Travis Timmerman travis.timmerman@shu.edu Seton Hall University

Are Epicureans and Deprivationists Involved In A Mere Verbal Dispute?

Abstract: Perhaps death's badness is an illusion. Epicureans think so and argue that agents cannot be harmed by death when they're alive (because death hasn't happened yet) nor when they're dead (because they do not exist by the time death comes). I argue that each version of Epicureanism faces a fatal dilemma: it is either committed to a demonstrably false view about the relationship between prudential reasons and well-being or it is involved in a mere verbal dispute with deprivationism. I first provide principled reason to think that any viable view about the badness of death must allow that agents have prudential reason to avoid (or seek) death if doing so would increase their total well-being. I then show that Epicurean views which do not preserve this link are subject to *reductio* arguments and so should be rejected. After that, I show that the Epicurean views which accommodate this *desideratum* are involved in a mere verbal dispute with deprivationism.

"Anyone who has been born must wish to remain
in life so long as the caresses of pleasure hold him there."[1]

- Lucretius (ancient Epicurean)

"Any argument that implies that it is irrational to avoid dying is clearly wrong…it is perfectly rational to want more good rather than less. When death would give us less, it is perfectly rational to want more."[2]

- Aaron Smuts (contemporary Epicurean)

1. Introduction

I'll understand Epicureanism as the view that death cannot be bad for the person who dies. Epicureans argue that death cannot harm a person when she is alive (as death has not yet happened) nor when she is dead (as one does not exist by the time death comes).[3] So, the Epicurean reasons, if there is no time at which death is bad for a person, it follows that death is not bad for a person. Epicureanism's main contender is deprivationism. Deprivationists hold that death can be bad for the person who dies. Current forms hold that death is bad for one to the extent that it deprives that person of good life she would have had were her actual death not to occur. So, according to deprivationism, the more good (and less evil) of which death deprives its victim, the worse death is for that person. At first glance, deprivationism and Epicureanism not only appear to be substantively different, but simple contraries of each other. To be sure, some versions of Epicureanism are incompatible with some versions of deprivationism. However, I will argue that these forms of Epicureanism are demonstrably false. I will also argue that any viable version of Epicureanism is involved in a merely verbal dispute with an analogue version of deprivationism.

More specifically, I will argue that Epicureanism is subject to the following dilemma. Epicurean views that do not accommodate certain claims about preferences concerning (and reasons for seeking or avoiding) death are subject to detrimental *reductio* arguments. Epicurean

[1] (Lucretius 1975: Book V, lines 177-178).
[2] (Smuts 2012, 216).
[3] This view and argument originates with Epicurus and was rigorously defended by Lucretius in his epic poem *De Rerum Natura*. I take all contemporary Epicureans to endorse this argument in one form or another.

views modified to accommodate such claims are involved in a merely verbal dispute with standard forms of deprivationism. This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I defend what I refer to as the *Essential Desideratum* (ED), which any viable account of death must be able to accommodate. In the third section, I briefly review how most contemporary Epicureans and deprivationists accommodate ED. In the fourth section, I review what it means for a dispute to be merely verbal. After doing so, I argue that most contemporary Epicurean views are involved in a merely verbal dispute with standard deprivation views. In the fifth section, I consider and rebut a few objections to my argument.

2. The *Essential Desideratum*

2.1 Two Principles

A basic *desideratum* for any account of death is that it can accommodate the fact that a person's self-regarding[4] preferences about when they die (and reasons for seeking/avoiding death) track how well one's life would go were one's actual death to not occur. For lack of a better term, I'll refer to this desideratum as the *Essential Desideratum* (ED). ED can be captured by the following, seemingly axiomatic, principles.

> **Preferring Life (PL):** Any person *P* has *pro tanto* self-regarding reason to prefer (and ensure, if possible) continued life at time *t* if *P*'s total well-being would be higher if *P* does not die at *t* than if she does die at *t*.
>
> **Preferring Death (PD):** Any person *P* has *pro tanto* self-regarding reason to prefer (and ensure, if possible) death at time *t* if *P*'s total well-being would be higher if *P* dies at *t* than if she does not die at *t*.

Preferring Life and *Preferring Death* are modest principles. They are not intended to capture all reasons concerning death. PL and PD can be supplemented with principles concerning people's other-regarding reasons to seek or avoid death. For instance, they can be supplemented with principles which allow that parents can have reason to prefer continued life if doing so would be good for the parent's child. Additionally, unlike comparativism[5] and other similar principles, PL and PD are not formulated as biconditionals. As such, they even allow that persons can have self-regarding reasons to prefer a particular outcome other than the fact that doing so would result in a higher total well-being for the person in question. For instance, these principles are consistent with views which hold that the *narrative structure* of one's life also

[4] I am using the term 'self-regarding reasons' in a stipulative sense. Self-regarding reasons are the genuinely normative reasons one has to act in light of considerations about one's well-being. Self-regarding reasons may just be prudential reasons, but without the conceptual baggage. It is sometimes assumed, if only implicitly, that prudential reasons concern only what is "good for" and "bad for" persons. But, given Epicureans' and deprivationists' divergent uses of terms like "good for" and "bad for," no such assumption should be made.

[5] Comparativism can be formulated as follows: For any person *S* and event *E*, *E* is extrinsically bad (good) for *S* if and only if, and to the extent that, *S*'s total net receipt of intrinsic goods over intrinsic evils would have been greater (or smaller) if *E* had not occurred (Ekendahl and Johansson 2016, 40). For other formulations of comparativism, see (Feldman 1992), (Feit 2002), (Johansson 2005), and (Luper 2009, 86-87). Many deprivationists accept comparativism, while Epicureans often deny it. According to Ekendahl and Johansson, to avoid absurdity, Epicureans should accept that death can reduce a person's receipt of intrinsic goods, but deny that such a death would be extrinsically bad (2016, 40-41). Severing the connection between extrinsic goods and the receipt of intrinsic goods seems no more plausible to me than denying that death can reduce a person's receipt of intrinsic goods. At any rate, PL and PD are weaker than comparativism and consistent with accepting or rejecting it.

partly determines when it is best to die.[6] Finally, neither PL nor PD aim to pick out what a person has most reason, all things considered, to do.[7]

2.2 Two Cases

Preferring Life and *Preferring Death* merely posit a connection between a person's interest in continued life (or death) and how well that person's life would go, as a whole, for that person were she to continue living (or were she to die) at the time in question. Rejecting these principles amounts to rejecting the idea that it is ever in one's interest to live a longer better life rather than a shorter, less good, life. This strikes me as utterly absurd. Unfortunately, many philosophers have a bad habit of accepting the absurd. So I will now provide two cases to further motivate *Preferring Life* and *Preferring Death*. Following Smuts[8], my first case draws from the modern classic *No Country for Old Men*.

