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For Whom Is Death Bad? A Relational Subsequentism

Rodrigo Laera

rodrigolaera@gmail.com

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas

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For Whom Is Death Bad? A Relational Subsequentism

Abstract. If the person who dies ceases to exist, attributing to them a harm that postdates their death seems to require a harm without a subject. This article argues that the difficulty comes from misidentifying the bearer of death's harm. With respect to the deceased, it grants Epicurus that death is not bad for them. It argues further that the intuitions that motivate deprivationism track a real harm whose bearer is the survivor, considered in their relational dimension. Death forecloses the real relation the survivor had with the deceased and leaves only an intentional one. What is bad about this is the foreclosure of the relationship's valued possibilities, a loss made true by present traces of the bond and by the survivor's attachment to the relationship. Unlike deprivationism, the account requires no determinate fact about what would have happened. The result is a relational subsequentism, in which the harm begins with the death, lasts as long as the bond, and is suffered episodically. The account explains why death differs from other separations, why dying young seems worse than dying old, and why prenatal nonexistence is not bad in the same way. Its specificity depends on the Termination Thesis.

Keywords: death, harm, subsequentism, Problem of Predication, transformative experience, grief.

1. Introduction

If the person who dies ceases to exist, how can death be bad for them? The question becomes more pressing when one tries to date that badness. If death harms the person who dies after it has occurred, then the property of "being harmed" must be attributed to someone at a time when they no longer exist; the harm seems to be left without a subject (Fischer, 2021).

I contend that this difficulty stems from assuming that the bearer of death's harm is the person who dies. With respect to the deceased, I accept Epicurus's answer that death is not bad for them, which answers negatively the question of when death is bad for its victim. The article then asks where the harm our intuitions register actually falls. The debate on the time of death's harm seeks to accommodate five data. Death is often, though not always, bad; its badness can be dated; something makes it true; dying young seems worse than dying old; and death is worse than prenatal nonexistence. I argue that these data are best explained if the harm is borne by survivors, in their relational dimension. That death harms the bereaved is, of course, a familiar claim. My claim is that this relational harm is what the debate has been trying to describe, and that, once its structure is made explicit, it answers the debate's

questions about what is lost, what makes the loss true, when it occurs, and why its shape varies.

The proposal rests on four theses. First, death is asymmetric, unknowable for the one who dies and capable of transforming those who remain. Second, the harm of death is relational and structurally different from the harm of other separations, because it forecloses the real relation and leaves the relationship with only one active pole. Third, what is bad about death is the foreclosure of the relationship's valued possibilities, a loss whose truth requires no determinate fact about what would have happened. Fourth, the harm begins with the death, lasts as long as the bond persists, and is suffered episodically. The result is a relational subsequentism. Along with most secular authors, I assume the Termination Thesis, according to which those who die cease to exist (Luper, 2009; Rosenberg, 1983), and the specificity of relational harm depends on it.[1]

The available solutions retain the deceased as the bearer of harm and thereby incur costs that this proposal avoids (for an overview, see Johansson, 2013). Priorists locate the harm in the antemortem person, whose interests are thwarted (Feinberg, 1984; Pitcher, 1984). Concurrentists locate it at the time of death (Lamont, 1998). Subsequentists locate it after death, either by attributing to the deceased negative properties or a zero level of well-being (Bradley, 2009; Feit, 2016) or by grounding the harm in the events that make true a proposition comparing the actual course of events with a hypothetical one (Fischer, 2021; Purves, 2016). Atemporalists hold that the harm is real and has no date (Feldman, 1991, 1992), four-dimensionalists grant the dead a tenseless existence that lets them bear it (Silverstein, 1980), and others dissolve the problem by disambiguating the question (Timmerman, 2022a). Familiar objections hold that events that do not occur cannot be part of

[1] The label comes from Feldman (2000), who rejects the thesis.

any truthmaker, that it is unclear how someone who no longer exists can be worse off (Carlson et al., 2024), and that there is no time at which death could be bad for the person who dies (Ekendahl, 2022).

