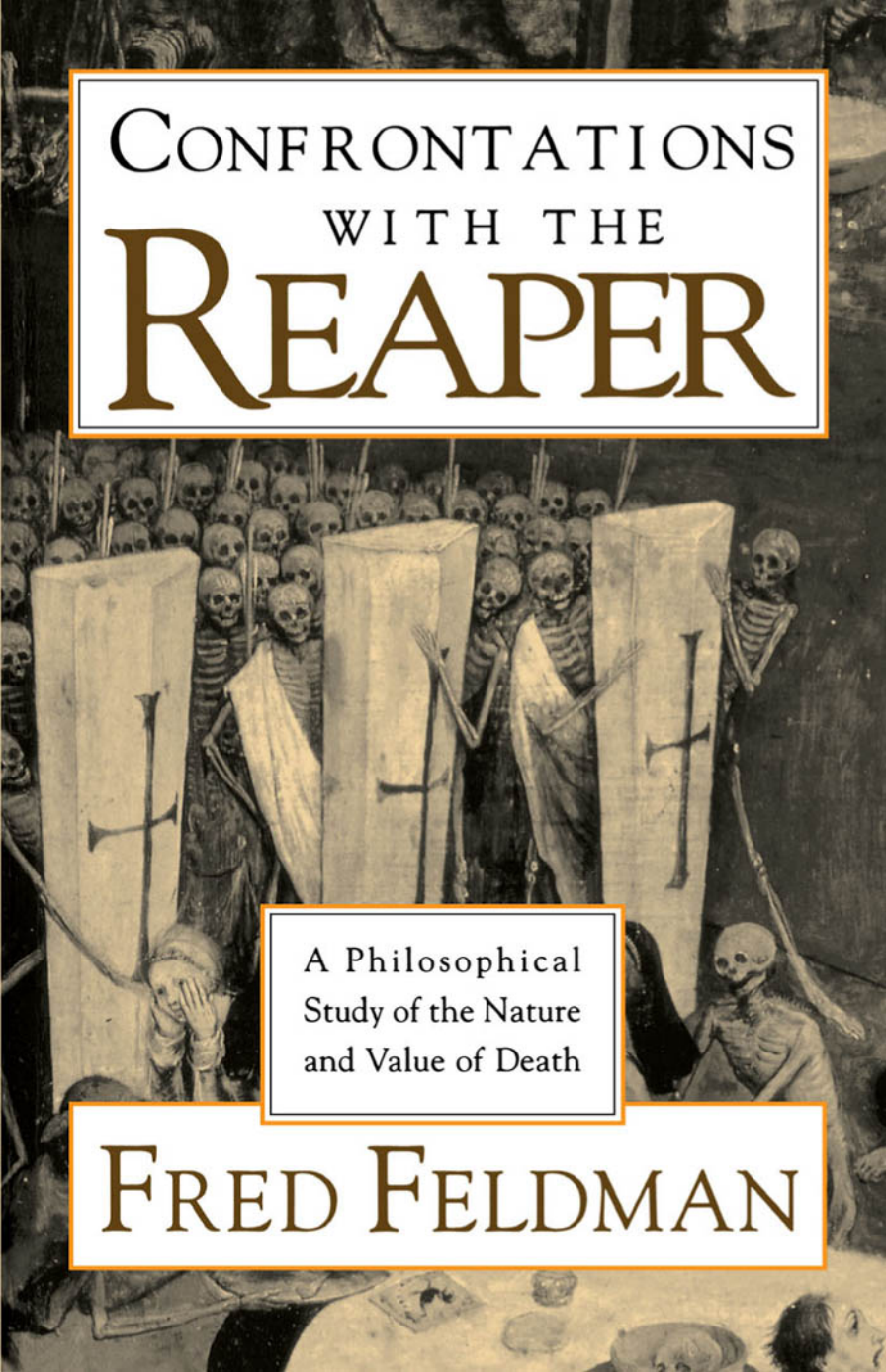
Confrontations with the Reaper



A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death

Fred Feldman

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland Madrid

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1994

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Feldman, Fred, 1941–
Confrontations with the reaper :
a philosophical study of the nature
and value of death / Fred Feldman.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-507102-6 ISBN 0-19-508928-6 (pbk)
1. Death. 2. Life. 3. Abortion. 4. Suicide.
I. Title. BD444.F44 1992 128′.5—dc20 91-3640