> **Two Doors:** Convenience store clerk Carl crosses paths with psychopathic killer Anton Chigurh, who happens to be in a good mood. Chigurh offers Carl the following deal. If Carl walks out the front door, he will receive a satchel filled with two million dollars cash. If Carl walks out the back door (or refuses to go out any door), Chigurh will quickly and painlessly murder Carl.
>
> Carl is both a happy person and a hermit. If he is murdered, no one would mourn his loss. But if Carl receives the cash, he would use the money to live a long and incredibly good life according to any account of well-being.

For the sake of simplicity, assume that there are no other reasons at play in this case. That is, assume that Carl has no other-regarding reasons to live, that the narrative structure of his life will not be negatively affected by either choice and so on. Now, setting aside the question of whether death would be *bad for* Carl, any plausible account of death should allow that Carl has self-regarding reason to prefer to walk out the front door. For, if he does, his life will be much longer and contain more good overall than if he doesn't. More precisely, Carl's total well-being will be non-trivially higher if he walks out the front door than if he doesn't. This much is uncontroversial and Epicureans and deprivationists alike accept it. Furthermore, it should be uncontroversial that one has self-regarding reason to prefer an overall better life to an overall worse one.

Just as the prospect of continued good existence should provide one self-regarding reason to prefer continued life, the prospect of a continued, solely dreadful, existence should provide one with self-regarding reason to prefer death. To illustrate, consider

> **Torturing the Spy:** Sage the spy has been captured and is about to undergo years of constant torture followed only by death. If Sage continues living, her well-being at every subsequent moment would be negative according to any account of well-being. Sage can avoid such a fate iff she immediately takes the cyanide capsule she has hidden on her.

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[6] For more on narrative structure, see (Jones 2012). These principles also allow for any other potentially relevant considerations too, such as one's reasonable attachment to the actual (Harman 2011), fission cases (Parfit 1984, § 90), considerations of autonomy, and any other potentially relevant features.

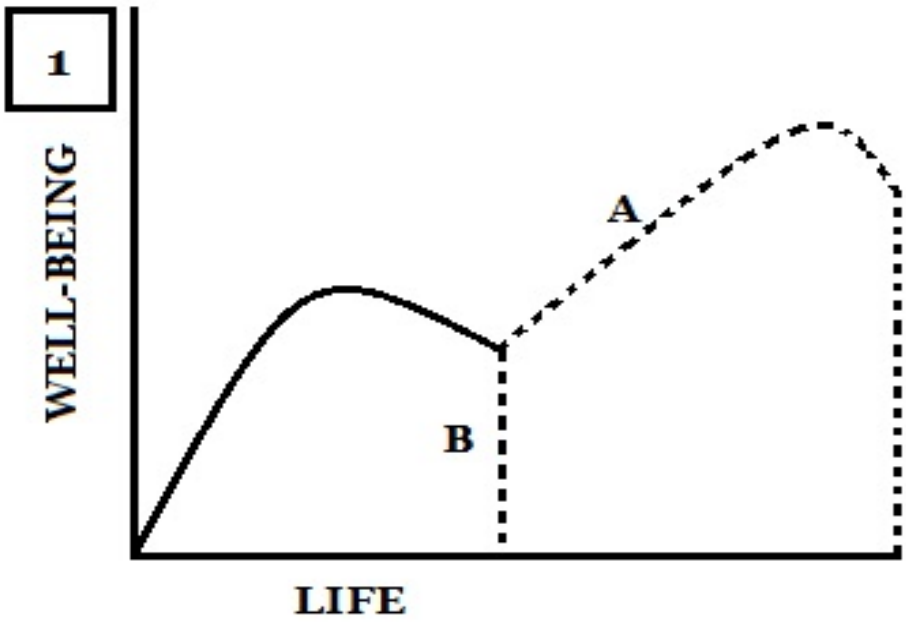
[7] In certain cases, death may benefit a person, yet be part of a larger series of events that collectively harm a person. PD entails that this person has some self-regarding reason to seek death, but still allows that the individual has most reason, all things considered, to prevent the collective harm, which requires avoiding death. For more on plural harm and death, see (Feit 2015).

[8] (Smuts 2012, 205-206).

Again, assume that there are no other reasons at play in this case. Setting aside the question of whether death by cyanide would be *good for* Sage, it seems clear that Sage has self-regarding reason to prefer to immediately end her life, thereby preventing herself from suffering years of constant torture.