Section 2 identifies the bearer of the harm and distinguishes death from other separations. Section 3 asks what is lost and what makes the loss true. Section 4 asks how the loss is lived, why dying young seems worse, and how Lucretius's symmetry argument is answered. Section 5 dates the harm, and Section 6 discusses three objections.

2. Death, Transformation, and Relational Harm

2.1 The Bearer of Harm

Death is asymmetric. Paul (2014) calls transformative those experiences whose character can be known only by undergoing them, which makes them epistemically transformative, and that change the core preferences of the one who undergoes them, which makes them personally transformative. Under the Termination Thesis, no one is left on the other side of death to learn what it is like or to change, so for the one who dies death is only structurally unknowable. It is the survivors whom death can transform, as the death of a child shows, in a case that reverses Paul's own central example of having a child. For the deceased, the transformation is ontological. The subject ceases to exist, and what persists of their life is their causal legacy, understood as the set of modifications they introduced into the world while alive, and sometimes, for a while, their memory in some of the living. The causal legacy does not depend on anyone remembering it. It survives oblivion, though over time it becomes increasingly diffuse and difficult to attribute.

Fischer (2021, pp. 2006–2007) examines a related phenomenon, which he calls "anchoring," in which certain properties of an individual who no longer exists are anchored in properties of present individuals. That Aristotle is influential today amounts to there being

people today who read him and orient their thinking by him. Fischer denies that anchoring explains the harm of death, because that harm does not seem to consist in others' having certain properties in the present. I agree that anchoring does not explain a harm to the deceased, and I conclude that we should separate the ontological transformation of the deceased from the harm of death. My account is not anchoring in disguise. Anchoring reduces ascriptions to an absent individual, and I make none that need reducing. Nor does my account shift the deceased to the passive side of a real relation, a move Fischer dismisses, since the harm is that relation's ceasing to be real. That harm falls primarily on the relationship the living had with the deceased and, to a lesser extent, on the relationships among the living themselves, as when a mother's death reorganizes the ties among her children. The Problem of Predication does not arise for this harm, since it never requires attributing the property "being harmed" to someone who does not exist.[2]

To speak of harm to the relationship is shorthand for saying that the harm is suffered by the living person, considered in their relational dimension. While both people are alive, the relation is real, because both of its terms exist. After the death, the survivor remains directed at the deceased in memory, imagination, and lament. Since one of the relation's terms no longer exists, this is, strictly speaking, a relational property of the survivor whose object need not exist, what Brentano called something quasi-relational.[3] I call it an intentional relation for short. Fischer notes that "one might say" there are "real relations," in which both individuals exist now, and relations in which the target individual need not, as when Beth, writing about Aristotle, has a "trans-temporal intentional property" (2021, p. 2007). He invokes the

[2] Timmerman (2022a) argues that the question of when death is bad for the one who dies is underspecified and that each of its interpretations has a clear answer. My proposal takes the question about the deceased at face value and answers it with Epicurus.

[3] Brentano (1874/1995, p. 272, appendix of 1911) concluded that intentional reference, since its object need not exist, is only something "quasi-relational." Nothing in my argument depends on whether one calls it a relation; what matters is that its bearer exists.

distinction only to explain present ascriptions to the dead. Applied to harm, it locates the harm. The harming event is the passage from a real relation to an exclusively intentional one. What harms, when death harms, is the impossibility of the real relation, and the intentional relation that remains may even be a good.[4] A friend's moving away or a coma damages a relation that stays real while both terms exist. Such harm is relational without being the harm of death.

