we are agents. As agents, we act based on reasons, and it is valuable for us to effectively pursue whatever reasonable goals we have set for ourselves.

In section 2, I ask how we should reason about the prudentially right thing to do when an otherwise attractive option comes with an increased risk of an untimely death. I argue that we can use the insights of the deprivation account to move towards an answer to this question. The emerging answer isn't entirely gratifying, however, as it highlights that the prospect of our death can sometimes put limits on the enjoyable activities we may reasonably pursue.

¹ Epicureans argue that a person's death cannot be bad for her. Solberg (this volume) defends the deprivation account against Epicurean challenges.

In section 3, I argue that besides being potentially overall bad for her, a person's death can be absolutely bad for her as well, namely when it frustrates her ongoing plans and projects.

When an event is *overall bad* for a person, she would have lived a better life had it not occurred. When an event is *absolutely bad* for a person, its occurrence provides a suitable explanation for the presence of some intrinsic badness in the person's life. I explain how a person's death can be absolutely bad for her without being overall bad for her, and I show how distinguishing between overall and absolute badness allows us to make sense of the claim that a person's death can sometimes be the lesser of two evils for her. In section 4, I consider some implications of my discussion for the allocation of scarce medical resources. I argue that focusing on agential value helps us make sense of the view that the deaths of infants and adolescents may be similarly bad in a way that is relevant for policymaking. Section 5 concludes.

2. Death and Practical Reasoning

A first way in which our death affects us as agents is when it crops up as a prospect in practical deliberation. Sometimes an otherwise attractive option comes with an increased risk of premature death. When this happens, what effect should it have on our decision-making?

Suppose you are on a holiday in New Zealand, and you are considering doing a bungee jump. In some ways, you are tempted to take the plunge: you crave the rush of adrenaline in the time leading up to the jump, and you would love to live through the intense experience of a free fall. But you also think that if you jump, there is a slim chance that you will hit the ground and die on the spot. If this is the situation you find yourself in, how should you think

about whether or not to jump? How should the risk of dying prematurely figure in your deliberation?

The deprivation account helps us move towards an answer to these questions. It implies that from a self-interested perspective, you should think about the goodness of the different lives you can expect to lead depending on which alternative you pick.

2.1 The Deprivation Account

According to the deprivation account, a person's death can be bad for her because it can be *overall bad* for her – it is possible that the person would have lived an all-things-considered better life had she not died when she did (see e.g. Feldman 1992; Broome 2004; Bradley 2004).² Suppose that I die in a plane crash tomorrow. On the deprivation account, this is bad for me if my actual life – the one terminated by the plane crash – is worse than the life I would have led had I not died in the crash. Likewise, dying in the plane crash is good for me if my actual life is better than the one I would have led otherwise. According to the deprivation account, whether a person's death was bad for her thus always depends on a comparison between two lives.

The deprivation account is compatible with many different theories of value, or with many different views on what makes a person's life go well or badly. As long as a theory of value permits us to compare whole lives in terms of their overall value, and provided we can answer the question of how well a person's life would have gone had she not died her actual

² The standard interpretation of the deprivation account presented in this section is sometimes referred to as the Life Comparative Account. I touch on a non-standard interpretation of the deprivation account – the Time-Relative Interest Account – in section 4 below.

death, the deprivation account allows us to assess whether someone's death was overall good or bad for her according to that theory of value.

A theory of value that allows us to compare whole lives in terms of their overall value may merely allow us to rank different lives from best to worst. If so, it measures their value on an ordinal scale. Alternatively, it may additionally allow us to evaluate how much better or worse a given life is compared to another. If so, it measures value cardinally, and we can meaningfully interpret the differences in the units of value that we assign to different lives. In this chapter, I assume that our theories of value measure value cardinally. At least in principle, the deprivation account then allows us to determine not only whether someone's death was bad for them, but also how much better or worse a given death was compared to another.

2.2 The Prospect of Death as a Killjoy

In the bungee-jump example, there are three salient ways in which your life might go depending on what you decide to do.³ First, there is the way in which you think your life will go if you do not jump. Suppose you expect to live a long and fairly fulfilled life whose value is somewhat diminished by the fact that it lacks a bungee jump experience. You use your best theory of value to estimate the value of this life at 400. Second, there is the way in which you think your life will go if you jump and live. Suppose you expect this life to be similar to the one you will lead if you do not jump, but you think it will be slightly better because of the bungee jump experience it will contain, so that you estimate its overall value at 401. Third, you assign a value of 150 to the all-too-brief life you will lead if you jump and die.