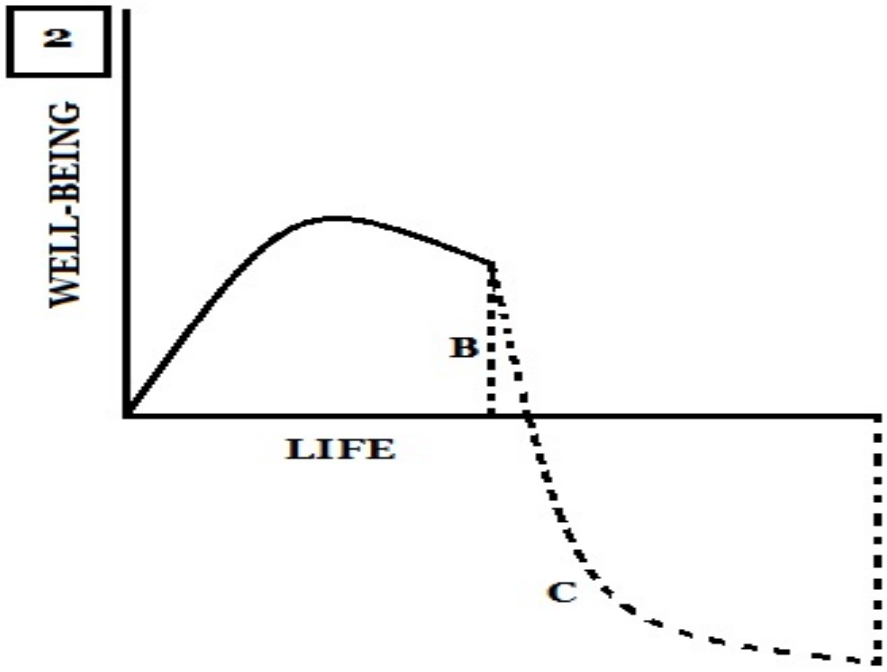
2.3 Transitivity

The case for ED already seems to me to be decisive. Still, some Epicureans seemingly reject it.[9] Epicureans who reject ED must claim that one has no self-regarding reason to prefer one outcome to another if one of the outcomes results in P's immediate non-existence. This move to reject ED is unmotivated. Absent a very strong argument in its favor, there is no reason to accept it. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Epicurean who makes this move incurs problems with transitivity. To illustrate the problem, it will be helpful to graphically represent the quality of people's life over time.[10] First, consider the following two graphs, which represent lives like Carl's and Sage's.



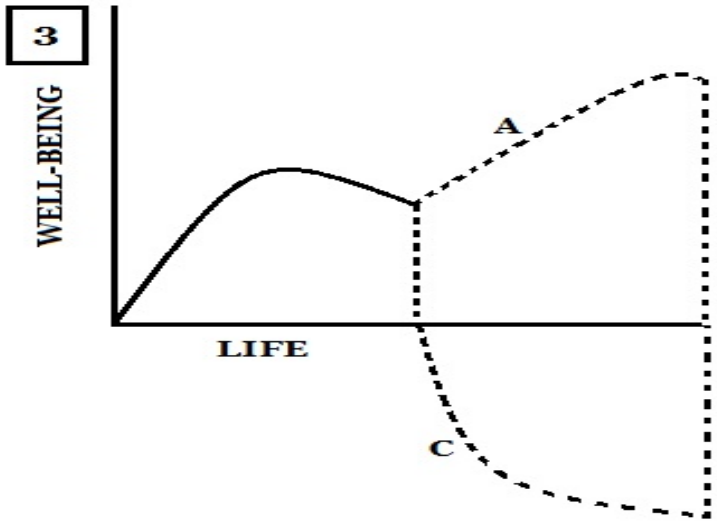
[9] Examples include (Suits 2001) and possibly (Hetherington 2013), depending on how Hetherington understands the relationship between self-regarding reasons, total well-being and achieving *ataraxia*. In personal correspondences, [name deleted] and [name deleted] both said that they reject ED, though their formulations of Epicureanism are consistent with ED.

[10] For the purposes of my argument, I needn't assume *(a)* any particular account of well-being *(b)* that well-being can be represented by a single metric *(c)* that the value of different lives are commensurable *(d)* that one's well-being level raises or drops to 0 at death or even that *(e)* one's life can be graphically represented. However, I proceed as if these claims are true in order to make the presentation of my argument as clear as possible. The only assumption I need to make is that some lives are determinately better than others. This assumption should be uncontroversial.



The total well-being is represented by the area under the curve. The area above the x-axis represents life with a positive well-being level (i.e. life that is worth living). The area under the x-axis represents life with a negative well-being level (i.e. life that is not worth living). One's life, on the whole, is good to the extent that the area under the curve above the x-axis is greater than the area under the curve below the x-axis. The solid line represents the life that person *P* has already lived and the dotted lines represent how one's life would go were a given event to occur. So, in graph one, *P*'s total well-being would be higher if A happens rather than B. In graph two, *P*'s total well-being would be higher if B happens rather than C.

An Epicurean who rejects ED must deny that *P* has self-regarding reason to prefer A to B and B to C. Now consider a third graph, where the possible outcomes are just A and C.



It is an incontrovertible axiom that, *ceteris paribus*, we have reason to prefer outcomes that are better for us.[11] So, given this axiom, any existing account of well-being must allow that *P* has self-regarding reason to prefer A to C. Even the staunchest of Epicureans who denies ED should accept as much. Denying that one has self-regarding reason to prefer continued life worth living over continued life not worth living scales the heights of absurdity. Now, suppose *P* is in a situation where A, B, and C are possible outcomes. Epicureans who reject ED are committed to the following.

(i) P has no self-regarding reason to prefer A to B.

(ii) P has no self-regarding reason to prefer B to C.

(iii) P has self-regarding reason to prefer A to C.

In other words, rejecting ED requires rejecting the transitivity of self-regarding reasons to prefer. But this is highly implausible. If one really has no self-regarding reason to prefer A to B or B to C, then it would seem that one has no self-regarding reason to prefer A to C.

At this point, an Epicurean (who rejects ED) may object, arguing that one cannot coherently makes claims about reasons to prefer outcome A to B or outcome B to C. After all, the person ceases to exist in outcome B and consequently, one may think, ceases to have a well-being level. This response is inadequate. The proponent of ED can happily grant that B ceases to have a well-being and so happily grant that it is incoherent to compare the *well-being levels* of a person during the time outcome A would obtain relative to the time outcome B would obtain (ditto for the time outcome B would obtain relative to the time outcome C would obtain). However, it does not follow that it is incoherent to compare the *self-regarding reason* one has to prefer outcome A to outcome B or outcome B to outcome C. Justifying that inference requires an additional argument demonstrating that in order to have self-regarding reason to act, it must be possible to compare one's well-being levels subsequent to the act in question. Yet, there is no good reason to accept this as a precondition of self-regarding reasons. After all, it is perfectly coherent to compare each outcome's *contribution of value* to the total value of one's life.[12] Each outcome would make a different contribution to the person's total net receipt of intrinsic goods and these facts seem to be a plausible candidate for grounding self-regarding reasons.[13] This is just one of multiple plausible accounts that would make such comparisons coherent.

In brief, the Epicurean who rejects ED, and who wants to preserve the transitivity of self-regarding reasons to prefer, would have to show that reasons to prefer one outcome to another requires comparing the well-being levels of persons during the time the outcomes in question obtain. This seems to be a daunting, and perhaps impossible, task for the Epicurean. I will return to this issue in section 5. Moreover, such a move would prevent the Epicurean from being able to adequately handle the *objection from morality* and the *objection from prudence*.[14] That is, it would wholly undercut the resources Epicureans have to explain why it is generally morally wrong to murder and generally imprudent to commit suicide.