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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More Puzzles About the Evil of Death

The Puzzles

Death is nothing to Epicureans. They do not fear or hate death. They do not view death as a misfortune for the one who dies. They think death is no worse for the one who dies than is not yet being born for the one who is not yet born. They say that ordinary people who look forward to their deaths with dismay are in this irrational. As we saw in Chapter 8, Epicureans think they can prove their views on these matters to be correct.

In his central argument for these conclusions, Epicurus says:

> So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.[1]

As I understand it, the argument is based on several principles. One is the termination thesis, according to which we cease existing when we die. Another is the doctrine that we cannot experience pain when we don't exist. And a final relevant principle is the hedonistic claim that "all good and evil consist in sensation"—pleasures and pains are the only intrinsic goods and evils that can befall a person.

When these principles are combined, we seem to be driven to the conclusion that neither the event of death nor the state of being dead is an evil for the person who dies and then is dead. Roughly,

the reasoning is this: when we are in the state of being dead, we no longer exist and so cannot experience pain; a state is bad for a person only if it is painful for him or her; therefore, being dead is not bad for the one who is dead. Similarly, since we will cease to exist when we die, we will not experience any pain after death; an event is bad for a person only if it causes him or her to experience later pain; therefore, the event of a person's death is not bad for that person.

In Chapter 8, I attempted to show that these arguments are unsuccessful. I claimed that each argument is based on a failure to take due account of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic badness. I granted that being dead is not a painful experience. Perhaps this shows that being dead is not *intrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. Nevertheless, being dead still might be *extrinsically* bad for him or her. Suppose the one who is dead would have been happy if he or she had been alive. Then being dead deprives him or her of happiness and so is an evil. I also granted that the event of death does not cause, or lead to, later pains for the one who dies. Perhaps this shows that death does not *cause* evil for the decedent. Nevertheless, death might still be extrinsically bad for us because it *deprives* us of the goods we would have experienced if it had not taken place when it did.

This so-called deprivation approach is based on a novel conception of the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic value. According to this conception, something is extrinsically bad for a person to the extent that the person would have been intrinsically better off if it had not taken place. Many who have died would have been intrinsically better off if they had not died when they did. In all such cases, death was extrinsically bad for the one who died; being dead is extrinsically bad for them. Epicureans, I suggested, feel otherwise because they have a faulty conception of the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic evil.

The deprivation approach is not a novelty. Philosophers have been aware of it at least since the time of Epicurus.[2] However, many philosophers find it to be unacceptable. They think that there is something paradoxical, or incoherent, about the deprivation approach. One objection is this: if the deprivation approach is correct, then in many cases being dead is a misfortune for the one who is dead. This seems to imply that a misfortune can happen to a

person at a time when the person no longer exists. But this seems impossible. Surely, someone has to be "present" at a time in order to suffer a misfortune then? The complaint seems reasonable. So we have our first puzzle: how can being dead be a misfortune for a person, if she doesn't exist during the time when it takes place?

According to the view proposed in Chapter 8, a person's death is bad for him to the extent that he is thereby deprived of goods. This seems to suggest that in order to find the precise degree of badness of a given death, we have to determine the amount of good and evil the decedent would have experienced if he had lived and compare this with the amount of good and evil he in fact does experience while dead. The badness of the death is the difference between these two values. So the proposed conception of extrinsic value seems to require that we make a certain comparison—a comparison between (a) how well off a person would be if he were to go on living and (b) how well off he would be if he were to die.

The second puzzle about the deprivation approach is that it appears that any such comparison is incoherent.[3] It seems to be, after all, a comparison between (a) the benefits and harms that would come to a person if he were to live; and (b) those that would come to him if he were to die. However, if he doesn't exist after his death, he cannot enjoy or suffer any benefits or harms after death. So there apparently is no second term for the comparison. There is no number that indicates the amount of pleasure minus pain that the dead person experiences while dead. So the required calculation cannot be performed.