³ The discussion easily generalizes to set-ups where there are more than three salient ways in which your life might go.

Assuming that you should avoid an overall bad death if you can, you would have to refrain from jumping if you were certain that your jump would be fatal. You would thereby avoid dying a death with an estimated overall value of -250. As things are, however, you think that there is only a slim chance that your jump will be fatal; you think it exceedingly likely that everything will go well. What is more, if everything goes well, you avoid what you think would be an overall bad death not by staying put, but by jumping. So how should you decide between your options?

A straightforward way to make deliberative progress is to take informed guesses about the probabilities of different outcomes occurring depending on your choices. Together with your estimates of the values of different lives that you will lead under different outcomes, this will allow you to calculate the expected value, the variance, and other quantitative measures of your alternatives for action. There are various ways in which these measures may be used to settle on an alternative for action, the details of which are not important for our purposes. What matters for our purposes is that depending on your estimates, and depending on how you use them in your deliberation, it will sometimes be reasonable to forgo otherwise worthwhile activities or valuable experiences⁴ *simply because they come with an increased risk of an untimely death*. To illustrate this, suppose that in the bungee jump example, you decide to go with whatever alternative has the highest expected value. Further suppose that you estimate the risk of death at 0.5%. If so, the expected value of jumping is $0.995 \times 401 + 0.005 \times 150 = 399.75$. As $399.75 < 400$, it follows that you should not jump, and this

⁴ By “otherwise worthwhile activities or valuable experiences” I mean activities and experiences that you would expect to be overall good for you if they did not increase your risk of dying an untimely death.

despite the fact that your jump would most likely have been successful, and despite the fact that a successful jump would have made your life go better.

Similar considerations apply with respect to other self-restraining choices, such as decisions to eat a healthier diet, to drink less alcohol, or not to travel to unsafe destinations that it would be enriching to visit.⁵ Because we have reason to assume that our choices can sometimes affect when we will die, and because we have reason to assume that the time of our death affects how good a life we will eventually have lived, the prospect of an untimely death regrettably puts limits on what pleasurable activities and meaningful experiences we may reasonably decide to pursue.

3. Death and What We Value as Agents

The deprivation account draws our attention to the fact that a person's death can be *overall* good or bad for her. When something is overall good for you, you have an all-things-considered reason to seek it, as – by definition – it makes your life go better; when something is overall bad for you, you have an all-things-considered reason to avoid it, as – by definition – it makes your life go worse. Because of this close affinity between overall value and what it is in our self-interest to do, the deprivation account usefully informs practical reasoning when different options come with different distributions of the risk of death over time.

⁵ Of course, we make such choices not *only* to reduce the risk of dying an untimely death. But *to the extent* that it is in our self-interest to make them to avoid an untimely death, the prospect of an untimely death bars us from enjoyable experiences that it would otherwise be reasonable to pursue.

But while the deprivation account can usefully inform practical reasoning, it is unable to fully capture how our death can be bad for us specifically as agents.

3.1 Agential Value

To the extent that we live our lives as agents, we live them intentionally and purposefully. We deliberate about what to do and act on reasons; we pursue goals that we have set for ourselves; we invest time and resources into plans and projects; and we guide ourselves by rules and principles that we endorse.

I submit that insofar as we are agents, it is intrinsically good for us to set ourselves reasonable⁶ goals and to pursue them effectively, and it is intrinsically bad for us to waste time and effort by pursuing reasonable goals ineffectively (Scanlon 1998, 119-23).⁷ If our plans and projects come to fruition, this is good for us to the extent that it means that we were pursuing our goals in an effective manner. If something thwarts our plans and projects, this is bad for us to the extent that it means that our efforts weren't productive.

⁶ "Reasonable" means to exclude morally objectionable and otherwise defective goals, such as a goal driven by the pointless desire to count blades of grass (Rawls 1971, 432).

⁷ In this section, I neither come up with a complete account of agential value, nor do I defend the agential values that I focus on against possible objections. Instead I simply present what I take to be a relatively uncontroversial subset of agential value, so that in the remainder of the chapter, I am able to clarify some aspects of the badness of death on the assumption that these agential values exist.