This move would also cause the Epicurean to incur yet another problem. It would wreak havoc on decision theory. How ought one to act rationally when A, B, and C are options *P* can bring about? Given the imagined objection, A is decisively better than C, but B cannot be

[11] For discussion, see (Olson 2013, § 4).
[12] See (Purves 2016).
[13] I'll expand on this line of argument when addressing the *Timing Problem* in section 5.2.
[14] For more on this, see (Ekendahl and Johansson 2016).

compared to A or C. The Epicurean who takes this view then has a difficult time accounting for the deontic status of these acts. Is it determinately true that it's rationally obligatory to A when the only options are A and C, but indeterminate whether it's rationally obligatory to A when the options are A, B, and C? It's unclear how to account for such cases, though each option for the Epicurean who rejects ED seems implausible. Most would think, *ceteris paribus*, it is rationally obligatory to A, and rationally impermissible to either B or C, with C being the most irrational. Yet, the Epicurean who rejects ED cannot account for these verdicts and it is a significant cost to any Epicurean view that would have to deny the very coherence of many seemingly paradigmatically rational decisions.

The reasons in favor of accepting ED seem to me to be decisive. We can appreciate them by considering the self-evident principles *Preferring Life* and *Preferring Death* and by our judgments in *Two Doors* and *Sage the Spy*. Furthermore, views that reject ED cannot preserve the transitivity of self-regarding reasons to prefer. The arguments in this section collectively provide overwhelming reason to reject any form of Epicureanism that does not accommodate ED.

3. Accommodating the *Essential Desideratum*

We have just seen that Epicurean views that do not accommodate ED should be rejected. As such, any remaining forms of Epicureanism that are viable must accommodate ED. In this section, I will show how Epicureans can, and do, accommodate ED. In the next section, I will show how these forms of Epicureanism are involved in a merely verbal dispute with standard forms of deprivationism. First, however, I will review how deprivationists can accommodate ED.

3.1 Deprivationism

According to the deprivationist, the goodness or badness of a person's death is determined by how that person's life would[15] have gone in the nearest possible world where the person's actual death did not occur.[16] All deprivationists mean when they claim that an event *harms* or is *bad for* a person is that the person's total well-being is lower than it would have been if the event had not occurred. All deprivationists mean when they claim that an event is *good for* a person is that the person's total well-being is higher than it would have been if the event had not occurred. I'll refer to the deprivationists' use of these terms as $harm_D$, $bad\ for_D$ and $good\ for_D$ and so on. Since everyone has defeasible self-regarding reason to prefer things that are good for them over things that are bad for them (in any meaningful sense of these terms), deprivationists have a straightforward way to account for PL and PD. Those principles track which deaths are good for and which deaths are bad for people.

3.2 Epicureanism

Epicureans do not have this explanation at their disposal. To see why, recall that Epicureans hold that death can never be good for or bad for people, at least in their favored senses of the terms. An Epicurean who wants to hold that persons can have self-regarding reason to prefer or seek one death over another needs to ground those reasons in something

[15] In his (1970), Nagel argues that the badness of death is determined by how one's life *could* have gone, not *would* have gone. However, every subsequent form of deprivationism is formulated in terms of how one's life *would* have gone had the person's actual death not occurred.

[16] See, for instance, (Brueckner and Fischer, 1986), (Feldman, 1992), (Luper 2009), and Bradley (2009). Note also that Bradley's view is contextualist, so the nearest possible world is picked out relative to similarity relation *R*, which is determined by context.

other than the goodness or badness (in the Epicurean senses) of death. Sure enough, this is the strategy employed by almost all contemporary Epicureans.

More precisely, Epicureans who adopt this strategy first invoke a sense of terms like *bad for* and *good for* that is more narrow than the deprivationists' broad sense of these terms (e.g. bad for $=_{df}$ a painful state). Second, the Epicurean argues that death cannot be good for or bad for a person in the narrow sense in question (e.g. death cannot be a painful state). Crucially, the narrow Epicurean senses of good for and bad for still allow that death can be good for$_D$ or bad for$_D$ a person (e.g. even though death cannot be painful, it can result in a person having a lower total well-being than they otherwise would have). Third, the Epicurean then accommodates ED by holding that self-regarding reasons track events that are good for or bad for a person in the narrow Epicurean sense in question *as well as in the broader deprivationist sense* (e.g. one has self-regarding reason to avoid events that are painful, as well as events that reduce one's total well-being). In doing so, the Epicurean often introduces unique well-being terminology to refer to events that are good for$_D$ or bad for$_D$ people, but not good for or bad for people in the narrow Epicurean sense in question (e.g. death is never bad for a person, but can result in *less good* for a person).

By using well-being terms differently than deprivationists, Epicureans are trying to have their cake and eat it too. The Epicurean can claim that death is never bad for anyone (in a specific narrow sense), but accommodate ED by using their unique well-being terminology to explain why one has self-regarding reason to seek or avoid death when doing so would result in a higher total well-being for the person in question. However, the Epicurean's alternative well-being terminology still picks out harms and benefits in the broader deprivationist sense of the terms. Such Epicurean views are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivation views or so I will argue. I will now review what I take to be prominent and representative contemporary defenses of Epicureanism.[17] Such Epicurean views can (and do) accommodate ED by employing the strategy outlined above.

I do not canvass the entire Epicurean literature for two reasons. First, that project is too lengthy for this paper. Second, and more importantly, doing so is entirely unnecessary for the purposes of my argument. This is because I am arguing that each Epicurean view is subject to a dilemma. On the first horn, the Epicurean view in question accommodates ED and, consequently, is involved in a merely verbal dispute with an analogue form of deprivationism. If an Epicurean view fails to do this and posits no connection between one's self-regarding reasons and total well-being, then the Epicurean view falls on the second horn. Such views are false. Any version of Epicureanism not discussed in this paper will still be subject to this dilemma. As such, it ultimately does not matter, for the purposes of my argument, whether any particular Epicurean view accommodates ED. Either it does (and is involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism) or it doesn't (and should be rejected).