Suppose we find some coherent way to formulate the view that a person's death is a misfortune for him because it deprives him of goods. Then we face another Epicurean question: *when* is it a misfortune for him? It seems wrong to say that it is a misfortune for him while he is still alive—for at such times he is not yet dead and death has not yet deprived him of anything. It seems equally wrong to say that it is a misfortune for him after he is dead—for at such times he does not exist. How can he suffer misfortunes then? As Epicurus said, death "does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more."[4]

Another problem confronts the anti-Epicurean. If we can find a way to say that early death is bad for us because it deprives us of certain goods, then (whether we intended to or not), we probably

will have found a coherent way to say that "late birth" also deprives us of certain goods—the goods we would have enjoyed if only we had been born earlier. Yet virtually nobody laments his late birth, or thinks it a misfortune that he wasn't born years or decades earlier. Lucretius presented a forceful statement of this puzzle. He said:

> Think too how the bygone antiquity of everlasting time before our birth was nothing to us. Nature therefore holds this up to us as a mirror of the time yet to come after our death. Is there aught in this that looks appalling, aught that wears an aspect of gloom? Is it not more untroubled than any sleep?[5]

So another puzzle that must be confronted is this: if early death is bad for us because it deprives us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had died later, then why isn't late birth just as bad for us? After all, it seems to deprive us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had been born earlier.

Axiological Preliminaries

These questions are troubling. Nevertheless, I think I can answer them. In order to make my proposed answers as clear and useful as possible, I will have to refine the fairly sketchy view presented in Chapter 8. It will be necessary to introduce some distinctions and some terminology. The first concept I must introduce is the concept of the intrinsic value for a person of a life.

There are several different ways in which a person's life might be evaluated. For example, we might want to know the extent to which someone's life benefitted others—how much better off are *we* in virtue of the fact that *he* lived? Thus, even if Mother Theresa does not get much out of life, we may want to evaluate her life by saying that it has been *good for us.*

A different sort of evaluation takes place when we ask how good someone's life is *for him.* When we ask this question, we seem to be asking, roughly, how much intrinsic value did this person receive throughout his life? How much of the things that are good in themselves fell to him? So, for example, if we think that hedonism

is true, we may be asking, in effect, how much pleasure and pain this person experienced throughout his life.

It is important to note that when I speak of the value of a life for a person, I am *not* speaking of the amount of value that the person *thinks* he would get from that life; I am speaking of a certain objective value-theoretic fact about the life—a fact about which even the person himself might be mistaken. Thus, someone might think, near the end of his life, that his life had been full of things of great intrinsic value. He might be wrong.

If hedonism is true, then the value of a life for a person is determined in this way: first consider how much pleasure the person experienced throughout her life. Add it up. Then consider how much pain the person experienced throughout her life. Add it up. Then subtract the pain from the pleasure. The hedonic value of the life is the result. If hedonism is true, then the intrinsic value of the life for the person is equal to the hedonic value of the life.

In fact, I do not think that the value of a life should be determined in the simpleminded hedonistic way I have sketched. I am inclined to think that several other factors may contribute to determining how good a life is for a person. Later, in Chapters 10 and 11, I will present the outlines of my view. For now, however, I prefer to proceed on the pretense that hedonism is true. I have several reasons.

First and foremost, there is the historical reason. I am engaged in a debate with Epicurus about the evil of death. Epicurus was a hedonist. Some commentators have suggested that in order to answer Epicurus, we must reject his axiology—that his view about the evil of death is inextricably tied to his hedonism. I think this is a mistake. I want to show that even if we accept the Epicurean axiology, we can still reject his paradoxical conclusion about the evil of death.

A second reason for assuming hedonism is strategic. The central intrinsic value-bearing properties associated with hedonism are ones that a person can have at a time only if he is alive and conscious then. A person cannot experience pleasure or pain at a time if he or she is not alive then. I want to show how death can be an evil for the deceased even if this hedonistic axiology is assumed. Thus, I take myself to be trying to show that death may be an evil for a person even according to an axiology maximally hostile to this

notion. If I succeed, it will be fairly easy to see how to extend the solution in the direction of more plausible axiologies.