This requires saying what harm is. I assume only that close personal relationships are among the things that make a life go well. Most theories of well-being grant this. Objective-list and hybrid theories count such relationships as part of well-being, and desire-based theories count them when a person wants them, as people usually do. Hedonism values them only for the pleasure they bring. On that view the harm of death would reduce to hedonic states, the pain of grief and the pleasures forgone, and I set it aside. A relational good is a good of each related person taken singly. It consists in standing in a real relation, with its open possibilities, to which one is attached, whether or not one has ever reflected on that attachment. Reflection plays only a corrective role. It discounts attachments that rest on a false picture of the relationship, as when grief idealizes the dead (Section 4.1). Death harms the survivor by depriving them of such a good. The harm does not reduce to an experience. It is lived in grief, and it also extends beyond what is felt. Someone who has not yet heard of the death has already lost the relationship, just as Nagel's (1970) betrayed man is harmed by a betrayal he never discovers. The harm depends on the survivor's attachment, a standing disposition that persists when it is not felt and that ignorance of the death leaves intact. This separates the account from the platitude that bereavement hurts. An experiential account

[4] Drawing on psychological research on imaginal relationships, Norlock (2017) argues that relationships with the dead do not end with death and can be substantive, since they make it possible to forgive the dead, honor them, and fulfill their wishes. I agree that the relationship persists; I call it intentional to emphasize that it has a single active pole, and I grant that it may be valuable.

reduces the harm to the survivor's suffering. On mine, suffering is the way in which the harm is lived, and the harm itself is the foreclosure of a good that is lost whether or not the loss is felt. Which possibilities of a relationship count as good is for the theory of well-being to say. The condition of attachment is one that subjectivist and hybrid theories accept and a pure objective-list theory would have to add. Beyond it, the structural claims of this article about the bearer, the truthmakers, the time, and the shape of the harm are neutral among such theories; where the choice matters, I say so (Section 3.3).

This characterization converges with recent philosophy of grief. Cholbi (2022) takes the object of grief to be the loss of one's relationship with the deceased as it was, Ratcliffe (2022) describes the disturbance of the world of experience that the loss produces, and Fuchs (2018) analyzes the ambiguous presence of the deceased, absent and yet present in memory and in frustrated expectation. Research on continuing bonds shows that the bond with the deceased persists and can be healthy (Klass et al., 1996). The present article connects that literature with the metaphysical problem of the time of harm.

With respect to the person who dies, my account coincides with Epicurus's position. I also accept the timing argument. If an event is bad for a person, there must be some time at which it harms them, and there seems to be no time at which death can be bad for the one who dies, especially if the argument requires a time at which their well-being is lower than it would have been had they not died (Ekendahl, 2022; Johansson, 2013).[5] My departure from the Epicurean tradition concerns the scope of its "us." When Epicurus (1994, *Letter to Menoeceus* 124–125) asserts that death is nothing to us, he refers to each person's own death. It is Lucretius who extends the lesson to the deaths of others and reproaches the bereaved for

[5] Ekendahl argues that the standard objections to the argument fail to refute this formulation in its most demanding version.

their weeping.[6] Against that extension, I hold that the death of another *is* something to the living, because it harms the relationship they had with the deceased. The resulting position is Epicurean with respect to the dead and anti-Lucretian with respect to the living. Fischer asks when death is bad for the one who dies "in a circumstance in which it is bad" (2021, p. 2003). I answer with Epicurus that, for the one who dies, there is no such circumstance. This rejects the question's presupposition and changes the subject, deliberately; what remains of the question about the deceased is, at most, a conjecture of the living.

2.2 What Distinguishes Death from Other Separations

It may be objected that what has been described is an ordinary harm to the living, with nothing peculiar to death. When a friend moves permanently to another continent, the Thursday dinners end, shared plans are abandoned, and the one who stays behind can regret what they would have lived through together. If that sufficed for relational harm, death would be merely an extreme case of separation. I hold that death alters the relationship in a structurally different way, along three dimensions.