[17] I do not discuss ancient Epicureans, such as Lucretius or Epicurus since historical interpretations of their work are contentious and because I do not need to take a stand on the correct interpretation of their positions for the purposes of my argument. That being noted, I am inclined to interpret Lucretius and Epicurus as attempting to assuage worries that death is intrinsically bad. Consequently, ancient Epicureanism can be seen as consistent with deprivationism without succumbing to anachronism. But whatever the correct historical interpretation, Epicurus' and Lucretius' version of Epicureanism is still subject to my dilemma. For a compelling historical interpretation of ancient Epicureanism, see (Warren 2001).

3.3 David Hershenov

I'll start with David Hershenov's compelling defense of a "more palatable" Epicureanism. Hershenov aims to demonstrate that one could preserve "commonsense ethics" and deny that death is bad for anyone.[18] His strategy is to sever conceptual ties between *bad for* and *more good*. Specifically, Hershenov argues that additional life can be *good for* a person, yet death (which is stipulated to prevent additional good life) not be *bad for* that person. Hershenov reasons that if one continues living a good life, one will continue to have some level of well-being and one's total well-being will be higher as a result.[19] Once a person dies, however, Hershenov believes that this person ceases to have any well-being level. This prevents death from being bad for this person, even if this death prevents additional good life. In short, Hershenov restricts the use of the terms *good for* and *bad for* to refer to events that do not result in a person ceasing to have a level of well-being. I will refer to Hershenov's use of these terms as *good for*$_H$ and *bad for*$_H$.

By severing the conceptual tie in the way he does, Hershenov is able to maintain a form of Epicureanism and accommodate ED. To see how this works, let's apply Hershenov's strategy to the two cases. In *Two Doors*, going out the front door would be good for$_H$ Carl, but going out the back door would not be good or bad for$_H$ Carl. This is because if Carl goes out the front door, his total well-being would be higher than if he doesn't and he will continue to exist with a level of well-being. If Carl goes out the back door, his total well-being would be lower than it otherwise would have been. But doing this isn't bad for$_H$ Carl because he would supposedly cease to have a level of well-being were he to go out the back door.

Now, here is the important point. Carl has self-regarding reason to go out the front door because doing so is good for$_H$ him. Whenever an event is good for$_H$ a person, it will necessarily be good for$_D$ that person too. The same reasoning applies in *Torturing the Spy*. Sage's continued life would be bad for$_H$ her, yet her death would not be good for$_H$ her. Nevertheless, Sage has self-regarding reason to bite the cyanide capsule because not doing so would be bad for$_H$ (and therefore bad for$_D$) her.

3.4 Aaron Smuts

Aaron Smuts's strategy parallels Hershenov's strategy. Smuts restricts the uses of the terms *good for* and *bad for* to events that are experientially (and he thinks intrinsically) good and bad. Smuts also draws a distinction between *bad for* and *less good*. On Smuts use of these terms, an event that is *bad for* a person involves a painful state, while an event that results in *less good* for a person will involve the prevention of a pleasurable state.[20] I'll refer to Smuts's use of *bad for* as *bad for*$_S$. Smuts preserves a form of Epicureanism since he can still claim that death is never *bad for*$_S$ a person, as death is never painful. It is only an experiential blank. At the same time, Smuts accommodates ED by holding that persons can have self-regarding reason to avoid death if death would result in *less good* for a person than continued life. Any death that results in less good (and not less bad) for a person will necessarily be bad for$_D$ that person.

[18] (Hershenov 2007, 176).
[19] Hershenov appears to assume that accepting the deprivation account of the badness of death requires assuming that the deceased have well-being levels of 0 (p. 177). But, as was later shown in the literature, this isn't the case. See (Bradley 2009, 98-105) and (Purves 2016). In a personal correspondence, in response to these later articles, Hershenov suggests that deprivationists should (like him) allow that people can have interests that do not track their well-being.
[20] (Smuts 2012, 211-213).

3.5 James Stacey Taylor

James Stacey Taylor defends a rather unique version of Epicureanism.[21] Taylor draws a distinction between a harm *for* a person and a harm *to* a person. Harms *to* persons affect their [momentary] well-being, while harms *for* persons do not affect their [momentary] well-being[22], but prevent the existence of a state of affairs the person values independently of her [momentary] well-being.[23] This distinction gives Taylor room to accommodate ED by holding that death can be a harm *for* persons, but not a harm *to* them and that persons have self-regarding reason to avoid things that are harms *for* them, as well as harms *to* them. Whenever death is a harm *for* a person, it will necessarily be bad for$_D$ them as well.

To see how this could work, consider *Two Doors* again. Death would be a harm *for* (but not *to*) Carl because the nearest possible world in which Carl does not die is one where his subsequent life is very good according to any account of well-being. Carl's death prevents the existence of such a state of affairs; one that Carl has self-regarding reason to value. Applying Taylor's view to *Torturing the Spy* in this way yields similar results. Sage's death presumably would not be something that is good or beneficial *to* Sage (as she cannot experience said good), but would be good or beneficial *for* Sage since it prevents a state of affairs Sage has self-regarding reason to avoid. This allows Taylor to preserve a form of Epicureanism since he can claim that death is never a harm *to* a person, yet preserve ED by allowing that people have self-regarding reason to avoid deaths that are harms *for* (and therefore bad for$_D$) them.

I wrote that Taylor's view leaves room for accommodating ED because his view could be precisified in such a way that it is either consistent or inconsistent with ED. If one supplemented Taylor's view with the claims that *(i)* death cannot prevent a state of affairs a person values independently of her [momentary] well-being and that *(ii)* death cannot affect a person's [momentary] well-being, then this version of Taylor's view will be inconsistent with ED. In a personal correspondence, Taylor indicated that he would favor a precisification of his view inconsistent with ED. Consequently, Taylor's favored version of his view falls on the first horn of my dilemma.