A final advantage of the hedonistic axiology is its simplicity. If we assume that intrinsic value attaches only to experiences of pleasure and experiences of pain, and we assume that these are in principle subject to unproblematic quantification, then the determination of the value of a life for a person becomes quite straightforwardly a matter of simple arithmetic. To find the value of a person's life, just subtract the amount of pain that person suffers throughout her life from the amount of pleasure she enjoys throughout her life. Although the axiology is admittedly quite crude, its simplicity makes it especially useful for present purposes.

I should also point out that although I think the termination thesis is false (as I tried to show in Chapter 6), I am not going to debate it again here. I acknowledge that some people go out of existence when they die. (For example, consider a person standing at ground zero at the moment of a nuclear blast.) For present purposes, I will make the (for me incredible) assumption that everyone does the same. Once again, I do this in part for historical reasons—Epicurus seems to have accepted this view about death and nonexistence—and in part for strategic reasons. I want to make things hard on myself. I want to try to show how death can be bad for the deceased even on the assumptions (a) that things that affect the value of a person's life can happen to that person only at times when he exists; and (b) that death marks the end of existence for the deceased.

Things That Are Bad for People

The central question here is how a person's death can be bad for him. The claim that someone's death is bad for him is an instance of a more general sort of claim: the claim that something is bad for some person. It would be surprising if it were to turn out that we need two independent accounts of what is meant by statements to the effect that something is bad for someone: one account of the meaning of such a statement when the relevant object is something other than the person's death, and another account of the meaning of such a statement when the relevant object is the person's death.

Surely the statement about death ought to be nothing more than an interesting instance of the general sort of statement. So let us consider the more general question first, and then focus more narrowly on the specific case concerning death. What do we mean when we say that something would be bad for someone?

It seems to me that when we say that something would be bad for someone, we might mean either of two main things. One possibility is that we mean that the thing would be *intrinsically* bad for him. So if someone says that a state of affairs, p, is intrinsically bad for a person, s, he presumably means that p is intrinsically bad, and s is the subject or "recipient" of p. Given our assumed hedonistic axiology, the only things that could be intrinsically bad for someone would be his own pains. Thus, *Dolores suffering pain of intensity 10 from t1 to t3* would be intrinsically bad for Dolores.[6]

On the other hand, when we say that something would be bad for someone, we might mean that it would be *extrinsically* bad for him. At least in some instances, this seems to mean that he would be intrinsically worse off if it were to occur than he would be if it were not to occur; in other words, it means that the life he would lead if it were to happen is intrinsically worse for him than the life he would lead if it were not to happen. In this case, the thing itself might be intrinsically neutral. The relevant consideration would be the extent to which it would lead to or prevent or otherwise be connected with things that are intrinsically bad for the person. Consider an example. Suppose we are interested in the question whether moving to Bolivia would be bad for Dolores. Intuitively, this question seems to be equivalent to the question whether Dolores would be worse off if she were to move to Bolivia than she would be if she were to refrain from moving to Bolivia. Letting 'B' indicate the state of affairs *Dolores moves to Bolivia,* we can say this: B would be extrinsically bad for Dolores if and only if she would be intrinsically worse off if B were true than she would be if B were false. And this, in turn, seems to amount simply to the claim that B would be extrinsically bad for Dolores if and only if the value for Dolores of the life she would lead if she were to go to Bolivia is lower than the value for her of the life she would lead if she were not to go to Bolivia.[7]

Correspondingly, to say that a state of affairs would be extrinsically good for a person is to say that she would be intrinsically

better off if it were to occur than she would be if it were to fail to occur. More exactly, it is to say that the intrinsic value for her of the life she would lead if it is true is higher than the intrinsic value for her of the life she would lead if it is false.