The first is modal. Moving away suppresses actual interaction and leaves its possibility intact. A letter or an unexpected reunion remains possible, even if none ever happens, and the relationship retains an open future shared by two. Death suppresses the interaction together with the very horizon within which it could take place. The second dimension concerns reciprocity. The friend who moved away is still an agent who can surprise, contradict, forgive, or ask forgiveness, and who can still belie the image retained by the one who stayed behind. The deceased becomes a closed totality, made of causal legacy and, sometimes, memory. The living can still actualize the relationship, through imagination or lament, and

[6] Lucretius (1992, *De rerum natura* 3.894–911) treats the weeping of the mourners beside the pyre as a mistake, since they lament what they believe the deceased loses and the deceased no longer loses anything. I accept his premise and reject his conclusion, since what grief lives through is a harm that belongs to the living.

the deceased can no longer respond. That is why death leaves a relationship's unsettled accounts open forever, the reconciliation that never came, the apology that went unspoken. Whatever the living do with them, they will do alone. The third dimension concerns the world. Moving away leaves standing a place, however distant, from which the friend organizes their life. Death annihilates the world in which the relationship made sense as a shared practice (Section 5), and the practices that sustained it, such as the Friday chess game or the birthday phone call, survive only as orphaned habits in the one who remains. The relational harm of death is, therefore, the harm proper to a relationship left with only one active pole.

An irreversible coma is a more demanding case. The patient is alive and no longer an agent, so the relationship loses reciprocity and world. If that were sufficient, what I have called the harm of death would, strictly speaking, be the harm of the foreclosure of agency. The coma differs in the modal dimension. As long as there is a living body, recovery remains possible in a natural sense, however improbable, and a diagnosis of irreversibility is a prognosis that admits a margin of error. Death, under the Termination Thesis, leaves reunion at most logically possible. Hope is the response of the living to that natural possibility, which is why withdrawing life support is experienced as so hard. It turns a still-open relationship into a foreclosed one.[7] Relational harm can therefore begin before death, as it does in advanced dementia; what death adds, and what makes its harm specific, is the foreclosure of the modal dimension.

Hope can also come apart from possibility. The Platonist lives as open a relationship that, under the Termination Thesis, is already foreclosed. For the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, who expects to join good men among the dead (Plato, 1997, *Phaedo* 63b–c), the relational

[7] This describes how families experience the decision and makes no claim about its permissibility. Brain death, which many legal systems already count as death, falls outside this discussion.

harm of death would come close to that of moving away, which is why its specificity depends on the Termination Thesis. Socrates himself calls this belief a risk worth running (Plato, 1997, *Phaedo* 114d), so even for the Platonist the other side of death remains unknowable.

3. Lost Possibilities

3.1 The Continuity Assumption

Any account of what death takes away presupposes a comparison, in which the life that took place is measured against another that did not. That other life is not an object in the world. No one lived it, it left no traces, and it exists only as the content of a counterfactual judgment. The difficulty differs from the one raised by any uncertain future. What a living person will do tomorrow is uncertain, and tomorrow will come and settle it. The future that death cancels is never settled. Deprivation theories nonetheless treat it as if it were a fact.

Fischer (2021) compares the events that actually occur after the death, {S}, with those of a single hypothetical course, {S*}, as if what would have happened were given. Other authors hold that death is bad because it cancels indefinitely extensive possible goods (Nagel, 1970) or because it frustrates the categorical desires that sustained a life (Williams, 1973). Regimented as comparative counterfactuals, these positions assume that there is a determinate fact about what would have happened. The assumption is more fragile than it appears, for two reasons. The first is metaphysical. The comparative proposition refers to the closest world in which the person does not die when they did, and nothing guarantees that there is only one such world. If there are many equally close worlds, in some of which the life goes better and in others worse, it is not true that the life would have been better; at most, it is

true that it might have been (Lewis, 1973).[8] Fischer does not consider such ties. A deprivationist may reply that in many deaths the closest worlds agree, or may aggregate across them. Aggregating values a range of prospects, which is the structure I defend, and such valuing needs a bearer for whom the range is closed. The second reason is epistemic. Even if there were a determinate fact, in the long run it would be inaccessible to us, since the possibilities of a life may turn out good or bad, and that inaccessibility makes our verdicts conjectures. What death takes away is therefore best described as a range of possibilities, some good and some bad. What is bad about death is the foreclosure of the good ones, even if we do not know which would have been realized; the foreclosure of possibilities as such is neutral.