3.6 Stephen Rosenbaum

Stephen Rosenbaum takes a different approach and provides two avenues for his Epicureanism to accommodate ED. First, he allows that *being dead* can be *bad* without being *bad for* anyone.[24] So, ED may be preserved if one has self-regarding reason to avoid one's death when it is bad. However, I think Rosenbaum would want to reject this move and would almost certainly prefer the following avenue. He claims that *death* can be bad for the deceased, even though *being dead* cannot be bad for the deceased. This is because Rosenbaum is restricting his use of the phrase *bad for* to preclude events that occur at a time a person does not exist. I'll refer to this restricted sense of bad for as bad for$_R$. A death that is bad for$_R$ a person should also be

[21] See chapter five of (Taylor 2012) for an extended discussion of this distinction.
[22] Taylor's distinction between harms *to* and harms *for* is a bit under-described. As I understand him, harms *for* persons can affect a person's *total* well-being, but cannot affect a person's *momentary* well-being. I take this to be the charitable interpretation of Taylor. If, contrary to my interpretation, Taylor suggests that harms *for* persons cannot even affect one's total well-being, then Taylor would either be committed to holding that *(i)* death can be a harm to persons, thereby giving up his Epicureanism or holding that *(ii)* death can never affect one's total well-being. I find *(ii)* wildly implausible and presume Taylor would not want to accept *(i)*.
[23] (Taylor 2012, 44).
[24] (Rosenbaum 1986, 218).

bad for$_D$ a person. Rosenbaum understands death as the "time at which a person becomes dead," which may be an instant in time or no time at all and *being dead* follows death.[25] This happens after death when the person no longer exists. So, Rosenbaum can (and seemingly wants to) accommodate ED by holding that one has self-regarding reason to avoid *death* when it would be bad for them, yet he tries to preserve his Epicureanism by holding that *being dead* is never bad for anyone.

3.7 O.H. Green

O. H. Green distinguishes between *objective* and *subjective* evils. Objective evils are those that impede normal functioning, while subjective evils require painful conscious states of some sort.[26] Green defends Epicureanism by restricting its scope to subjective evils, rendering the view practically tautological. When the death of a person is understood, by definition, to entail a lack of consciousness, it follows that death can never be a subjective evil. So Green can preserve ED by holding that death can be objectively good for or bad for a person and that people have self-regarding reason to avoid things that are objectively bad for them and to seek things that are objectively good for them. Whenever an event is objectively bad for a person, it should also be bad for$_D$ that person as well.[27]

Now that we have seen how Epicureans can (and do) accommodate ED, we are in a position to see why such views are involved in a merely verbal dispute with standard forms of deprivationism.

4. Epicureans, Deprivationists, and Merely Verbal Disputes

Consider the following scenario. Tim and Tom both work at Chase bank, far away from a river with geese. They have this short conversation.[28]

Tim: There are no geese by the bank (meaning Chase bank).

Tom: There are geese by the bank (meaning the river bank).

Tim and Tom's conversation reveals there to be a *prima facie* dispute[29], but any appearance of a substantive dispute is illusory. Tim and Tom agree that there are geese by the river bank and agree that there are no geese by Chase bank. Their conversation nevertheless has the appearance of a substantive dispute because Tim and Tom are unwittingly using the term 'bank' differently. Once each comes to understand how the other is using the term 'bank', the *prima facie* dispute disappears.

Tim and Tom's conversation is a paradigmatic instance of a merely verbal dispute. From this example, we can see that merely verbal disputes are situations where *(i)* those engaged in

[25] (Rosenbaum 1986, 218).
[26] (Green 1982, 100).
[27] Green might actually understand any event that impedes normal functioning to be an objective evil regardless of how the event affects a person's total well-being. If so, then Green's view can be precisified to either accommodate or reject ED. If it is precisified to be incompatible with ED, it should be rejected. If it is precisified to accommodate ED, Green will be involved in a merely verbal dispute with an analogue form of deprivationism. I'll discuss this more in the next section.
[28] This is drawn from (Jenkins 2014, 16).
[29] A *prima face* dispute is anything that, at first glance, has the appearance of a real dispute (Jenkins 2014, 21).

the dispute take themselves to be disagreeing about a substantive issue, yet *(ii)* there is no "substantive, relevant disagreement between the parties" and *(iii)* the dispute "arises in virtue of differences concerning language."[30] In this section, I will argue that Epicurean views that accommodate ED (e.g. those discussed in the previous section) are involved in a merely verbal dispute with analogue forms of deprivationism. In order to do that, however, it is necessary to make a few preliminary points and to adopt a heuristic for identifying merely verbal disputes.

Here are the preliminaries. First, I am going to remain neutral about the best way to characterize merely verbal disputes. There is a variety of characterizations on offer[31] and an important emerging metaphilosophical literature on reasons for accepting, or rejecting, various characterizations. This literature is orthogonal to the issue at hand since the merely verbal dispute between Epicureans and deprivationists can be captured by each viable characterization on offer. Second, it is important to be clear about the scope of my argument. I am not arguing that every Epicurean view is involved in a merely verbal dispute with every deprivation view, just those that accommodate ED. Epicurean views that fail to accommodate ED are substantively different from any form of deprivationism. They are also demonstrably false. Third, my argument even allows that there can be substantive differences between particular Epicureans and deprivationists that accommodate ED. The substantive disagreement just won't be about whether death can be bad for people in any precisified sense of 'bad for'. Rather, it would concern related issues, such as whether deceased persons have well-being levels or which attitudes are fitting to have toward death.[32] There may even remain a substantive dispute about which use of terms like 'bad for' are correct.[33]

I appeal to Carrie Jenkins's (2014) account of merely verbal disputes since it is the clearest and, I think, most plausible account of verbal disputes. Jenkins defends the following characterization, which she labels MVD+.

> **MVD+:** Holding the conversational context fixed, parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere *prima facie* dispute D, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of D, and merely present the appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language.[34]

We can now see why Epicureans and deprivationists that accommodate ED are involved in a merely verbal dispute. D should be relatively fine-grained, so take it to be the issues of whether a person's death can be bad for (or harm) that person and what self-regarding

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[30] (Jenkins 2014, 20).

[31] In addition to (Jenkins 2014), see (Hirsch 2005), (Bennett 2009), and (Chalmers 2011).

[32] Epicureans usually argue that death is not to be feared. Some deprivationists have argued that fear is a fitting attitude, while others deny this. See (Scheffler 2013, 87) and (Draper 1999). To be clear, Epicureans and deprivationists can consistently accept or reject the claim that people should fear deaths that are bad for$_D$ them. So, debates about fitting attitudes toward death cut across debates about the badness of death. See (Bradley 2015) and (Reference Deleted) for recent deprivationist discussions of fitting attitudes toward death.