If we make use of our assumption that lives have numerical intrinsic values for individuals, then we can say precisely *how bad* or *how good* something would be for someone. Suppose that if Dolores were to move to Bolivia, the rest of her life would be a nightmare. Considering all the pleasures and pains she would ever experience, her life as a whole would have a hedonic rating of +100 points. Thus, the value-for-Dolores of the life she would lead if she were to move to Bolivia is +100. Suppose on the other hand that the value-for-her of the life she would lead if she does not move to Bolivia is +1000. Then she would be 900 units worse off if she were to move to Bolivia. That tells us precisely how bad it would be for her to move to Bolivia. The value-for-her of moving to Bolivia is −900. So the general principle says that to find the extrinsic value for a person of a state of affairs, subtract the value for him of the life he would lead if it is false from the value for him of the life he would lead if it is true.

In its most general form, then, the principle may be formulated as a principle about the extrinsic value (good, bad, or neutral) of states of affairs for persons. The extrinsic value of a state of affairs for a person is the result of subtracting the value-for-him of the life he leads if it does not occur from the value-for-him of the life he leads if it does occur. In other words:

D: The extrinsic value for S of P = the difference between the intrinsic value for S of the life S would lead if P is true and the intrinsic value for S of the life S would lead if P is false.

The Evil of Death

The application of these ideas to the case of death is straightforward. Recall the case of the boy who died while unconscious on the operating table (discussed in Chapter 8). Suppose we are wondering whether his death was bad for this boy. To find the answer, we must ask about the value for him of the life he leads if he dies when

he in fact dies; and we must compare that value to the value for him of the life he would have led if he had not died then. If the life terminated by that death is worse for the boy than the life not terminated by that death, then his death on that operating table was extrinsically bad for him; otherwise, not.

Let's consider another typical example to see how this works in the case of one's own death. Suppose I am thinking of taking an airplane trip to Europe. Suppose I'm worried about accidents, hijackings, sabotage, etc. I think I might die en route. I think this would be bad for me. D directs us to consider the life I would lead if I do die en route to Europe on this trip, and to consider the value for me of this life. I see no reason to suppose that interesting parts of my past would be any different in that life from what they are in my actual life. So I assume that all my past pleasures and pains would be unaffected. The main difference (from my perspective) is that in that life I suffer some terminal pain and then a premature death and never live to enjoy my retirement. Let's suppose that that life is worth +500 to me—+500 is the result of subtracting the pain I suffer in that life from the pleasure I enjoy in it. Next, D directs us to consider the life I would lead if I do not die en route to Europe on this trip. The relevant feature of this life is that I do not die a painful and premature death in an airplane accident. Suppose in that life I do live to enjoy the fruits of my retirement. Let's suppose the intrinsic value for me of that life is +1100. Fairly simple calculations then yield the result that my death on this trip would be bad for me. More precisely, the result is that such a death would have a value of −600 for me. It would be a terrible misfortune.

We can see, then, that principle D calculates the extrinsic value of a state of affairs for a person by considering the sort of life he would lead if that state of affairs were to happen and comparing this to the sort of life he would lead if that state of affairs were to fail to happen. Thus, according to D, my death would be bad for me not because it would cause me to suffer pain, and not because it would itself be intrinsically bad for me. Rather, it would be bad for me because it would deprive me of 600 units of pleasure that I would have had if it had not happened when it did. More precisely, it would be extrinsically bad for me because the intrinsic value for me of the life I would lead if were to occur is much lower than the intrinsic value for me of the life I would lead if it were to fail to occur.

Some Proposed Answers

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned four puzzles about the evil of death. These were prompted by the Epicurean challenge. I will now attempt to answer those questions.

The first question was the question how, given that he doesn't exist after he dies, a person's being dead can be a misfortune for him. The simple answer is this: a state of affairs can be extrinsically bad for a person whether it occurs before he exists, while he exists, or after he exists. The only requirement is that the value of the life he leads if it occurs is lower than the value of the life he leads if it does not occur. It may be interesting to consider an example in which something bad for a person occurs *before* the person exists. Suppose my father lost his job shortly before I was conceived. Suppose that as a result of the loss of his job, my parents had to move to another town, and that I was therefore raised in a bad neighborhood and had to attend worse schools. I would have been happier if he had not lost his job when he did. In this case, the fact that my father lost his job was bad for me, even though I did not yet exist when it occurred. It was bad for me because the value-for-me of the life I would have led if he had not lost his job is greater than the value-for-me of my actual life (which, on the assumption, is the life I would have led if he did lose his job). The same may be true of cases involving things that will happen after I cease to exist (although, of course, such cases will illustrate *deprivation* of happiness, rather than *causation* of unhappiness).