The shared assumption is clearest in Pitcher (1984) and Feinberg (1984), who locate the harm in the antemortem person, whose desires or interests a later event frustrates. Pitcher develops the idea for posthumous harms, such as slander, which require no alternative future and call for separate discussion (Boonin, 2019). Feinberg extends it to the harm of death itself, which would consist in the frustration of the interests the person had at the time of death. This avoids attributing properties to someone who no longer exists, and it rests on a continuity assumption, namely that, had the person lived, they would have continued to act in keeping with those interests. I reject it for two reasons. Lives include transformative experiences, so that someone who dies at thirty might, at fifty, have wanted something else. And the long-term uncertainty just noted applies here too. Antemortem interests therefore offer an unreliable measure of what death took away.

Consistent with Section 2, the possibilities that matter belong to the relationships of the living. They include the deceased's own prospects insofar as the survivor cared about them,

[8] Stalnaker's (1968) semantics, which assumes a unique closest world, avoids this result only by stipulation. When ties are real, it must be supplemented with supervaluation, and the comparative claim then lacks a determinate truth value whenever some tied worlds are better and others are not.

since a parent's concern for a child's future is part of the relationship as the parent lived it. Grief that laments what the deceased has lost thus tracks a real harm and misplaces its bearer.

It follows that death is not always bad. When the possibilities of a relationship are predominantly bad, as they were for those whose lives Hitler's rule threatened, their foreclosure is good for those who survive. In others, such as certain cases of euthanasia, the balance is uncertain and a death may only *seem* good. Such a judgment has the form of what Kant calls an imperative of prudence, which can give only counsels, since it would require an omniscience about consequences that no one possesses (Kant, 1785/1996, 4:418). This caution concerns the value of a death for those related to it and leaves untouched the moral assessment of a person and of what they did. It also has practical import, since a conclusive judgment about the value of a death could be invoked to justify bringing it about, as in some defenses of capital punishment.

3.2 What Makes the Loss True

Carlson et al. (2024) object to Fischer that events that do not occur do not exist and therefore cannot be part of the truthmaker of any proposition, so the hypothetical course {S*} cannot ground anything. The objection seems to reach the thesis defended here as well, since the good possibilities of a relationship cut short by death did not, and will not, occur either. It does not, and the reason is instructive. Deprivationism needs the comparative fact that the deceased's life would have been better had they not died when they did, a fact hostage to the closest-world problem and to long-term uncertainty. The relational account needs two facts of a different kind. The first is the modal fact that certain possibilities were open to the relationship and are now closed. The second is the evaluative fact that the survivor, attached to the relationship, values the range of possibilities that has been closed. Neither requires knowing which possibility would have been realized.

Possibility claims are cheaper than "would" counterfactuals. That a father and his daughter might have shared many more Sunday lunches requires only that this was compatible with what they were and how things stood. It is true however the tie among the closest worlds is broken, since on Lewis's semantics a "might" counterfactual is true as soon as one closest world verifies it. Its truthmakers are present. They are the dispositions and habits the relationship left in the survivor, the causal legacy of the deceased, and the traces of a shared history in memory and in things. That the possibilities are now closed is made true by the present fact that the deceased no longer exists.[9] Everything that makes the loss true thus exists now. The proposal satisfies the criterion of Carlson et al. without any commitment regarding the existence of the past and is therefore compatible even with presentism. These authors suggest that Fischer replace the events of {S*} with the modal fact that those events would have occurred. My strategy is similar, with two differences. The modal facts I appeal to are "might" facts, and they are grounded in the dispositions of the survivors and the features of the bond, which makes "would" counterfactuals about the deceased's life unnecessary.

The evaluative fact explains why the loss is bad. The survivor's evaluation bears on the foreclosed possibilities as prospects, in the way one values an option one no longer has, whatever outcome would have obtained. This is why the indeterminacy that undermines deprivationism does not return. The account is comparative only in comparing two determinate states of the survivor, holding a valued range of possibilities and lacking it, and every closest world without the death agrees that the range is open, however those worlds diverge afterward. A deprivationist might try the same move on behalf of the deceased, claiming that death closes the deceased's valued options. The closure of an option is a harm

[9] "No longer exists" conjoins a past-tensed truth, that the deceased existed, with a negative existential. The presentist can ground the first in the same present traces; the second needs at most a totality fact.

only for someone for whom it is closed. Before the death the deceased's options are still open, and after it there is no one for whom they are closed, so there is no time at which a bearer and a present truthmaker coexist. The survivor is such a bearer. The cheaper modal resource is available to the relational account precisely because its bearer exists.