[33] Although nothing in my paper hinges on the following claims, I will add that I accept some form of semantic externalism. So, I think that the correct use of well-being terms will be dictated by how the majority of people use these terms. Given this criteria, I suspect the deprivationists' sense of terms such as "harm" and "bad for" better captures the standard usage than any alternative Epicurean sense of these terms. Alternatively, common usage of such terms may be such a "Frankensteinian jumble" that there is no fact of the matter about which use of these terms is correct. See (Bradley 2012) for an argument defending this conclusion. This is an interesting, and substantive issue. But it is orthogonal to my argument in this paper.

[34] (Jenkins 2014, 21).

preferences people ought to have about their death. Of course, the relevant parties are deprivationists and Epicureans who accommodate ED. The appearance of disagreement is the product of divergent uses of well-being terms, such as 'harmful', 'harm for', 'bad for', and 'good for'.

When deprivationists assert that death can be *bad for* (or *harm*) a person, they are simply using these terms to refer to any event that has the consequence of a person's total well-being being lower than it otherwise would have been. Again, I'll refer to the deprivationist use of these terms as $harm_D$ and $bad\ for_D$. When Epicureans who accommodate ED assert that death cannot *harm* (or be *bad for*) a person, they are using these terms in a different sense. Once we eradicate the divergent use of these terms, the *prima facie* dispute disappears since each party should agree *(i)* about the precisified senses in which death can, and cannot be, harmful and *(ii)* about what self-regarding preferences people ought to have about their death. Specifically, they should agree that agents have self-regarding reasons to prefer outcomes that are good for_D them over outcomes that are bad for_D them. I'll now illustrate this for the specific accounts of Epicureanism discussed in the previous section.

I'll once again start with Hershenov's Epicureanism. When Hershenov asserts that death cannot be bad for a person, he is using the phrase *bad for* to refer to an event that has the consequence of a person's total well-being being lower than it otherwise would have been *and* that doesn't immediately result in that person ceasing to have a level of well-being. Again, I'll refer to this use of *bad for* as $bad\ for_H$. Now, both deprivationists and Hershenov agree that death can be $bad\ for_D$ a person and they agree that self-regarding reasons track this sense of 'bad for'. Moreover, Hershenov and deprivationists who deny that the deceased have well-being levels agree that death cannot be $bad\ for_H$ a person. The substantive disagreement that remains is not between Hershenov's Epicureanism and deprivationism, but between those who think that the deceased have well-being levels and those who deny this. That issue, however, cuts across the debate about the badness of death.

Smuts distinguishes between *bad for* and *less good*. Smuts uses the phrase *bad for* to refer to an event that involves a painful state. Again, I'll refer to this use of the phrase as $bad\ for_S$. Since death is non-experiential, deprivationists and Smuts agree that death can never be $bad\ for_S$ a person and they agree that death can be $bad\ for_D$ a person. Furthermore, they agree that one's self regarding reasons track events that can be $bad\ for_D$ a person.

Recall Taylor's distinction between a harm *for* and a harm *to* a person. Deprivationists don't distinguish between these two senses of harm, though nothing prevents them from adopting this more fine-grained distinction. Now, proponents of Taylor's view and deprivationists can agree that death can be bad for_D a person and agree that death can be a harm *for*, but not harm *to*, a person. Furthermore, they should agree that self-regarding reasons track events that are bad for_D people. Proponents of Taylor's view that take this route are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism. Those, like Taylor himself, who favor a precisified version of his view inconsistent with ED fall on the first horn of my dilemma.

Remember that Rosenbaum still allows that *death* can be $bad\ for_R$ a person. So deprivationists and Rosenbaum should agree that death can be both bad for_D and bad for_R a person. They should also agree that self-regarding reasons track events that are bad for_D people. Recall Green's slightly different terminology of objective and subjective evils. Green and deprivationists should both accept that death can be an objective, but not subjective, evil. Moreover, they should also agree that death can be bad for_D a person and that one's self-regarding reasons track events that are bad for_D that person. If a proponent of Green's view denied this, they would fall on the first horn of the dilemma.

To use David Chalmers's apt analogy, diagnosing merely verbal disputes has the "potential to serve as a sort of universal acid in philosophical discussion, either dissolving disagreements or boiling them down to the fundamental disagreements on which they turn."[35] Most contemporary Epicureans and deprivationists do not disagree with each other about what self-regarding reasons one has concerning death or about the precise senses in which death can, and cannot, be bad for people. I suspect there is even widespread agreement about when one has most reason, all things considered, to choose to die or to continue living. Recognizing that many Epicurean views are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism should play the dual role of eradicating this widespread confusion and helping philosophers hone in on the substantive disputes that remain in the literature.

5. Objections

A natural thought might be that the arguments in the literature for Epicureanism can function as arguments against ED. In other words, doesn't the s*ymmetry argument* or the *timing problem* provide good reason to think ED is false? Aren't *they* objections to my argument? The short answer is "No." While a comprehensive examination of these Epicurean arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly explain why neither should cast doubt on ED.

5.1 The Symmetry Argument

Lucretius noticed that no one seems to think that it was bad for them to not be conceived earlier than they, in fact, were conceived. But if it is not bad to be deprived of an earlier conception and if there is no relevant difference between non-existence before conception and non-existence after death, then it is also not bad to be deprived of a later death. This is the simplest form of the symmetry argument.[36] However, it is too simple. If it is going to cast doubt on ED, it will need to *(i)* be precisified to target the type of harm deprivationists are concerned with, viz. harm_D and *(ii)* show that one's self-regarding reasons concerning death track only this kind of harm. We can formulate a more precise version of the symmetry argument as follows.

(1) It is not bad for_D one to be deprived of an earlier conception.
(2) If it is not bad for_D one to be deprived of an earlier conception, then it is not bad for_D one to be deprived of a later death.
(3) Therefore, it is not bad for_D one to be deprived of a later death.

The problem is that once the argument is formulated to satisfy *(i)*, it is easy to see that (1) is false. The most popular deprivationist response is to deny that it is possible to be born (substantially) earlier than the time of one's actual conception, even though it is possible to die (substantially) later than the time of one's actual death.[37] Deprivationists who favor this response conclude that death can be bad for_D a person, but conception cannot. Consequently, they can posit self-regarding reason to prefer a later death, without committing themselves to holding that one has self-regarding reasons to prefer an earlier conception.