It should be clear, then, that a person does not have to exist at a time when something extrinsically bad for him occurs. Given our hedonistic axiology, it would be correct to say that nothing *intrinsically* bad can happen to a person at a time unless he exists at that time. You cannot suffer pains at a time unless you exist then. However, even on the same axiology, the *extrinsic* value version of the thesis is not true. That is, it would not be correct to say that nothing *extrinsically* bad for a person can happen at a time unless he exists at that time. Perhaps some Epicureans have been misled because they failed to recognize the importance of the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value.[8]

The second puzzle concerns an allegedly illegitimate comparison. It may seem that I am maintaining that when a person's death

is bad for him, it is bad for him because he is worse off being dead than he would have been if he had stayed alive. Yet this suggests that there is some degree of "bad-offness" that he endures while dead. However, since he doesn't exist while he is dead, he can have no degress of "bad-offness" then. The question, then, is this: does my answer presuppose an illegitimate comparison?

My answer presupposes no such comparison. I am not proposing that we compare the amount of intrinsic value a person receives during life to the amount of intrinsic value he receives while dead. I have assumed that the value for a person of a life is determined entirely by pleasures and pains that he feels during that life. Thus, the comparison is a comparison between the value for a person of one possible life (calculated entirely by appeal to what happens to him during that life) and the value for the person of some other possible life (also calculated entirely by appeal to what happens to that person during that life). I have provisionally agreed that nothing intrinsically good or bad can happen to a person at times when he does not exist.

In effect, then, my proposal is based on what has been called a "life-life comparison."[9] So, for example, consider the example concerning my imagined death en route to Europe. My proposal requires us to compare the value for me of two lives—the life I would lead if I were to die on the plane trip and the life I would lead if I were not to die on the plane trip. Since (according to our assumptions) the shorter life is less good for me, my death on that trip would be correspondingly bad for me.

The third puzzle was a puzzle about dates. I have claimed that a person's death may be bad for her because it deprives her of the pleasures she would have enjoyed if she had lived. One may be puzzled about just *when* this misfortune occurs. The problem is that we may not want to say that her death is bad for her during her life, for she is not yet dead. Equally, we may not want to say that it is bad for her after her death, for she does not exist then.

In order to understand my answer to this question, we must look more closely into the question. Suppose a certain girl died in her youth. We are not concerned here about any puzzle about the date of her death. We may suppose we know that. Thus, in one sense, we know precisely when the misfortune occurred. Nor are we concerned about the dates of any pains she suffered as a result of that

death. We assume that there are none. The present question is rather a question about when her death is a misfortune for her. If Lindsay is the girl, and E is the state of affairs of *Lindsay dying at 4:00 A.M. on December 7, 1987,* then the question is this: "precisely when is E bad for Lindsay?" I have proposed an account of the evil of death. According to that account, when we say that E is bad for Lindsay, we mean that the value-for-her of the life she leads where E occurs is lower than the value-for-her of the life she would have led if E had not taken place. So our question comes to this: "Precisely *when* is it the case that the value-for-Lindsay of the life she leads in which E occurs is lower than the value-for-her of the life she leads if E does not occur?"

It seems clear to me that the answer to this question must be "eternally." For when we say that her death is bad for her, we are really expressing a complex fact about the relative values of two possible lives. It seems clear that if these possible lives stand in a certain value relation, then (given that they stand in this relation at any time) they stand in that relation not only when Lindsay exists, but at times when she doesn't. If there were a God, and it had been thinking about which possible life to give to Lindsay, it would have seen prior to creation that E would be bad for Lindsay. In other words, it would have seen that the value-for-Lindsay of the life in which E occurs is significantly lower than the value-for-Lindsay of the relevant life in which E does not occur. And it would have seen this even though Lindsay did not yet exist at that pre-creation moment.

