
Many philosophers writing about death have adopted a strikingly cheery and optimistic tone. Their goal has been to show us that, though we may lack immortal souls, we should still regard the oblivion hurtling toward us with a calm and steady eye.

Some of these philosophers have tried to convince us that nonexistence is not so dreadful a thing. The Epicureans invoked a variety of ingenious arguments to this conclusion, the most famous being this: it makes sense for you to fear death only if it is bad for you to be dead. But it is not bad for you to be dead. Your death is the end of you. After the event there is no you for things to be good or bad for. More recently, Bernard Williams (in “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973]) had a more nuanced argument: a finite life is not so bad when you consider the alternative, an infinite life. An infinite life either would become tedious to the point of having no value, or would involve so much psychological change that the vibrant existence of later incarnations of the infinite being would not satisfy any desire to survive on the part of earlier incarnations of the infinite being.

More recently still, some philosophers have tried to convince us that, with sufficient effort, we can moderate or dodge the nonexistence that typically accompanies the death of our bodies. So Derek Parfit (in *Reasons and Persons* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984]) has argued that survival (of the kind that we should care about, at least) comes in degrees. By engineering psychological connections between yourself and future people, people who exist after the death of your body, you can—to a significant degree—survive the death of your body, and render that death less bad. And Mark Johnston (in *Surviving Death* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009]) has argued that, by identifying with others in a sufficiently radical and comprehensive way, you can, literally speaking, persist beyond the death of your first body. Your first body need not be your last.

Against this background of willful, suspiciously forced optimism, Bradley strikes a somber, sensible tone in *Well-Being and Death.* He offers no advice about how to moderate or dodge the nonexistence that typically accompanies the death of the body. And his views about well-being offer us little reason to think well of our impending nonexistence. Broadly: he defends welfare hedonism—good experiences make your life go better, bad ones make your life go worse. And he defends a deprivation account of the badness of death—your death is bad for you to the extent that you would have had a better life if you had not died. It follows...
from these views that (contra Williams and the ancient Epicureans) deaths are typically very bad for the person who dies. We cannot lessen the badness of our deaths by distancing them from our births. We cannot lessen the badness of our deaths by living full, rich lives before dying. We cannot lessen the badness of our deaths by coming to terms with them, or embracing them as they approach. Pretty much the only thing that we can to do to make dying less bad is to diminish the value of the salient alternative, living. When you come to know when you will die, arrange it so that someone would torture you if you were not to die at that time. That will make your death less bad for you. But it is not a consoling thought.

I did not put the book down any lighter of heart. But that is hardly a mark against Bradley. Sometimes the truth is bleak. I did put the book down impressed by the quality of the philosophy. Bradley does an excellent job at stating his claims precisely and defending them in original ways.

So Bradley’s argument for welfare hedonism does not just rely on our responses to tired old thought experiments involving experience machines. His central argument proceeds by elimination. He claims that the leading alternatives to welfare hedonism are versions of what he calls the “correspondence theory of well-being”—according to which whether we are well or badly off is determined, at least in part, by whether our psychological attitudes stand in an appropriate relation to the world (whether we have true beliefs, on one paradigmatic version, satisfied desires on another paradigmatic version). And he claims that all versions of the correspondence theory of well-being are vulnerable to a fatal objection. Applied to desire satisfactionism, the objection is this: if the theory is correct, then we cannot adequately account for the well-being of someone who desires to be badly off in all respects. If the theory is correct, then to desire to be badly off in all respects is to desire that, among other things, this very desire not be satisfied. But this is a very strange sort of desire. If it is satisfied, then it must not be satisfied. If it is not satisfied, then it must be satisfied. Its satisfaction is undefined. Is it possible to have such a desire? Either the desire satisfactionist says no, in which case she is committed to thinking that it is not possible to desire that you be badly off in all respects—a bad result. Or she says yes, in which case she is committed to thinking that sometimes levels of well-being are undefined—a bad result.

And Bradley’s argument against Epicurus does not just rely on his denying that the only thing that makes death bad is the badness of being dead. Bradley very carefully identifies a sense in which your death can be bad for you after you are dead, though you do not exist after you are dead.

Finally, Bradley’s argument for the deprivation account of the badness of death involves defending it against seeming counterexamples by claiming that events are good or bad for individuals, at times, only in relation to similarity orderings of possible worlds. In brief: suppose I get run over by the front wheels of a truck. My death is not neutral, good, or bad for me simpliciter. It is neutral for me relative to a similarity ordering according to which the closest possible world in which I do not get run over by the front wheels of the truck is one in which I get run over by the rear wheels of the truck, and killed. It is good for me relative to a similarity ordering according to which the closest possible world in which I do not get run over by the front wheels of the truck is one in which
I get run over by a tar-spreader following the truck, and killed in a tremendously gruesome and painful way. It is bad for me relative to a similarity ordering according to which the closest possible world in which I do not get run over by the front wheels of the truck is one in which I live on for fifty happy years. None of these similarity orderings is privileged.

Now, there certainly is room to quibble with Bradley at various points along the way. Regarding his argument against desire-satisfactionism: Is it so bad to say that it is impossible or incoherent for us to desire that we be worse off in all respects? Bradley says that we are familiar with desires like this, and that it is a major mark against a theory that it deem desires with which we are familiar impossible or incoherent. But it may be that the desires with which we are familiar are desires to be badly off in particular, specified ways (poor, hungry, meek, humiliated), not desires to be badly off in absolutely all ways. These desires to be badly off in particular, specified ways are quite possible and coherent, according to the desire-satisfactionist. Furthermore, if philosophy is to be at all interesting, we must allow that in some cases thoughts that appear coherent (thoughts like “I want to be badly off in all respects right now”) will turn out to be incoherent on reflection. And there is a ready explanation of why this is one of those cases—although to be badly off in all respects is to have universally dissatisfied desires, there is enough conceptual space between these notions for the possibility of the normative condition being satisfied and the descriptive condition not being satisfied to seem ‘open’ to us.

Regarding his argument for the deprivation account of the badness of death: Is there really no privileged similarity ordering? Suppose that an event is good for me now relative to ordering A, bad for me now relative to ordering B. Facts about how good or bad events are for me now are connected to facts about how I ought now to feel about them. Either Bradley says, implausibly, that there is no fact of the matter about how I ought now to feel about the event simpliciter, only facts like relative to ordering A I ought now to feel good about the event, while relative to ordering B I ought now to feel bad about the event. Or he says that there is a fact of the matter, in which case it would be helpful to have a way of identifying the similarity ordering such that the goodness or badness of the event for me now relative to that ordering determines how I ought now to feel about it. That is the interesting similarity ordering.

But it feels churlish to get too invested in the quibbling here. Readers are in a position to quibble only because Bradley has gone to such lengths to present his views in so clear and vigorous a way.

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There are two key philosophical issues to do with lying and deception. First, there is the conceptual question of what it is to lie and deceive. This question