I have argued elsewhere that the standard deprivationist solution to the symmetry argument is inadequate and shown that it is epistemically, nomologically, metaphysically, and

[35] (Chalmers 2011, 517).
[36] For a particularly helpful discussion of Epicureans handling of the symmetry argument, see (Johansson 2005, ch. 5).
[37] This response can be traced back to (Nagel 1970). Kaufman provides a more meticulous defense in multiple articles, most notably his (1995), (2011, § 4), and (2016). See also (Belshaw 1992), (Belshaw 2000), and (Draper 2004).

logically possible for each person to have been conceived substantially earlier in time.[38] Nevertheless, (1) is still false. *If* there is anyone who would have had a higher total well-being if they were not born at the time they were, then it just follows that this person's conception was bad for$_D$ them. On the other hand, if no actual person had a conception that was bad for$_D$ them, then people may rightly regard their earlier-than-necessary deaths as bad for$_D$ them without having to regard their later-than-necessary conceptions as bad for$_D$ them. Either way, the symmetry argument poses no problem for deprivationists (or Epicureans) who accommodate ED.[39]

5.2 The Timing Problem

Recall the argument for Epicureanism mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Epicureans have argued that death does not harm a person after she has died (since nothing is supposedly harmful for a person once they do not exist) nor prior to death (since no event supposedly harms a person prior to its occurrence). Thus, the Epicurean concludes, there is no time at which death is harmful. From this, they infer that death cannot be harmful. Since deprivationists (and many Epicureans) allow that death can be bad for$_D$ a person, they face the supposed challenge of locating the time that death is bad for$_D$ a person. An Epicurean who rejects the idea that death can be bad for$_D$ a person avoids the *timing problem*. If such Epicurean views are supplemented with the claim that self-regarding reasons only track events that are bad for$_D$ a person, they can reject ED and avoid being subject to any version of the timing problem.

This move, however, will not vindicate the rejection of ED. First, it is wildly implausible to hold that death can never result in a person having a lower total well-being than they otherwise would have. Even the staunchest of Epicureans should accept this. Second, the general timing question "What time(s) does death harm$_D$ people?" is under-described. Any adequately precisified form of the question poses no problem for deprivationists (or Epicureans) who accept that death can be bad for$_D$ a person.[40] We can understand the general timing question to be getting at any one of the following more precise timing questions.

(1) At what times *t* is it true that the total well-being of *P* is lower than the total well-being *P* would have in the nearest possible world where *P*'s actual death does not occur.[41]

(2) At what times *t* after a person *P*'s death ground the fact that *P*'s total well-being is lower that it would have been had *P*'s actual death not occurred?[42]

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[38] [reference deleted].

[39] In addition to the *harm* version of the symmetry argument, there is an *attitudinal* version that targets our asymmetrical attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem non-existence. The responses to the attitudinal version mirror the responses to the harm version. For more on the attitudinal version, see Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer's (1993), (2013), and (2014). For an argument that undermines the standard solution to the attitudinal version, see (Greene and Sullivan 2016).

[40] There is an extensive literature on the timing problem and deprivationists have defended every possible answer to this challenge, in one form or another. It has been argued that death harms a person prior to (priorism), during (concurrentism), and after death's occurrence (subsequentism). It has also been argued that death is a timeless harm (i.e. it harms, but doesn't harm at a time) and that death harms at all times. For more on concurrentism, see (Luper 2009). For a defense of priorism, see (Feinberg 1993), (Pitcher 1993), and (Li 1999). For a defense of subsequentism, see (Feit 2002), (Feit forthcoming), (Bradley 2004), and (Bradley 2009). Nagel suggests that death is a timeless harm in his (1970). Silverstein defends this view in detail in his (2010) and Feldman defends the view that death is an eternal harm in his (1992, ch. 9).

[41] This is Fred Feldman's interpretation of the question. See his (1992, 154).

(3) At what times *t* is it true that *P*'s momentary well-being level is lower than it would have been had *P's* actual death not occurred?[43]

Assuming that one's death is bad for$_D$ them, the answer to (1) is at all times.[44] The answer to (2) is the times that the person would have been alive and had a positive level of well-being had the person's actual death not occurred. The answer to (3) depends on whether the deceased have well-being levels. If the deceased do not have well-being levels, then the answer to (3) is at no time. Such deprivationists claim that death can be, in a sense, timelessly bad for$_D$ a person. On the other hand, if the deceased have well-being levels of 0, then the answer to (3) is the same as the answer to (2).

As previously noted, the question of whether the deceased have well-being levels is indeed a substantive one.[45] Deprivationists who claim they do face what is sometimes referred to as the *problem of locating the subject*. They need to explain how it is possible that non-existent persons can have certain properties, such as well-being levels.[46] Though this issue is substantive, the debate over whether the deceased have well-being levels cuts across the debate about whether death can be bad for$_D$ people. Whether or not one thinks that deceased have well-being levels, one can accept a form of deprivationism and easily answer any precise version of the timing question. Consequently, the so-called timing problem cannot be used as an argument against ED.

6. Conclusion

Epicurean views are subject to a dilemma. They either do, or do not, accommodate the *Essential Desideratum*. Epicurean views that do not accommodate ED are demonstrably false. They are inconsistent with the axiomatic principles PL and PD, they generate the wrong verdicts in cases like *Two Doors* and *Sage the Spy*, and they cannot preserve the transitivity of self-regarding reasons to prefer. Epicurean views that accommodate ED are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism. To accommodate ED, Epicureans allow that *(i)* death can be bad for people in the sense deprivationists are concerned with and *(ii)* that self-regarding reasons track the deprivationist sense of *bad for*. Once an Epicurean accepts *(i)* and *(ii)*, any *prima facie* dispute about the badness of death between such Epicureans and deprivationists can be traced back to divergent uses of terms such as *bad for* or *good for*. If my argument succeeds, we will have passed a major hurdle in developing the correct account of the badness of death. Though plenty of related substantive philosophical questions remain.

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[42] This is Duncan Purves's interpretation of the question. See his (2016, 103).
[43] This is Ben Bradley's interpretation of the question. See (Bradley 2009, § 3.3) for discussion.
[44] Or, if determinism is false, then the answer is at whatever times it becomes true that the *S*'s total well-being in the actual world is greater than the total well-being *S* would have in the nearest world where her actual death does not occur.
[45] The answer to this question has wide-reaching implications for, among other things, egalitarianism. See (Voorhoeve and Fleurbaey forthcoming).
[46] See (Johansson 2005, ch. 4).

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