A final puzzle concerns the fact that we feel that early death is a greater misfortune for the prematurely deceased than is "late birth" for the late born. Why is this?

Suppose Claudette was born in 1950 and will die somewhat prematurely in 2000 as a result of an accident. We may want to say that her premature death will be a misfortune for her. Consider the life she would lead (call it L2) in which she does not die prematurely. Suppose that in L2 she lives happily until 2035. Since she has thirty-five extra years of happiness in L2, the value for her of that life is higher than the value for her of her actual life (or L1). D yields the result that her premature death is extrinsically bad for her. But now consider the claim that Claudette suffered an equal misfortune in not having been born in 1915. This fact seems to

deprive her of thirty-five happy years too—the years from 1915 to 1950 when she was in fact born. Yet we feel uncomfortable with the idea that her late birth is as great a misfortune for Claudette as her premature death. Why is this?

Consider the state of affairs of *Claudette being born in 1915.* Call it "B." In Claudette's actual life B is false. Consider the life she would lead if B were true. (In other words, consider what would have happened if Claudette had been born 35 years earlier.) Call this life L3. I see no reason to suppose that Claudette lives any longer in L3 than she does in her actual life. Any such change in life span strikes me as being superfluous. I am inclined to suppose that the value for Claudette of L3 is slightly lower than the value for her of her actual life—after all, in L3 she probably endures hard times during the Great Depression, and maybe even catches measles, whooping cough, and other diseases that were rampant in those days. The twenties and thirties were not such fabulous decades for children. If she has just fifty years to live, she's better off living them in the second half of the twentieth century, rather than thirty-five years earlier.

I think the reply to Lucretius's challenge is thus based on an asymmetry between past and future. When we are asked to consider what would happen if Claudette were to die later, we hold her birth date constant. It has already occurred, and we tend to think that unnecessary differences in past history are big differences between lives. Thus, it is more natural to suppose that if she were to die later, it would be because she lives longer. On the other hand, when we are asked to consider what would have happened if she had been born earlier, we do not hold her death date constant. Instead, we hold her life span constant, and adjust the death date so as to accommodate itself to the earlier birth date.[10]

Someone might claim that I have made an unfair comparison. They might want to insist on holding life spans constant. They might say that Claudette would be better off living longer if the extra time is tacked on to the end of her life. They might say that Claudette would not be any better off if the extra time were tacked on to the beginning of her life. (That is, if she were born in 1915 instead of 1950 but lived until 2000 anyway.) The question is vexed, since it is hard to discern values for Claudette of the relevant possible lives. My own inclination is to say that if she lives

eighty-five happy years in each life, then the value for her of the one is equal to the value for her of the other. In this case, I can't see why anyone would think it would be better for her to have the thirty-five years tacked on at the end of her life rather than at the beginning. When the comparison is fair, principle D generates the correct results.

Conclusions

I have claimed that there is nothing paradoxical or incoherent about the idea that death may be bad for the one who dies. My explanation of the evil of death is a version of the traditional view that death is bad for the decedent (when it is bad for him) primarily because it deprives him of the goods he would have enjoyed if he had lived. But the deprivation approach generates further puzzles. In this chapter I have attempted to formulate coherent answers to four such puzzles. I have attempted to provide my answers within a fundamentally Epicurean framework. I have assumed that hedonism is true, and I have assumed that people go out of existence when they die. I have attempted to show that even if we grant these implausible assumptions, we can still answer these objections to the deprivation approach. There is nothing incoherent about the naive view that death can be an evil for the deceased.

Thus, I have attempted to show that if we formulate our account properly, we can provide satisfactory answers to these puzzling questions: "How can death be bad for the deceased if she doesn't exist when it takes place?", "When is death bad for the deceased?", "Is there an illegitimate comparison between values accruing to the living and values accruing to the dead?", and "Why is early death worse than late birth?"

Since I have claimed that death can be bad for the one who dies, it may seem that I am now in a position to explain why it is wrong to kill people. But that too turns out to be a bit of a puzzle. It is the topic of Chapter 10.