3.2 How Agential Value Can Make Death Absolutely Bad

Recall the bungee jump example. Suppose that you decide to jump, and that you hit the ground and die. Was your death bad for you? According to the deprivation account, this depends on how well your life would have gone had you not fallen to your death. In the absence of information about this counterfactual life, we simply can't say. But insofar as you are an agent, there are some tangible respects in which your death was bad for you *independently of how well your life would have gone otherwise*: your death was bad for you because it made it the case that you never finished the book that you were working on; your death was bad for you because it made it the case that you never took the trip to the Andes that you were saving towards; and your death was bad for you because it made it the case that despite your best efforts, you never managed to resolve a conflict between you and the person who used to be your best friend. More generally, your death thwarted all your ongoing plans and projects, thus rendering your agency ineffective. This is bad for you whether or not you would have lived a flourishing life had you continued to live.

When a person's death thwarts her plans and projects, it is to that extent bad for her in a *non-comparative* or *absolute* sense (cf. Draper 2013, 72). I propose the following definition for absolute badness:

Absolute badness. An event E is absolutely bad for a person P just in case citing E 's occurrence would provide a correct explanation for the presence of some particular intrinsic badness⁸ in P 's life were E to occur.

The badness that this definition tries to capture is as follows. When we calculate the value of a person's life, we use as input all the intrinsic goodness and badness that it contains. Crudely speaking, to a pleasure of 2 (playing with a dog on 10 August 2016), we add a pain of

⁸ Something is intrinsically bad if and only if it is bad in and of itself.

-1 (a headache on 25 August 2016), wasted time and effort of -8 (futile attempts to make up with a friend during the summer of 2016), and so on.⁹ An event is then absolutely bad for a person just in case it provides a correct explanation for at least one negative input in this calculation.¹⁰

Because it is easy to mistake the deprivation account for a structurally exhaustive analysis of the badness of death for the person who dies, it is easy to overlook that a person's death can be absolutely bad for her even when it isn't overall bad for her (and vice versa). To see this more clearly, suppose that in the bungee jump example, you would have lived a long and prosperous life had you not fallen to your death. You would have published your book, traveled to the Andes, and made peace with your friend. In this case, your death was *both*

⁹ These examples suggest that absolute badness coincides with *temporal badness*. An event *E* is temporally bad for a person *P* just in case the occurrence of *E* makes *P* worse off than she was before. But while the two notions may often coincide, they can nevertheless come apart. Suppose that at time *t*₀, you are ambling across a pasture. Your welfare is at 10. At *t*₁, a cow steps on your foot, and you have a brilliant eureka moment. At *t*₂, your welfare is at 10-2+7=15. Your foot hurts, but this is outweighed by your excitement about your intellectual progress. In this example, the cow's stepping on your foot wasn't temporally bad for you. But it was nevertheless absolutely bad for you: its occurrence correctly explains why there is some particular intrinsic badness in your life (a pain of -2 at *t*₂).

¹⁰ It is not always clear whether some event should count as a "correct explanation" for the presence of some intrinsic badness in a person's life. When this is the case, I feel that it is similarly unclear whether we are dealing with an absolutely bad event. While it would therefore be helpful to get a better grip on the notion of a correct explanation, I lack the space to pursue this further here.

overall *and* absolutely bad for you, and it was overall bad for you partly because it frustrated plans and projects *that would otherwise have come to fruition*. When overall and absolute badness are aligned in this way, it appears fussy to insist that we ought to distinguish the two.

But now suppose that had you not fallen to your death, you would have lived a life in which you would still have bungee jumped and fallen in an unchecked way, but this would have resulted in grave injury instead of death. After the accident, you would have been bedridden and in pain for the remainder of your life, so that none of your ongoing plans and projects would have come to fruition. The badness of this remaining section of your life would have nearly canceled out the goodness in your life so far, so that the overall value of this alternative life would have been close to zero: all things considered, it would have been a life barely worth living. Once we change our counterfactual assumptions in this way, your death becomes overall good for you, as the life that you actually lived – the one that was terminated by your fatal fall – was much better than a life barely worth living. But while the overall badness of your death is affected by counterfactual considerations, its absolute badness is not. When your death thwarts your ongoing projects, this is bad for you no matter how horrible the alternative of continuing to live would have been. In a case like the one just presented, we may want to say that your death was the lesser of two evils for you, but not that it was in no way bad for you.