The present traces of the bond's history ground the fact that the possibilities existed, since what a relationship could become was inscribed in what it already was. The evaluation grounds the fact that their foreclosure is bad for the survivor, by tipping the balance of a range that included bad possibilities as well as good ones. Someone who has lost a loved one can imagine situations they would have liked to share with them, and the preponderance of desired situations over undesired ones inclines the judgment toward the loss of good possibilities. Imagination is the way in which the living access and evaluate the loss, whose truthmakers lie elsewhere. What remains a "seeming" is any judgment about which possibilities would have been realized or about the value of the death itself, wherever the balance is uncertain. Deprivationism posits events that did not occur. I posit a history that did occur and persists in present traces, and an evaluation the survivor now holds.

3.3 Harm and Lament

Death can foreclose a reciprocal relationship, with possibilities inscribed in a shared history; a relationship of influence, which loses its living source; or a purely imagined one, which loses the hope that what was imagined might become real. Someone who mourns a singer she never met illustrates the third. She loses no possibilities inscribed in a shared history, since there was none, and her imagination combines with hope to constitute the very object of her loss. The account holds even in cases of extreme evil. Hitler's death involved the last two losses for the mass of his followers and the first two for his inner circle. On a subjectivist filling of well-being, which I adopt because it makes the cost explicit, they thereby lost a

good, at least where their attachment survived an accurate picture of him; on a hybrid filling, a relationship organized around a genocidal project may not count as one. Either way, the claim concerns only what his followers lost. It implies nothing about Hitler's worth, and his death remains, on any defensible moral view, a good for the world.

These losses are descriptive. They register that the living lost something good for them and say nothing about what we ought to feel. That a death harms a relationship does not, therefore, imply that it merits lament. Timmerman (2022b) holds that death, although not a fitting object of fear, can be a fitting object of lament. I agree, and I stress the "can." Relational harm makes a death apt to be lamented, and only apt. We must therefore distinguish the level of harm, which is descriptive, from the level of the fittingness of lament, which is normative. Lament fits an affective bond, and its fittingness is therefore relative to the one who laments. Affective fittingness is not moral approval. A follower's grief at losing someone he loved is intelligible, and to lament Hitler as the bearer of a genocidal project is morally corrupt. Fittingness of either kind leaves the value of the death where moral assessment places it.

4. Grief and the Shape of Loss

4.1 Imagination and Grief

The appeal to imagination faces an objection from the very framework with which I began. For Paul (2014), we cannot imagine in advance what a transformative experience will be like or what value it will have for us, and many of the deepest possibilities of a bond, such as having a child together or growing old together, are transformative in that sense. How, then, could imagination give access to their loss?

I respond in two ways. First, what the survivor imagines is extrapolated from the history shared with the deceased, from their gestures, their conversations, and what they did together.

Such imagination reaches the possibilities that extend the bond; those that would have transformed it entirely remain on the side of uncertainty. Second, grief transforms the one who remains in Paul's personal sense, because it changes their preferences; it is an unchosen transformative experience (Markovic, 2024), and the one who laments imagines from the other side of that transformation.

The two responses operate at different levels. The preferences held before the death, anchored in the shared history, provide the material, that is, which possibilities the bond had. The evaluation of the transformed survivor is the best evidence of which of them were good for the survivor. When the two clash, the later evaluation prevails, for a reason beyond its being later. Before the loss, the survivor could not know what it is like to lack the relationship; grief has given them that knowledge, in Paul's epistemic sense, so the later evaluation is better informed about precisely the comparison at stake. Consider a daughter who, for years, endured Sunday lunches at which her father insisted on arguing about politics. She changed the subject, looked at her phone, counted the minutes until dessert. Now that her father is dead, she would give anything for one more of those arguments, and she catches herself rehearsing the replies she never gave him. Her earlier preferences tell her which possibility she lost; her present ones, that it was good for her.