One could object that in cases where your plans and projects would have been thwarted whether or not you would have continued to live, citing the occurrence of your death doesn't provide a correct explanation for why your plans and projects didn't come to fruition. The thought behind this objection is that an event can properly *explain* the presence of intrinsic badness only if the latter does not occur in the absence of the former. If this is correct, then a person's death is not absolutely bad for her when it frustrates only plans and projects that would not have come to fruition anyway.

I feel ambivalent about this objection. On the one hand, it appears to me misguided. It seems to me that when we call something absolutely bad for someone, we express our judgment that the person has a reason to avoid that thing in the absence of information about the available alternatives. Suppose I ask you whether you want to have your toes stepped on by a horse. In the absence of information about the available alternatives, and assuming that you shy away from pain the way most people do, your reply will be “No thanks!” Now suppose that the alternative to having your toes stepped on by a horse is having your toes stepped on by a cow, and that both experiences are similarly painful. Because you chose not to have a horse step on your foot, a cow steps on your foot, and you suffer a pain of -2. In such a case, it still seems to me both right and informative to say that in the actual world, you suffered a pain of -2 *because a cow stepped on your foot*, and that the cow’s stepping on your foot was therefore absolutely bad for you.

But in some contexts, the objection appears quite forceful. Suppose you are pursuing an extremely ambitious project that you cannot reasonably hope to complete within a lifetime. At age 40, you die in a plane crash. In such a case, the claim that your death explains why you didn’t finish your project seems at least incomplete. A complete explanation of why you didn’t finish your project would have to make reference *both* to your death *and* to the fact that the project was too ambitious to finish.

But, crucially, even if we grant that a person’s death isn’t absolutely bad for her when all her plans and projects would have been thwarted anyway, a person’s death can nevertheless be absolutely bad for her without being overall bad for her. To see this, suppose that in the bungee jump example, you would have suffered grave injuries had you not died, and you would have been in serious pain for the rest of your life. Suppose that all things considered, you would have lived a worse life than the life you lived by dying in the jump, as pain and frequent frustration would have dominated your life after the jump. If so, dying in the jump

was overall good for you. But suppose that had you survived, you would have managed to complete at least some of the projects your death thwarted. It would have been a struggle, but you would have published your book and made peace with your friend. In this case, your death indubitably explains why you didn't finish some of your projects. To the extent that it does this, your death was absolutely bad for you, even though it was overall good. In such a case, we would once again want to say that your death was a lesser evil for you, but not that it was in no way bad for you.

4. Health Policy Implications

In a recent paper, Carl Tollef Solberg and Espen Gamlund (2016, 4) ask whether we can make sense of the view – commonly held in the health priorities literature – that it is worse when an adolescent dies than when an infant dies. If, as seems reasonable to suppose, we should allocate life-saving medical interventions at least to some extent in accordance with how bad it would be if a patient were to die, this is an important question not only philosophically speaking, but also for health policy.

Part of what might explain the view is the fact that an adolescent's death tends to have wider negative repercussions than the death of an infant.¹¹ But according to Solberg and Gamlund (2016), it is also possible to make sense of the view in terms of the badness of death *for the*

¹¹ Unlike infants, adolescents usually have friends who are negatively affected by their death, and they are more likely to have siblings who are old enough to experience a conscious loss. According to the Human Capital Approach to saving human lives, we should moreover prioritize saving adolescents over infants for economic reasons (see Mogensen, this volume).

person who dies, at least if we move away from the standard interpretation of the deprivation account. They argue that on the standard interpretation of the deprivation account, death for an infant will usually be worse for the infant than death for an adolescent will be for the adolescent: holding total life expectation and expected quality of life after the medical intervention constant, the infant loses out on a higher number of valuable life years, and therefore suffers the greater misfortune if she dies. To explain how the death of an adolescent can be worse for the adolescent than the death of an infant is for the infant, Solberg and Gamlund (2016, 6-8) make use of Jeff McMahan's Time-Relative Interest Account (TRIA). The TRIA is a sophisticated and controversial version of the deprivation account that centers on the idea that it is worse for you to lose out on future wellbeing if you are more psychologically connected to your later self who would enjoy this wellbeing. Adolescents, but not infants, tend to be highly psychologically connected to their later selves, so that according to the TRIA, death tends to be worse for adolescents than for infants, even if the latter lose out on a higher number of valuable life years.¹²

If we take inspiration from the sketch of agential value presented in section 3.1, we can go some way towards explaining the view that Solberg and Gamlund seek to explain without appealing to the TRIA. To see how, note that while an infant misses out on an entire life if she doesn't receive life-saving treatment, the infant has not so far made any investments into her future that her death could render futile (cf. Gamlund 2016). By contrast, the adolescent has already gone through much that prepares him for later life: he has acquired skills, knowledge, and experiences that all have the potential to serve him well throughout his adult life. If death robs him of a future, it renders futile what the adolescent has done and experienced so far, at least insofar as this is appropriately described as an investment in his

¹² For a more detailed discussion of the TRIA, see McMahan (this volume).

future. If we weigh agential considerations very heavily compared to other things that can make a person's life go well or badly, it then follows that the death of an adolescent can be worse for him than the death of an infant tends to be for the infant. To illustrate this with numbers, suppose that the value of a full life amounts to 400 units of value, and is composed of both experiential and agential value. An infant who dies hasn't lived through any of her life, so the overall value of her life is close to zero, and she misses out on 400 units of value. The adolescent's life, suppose, is at 20 units of experiential value. If all his investments into the future pay off, it will later be appropriate to say that the experiential-plus-agential value that he accumulated during his adolescence amounted to 100 units. But if his investments are all futile, this will detract from the 20 units of experiential value, and might make the overall value of his life negative. My personal feeling is that this numerical example overstates the comparative importance of agential considerations; experiential considerations seem to me relatively weightier than the example suggests. But combined with the typical negative effects of an adolescent's death on other people, I believe that agential considerations render plausible at least the view that the death of an adolescent might be *as bad* as the death of an infant.

In her contribution to this volume, Hilary Greaves convincingly argues that the badness of death that the TRIA captures does not match up with what she calls *badness in the axiological sense*. Roughly speaking, alternative A is *axiologically worse* than alternative B if, and only if, it produces a *worse state of affairs* to choose A rather than B. Arguably, when policymakers want to assign medical interventions at least to some extent in accordance with *how bad it would be if patients were to die*, axiological badness is what they have in mind – they are interested in assigning scarce medical resources so as to produce the best possible states of affairs. Greaves makes a strong case that insofar as we are interested in producing optimal states of affairs, we should *not* rely on the insights of the TRIA. If Greaves is right –

as I think she is – it follows that the TRIA cannot help explain why it might be right to save an adolescent over an infant if we are interested in producing the best possible state of affairs. By contrast, on the view of agential value that I have presented in this chapter, a world in which an adolescent’s investments into the future are rendered futile is at least potentially worse than an agentially more neutral world in which no such investments take place, even if the former contains positive experiential value that the latter lacks.¹³

¹³ See Broome (this volume) for an alternative defense of the view that the death of an adolescent may be axiologically worse than the death of an infant.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored two ways in which our death can affect us adversely specifically insofar as we are agents. I have argued that when some of our alternatives for action come with an increased risk of an untimely death, we should draw on the insights of the deprivation account, and should sometimes choose to forgo such risky alternatives even if they are otherwise attractive. The prospect of our own death can thus be bad for us because it can make it reasonable to avoid experiences that, but for this prospect, would have made our lives go better. In this way, our mortality can be bad for us even when, once it arrives, death does not deprive us of any remaining good life.

Insofar as we are agents, our death can affect us adversely not merely by limiting what valuable experiences it is in our expected self-interest to pursue. When a person dies, her death thwarts all her ongoing plans and projects, thus rendering some of her past efforts futile. This makes a person's death absolutely bad for her, even when it is overall good, thereby potentially turning her death into a lesser of two evils. But focusing on agential value not only helps us understand why a person's death can sometimes be the lesser of two evils for her. I have argued that together with the insights of the deprivation account, it can also help us make sense of the judgment that the deaths of adolescents and infants can be similarly bad in a way that is relevant for policymaking.

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