This authority is defeasible. Grief idealizes, and an evaluation that would not survive accurate recollection, one that requires forgetting how the lunches actually went, does not show the loss to be bad for her. The evaluation that counts is the one the survivor would endorse on reflection, recalling accurately what they still remember and knowing what it is to lack the relationship. The attachment predates grief, and grief supplies the knowledge that gives the later judgment its authority as evidence of it. The daughter's evaluation passes this test, since she remembers the tedium and still values the arguments. "Good" here means good for the survivor; on the subjectivist filling adopted in Section 3.3, it is a fact about her

attachment and says nothing about the value of the possibility in itself, which is why relational harm retains its descriptive character. Nor is the evaluation self-validating. Grief responds to the loss of a relationship inscribed in a history, whatever the value of its possibilities, and the evaluation that grief informs then serves as evidence of which of those possibilities were good. There is, therefore, no circle.

4.2 Dying Young: Completed and Unfinished Relationships

Since Nagel (1970), deprivationism has rested on the almost unanimous intuition that dying young is worse than dying old, and it explains the difference by the amount of future lost by the one who dies (Bradley, 2009). The proposal I defend lacks that resource, because it denies that death harms the deceased and because the amount of relational harm depends on the bond and is indifferent to age. A ninety-five-year-old surrounded by children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren may, by dying, harm many more relationships than a solitary young person.

One might think that what distinguishes a young death is surprise. A young person who dies after a terminal illness has time to say goodbye, grief can begin before death, and yet the intuition persists. Nor is the question settled by measurement. Measured by the intensity of each mourner's pain, the young person's death seems worse; measured by aggregate harm, the old person's may equal or exceed it. Asking which death harms more presupposes a common scale we lack. I hold that the difference between the two deaths is one of shape.

The deprivationist explanation looks only at what the one who dies would have lived. It measures a death by the future it removes, and so it depends on a limit to life. Without one, the future a death removes would not shrink with age, and dying young and dying old would be on a par. The relational account looks at what was lived together and at what the living projected from it, and it measures a death by the shape of what it closes.

Relationships have an arc. That arc is the one the living projected for the relationship; it is inscribed in its history and in the dispositions it has formed, so that describing it introduces no norm about what relationships ought to be. A parent's relationship with a child passes through child-rearing, the child's adulthood, and often the reversal of care. The death of someone aged ninety-five forecloses a completed relationship, one that has, in essentials, run its course. The death of a young person forecloses an unfinished relationship, one still in the process of becoming what it was going to be. This distinction also presupposes a limit to life, for a different reason. A relationship can run its course only if the lives it joins have one, so if life had no limit every relationship would remain unfinished and every death would cut one short. The farewell in the terminal case closes the conversation and leaves the arc open. Where there is no projection, there is no arc to cut short. A father who abandoned his child and never looked back loses no arc with the child's death, and, having no attachment to the relationship, he loses nothing. The inversion of the generational order, which Herodotus puts in the mouth of Croesus (in peace sons bury their fathers; in war, fathers bury their sons), expresses the most general form of that projection (Herodotus, 1920, *Histories* 1.87). To each form of foreclosure there corresponds a form of grief. In the face of an old person's death, grief is above all memory of what the relationship was; in the face of a young person's death, it is above all imagination of what it was going to be.

McMahan's (2002) time-relative interest account offers an instructive comparison. On that account, death is worse for its victim the more strongly the victim would have been psychologically connected to the future it loses, so that the death of a newborn is less bad for the newborn than the death of an adolescent is for the adolescent. Whatever its merits on the victim's side, the account leaves to a separate theory a datum that any account of the badness of death should explain. Perinatal loss is among the most devastating losses there are. The relational account explains it. A newborn has almost no shared history, and the parents'

projection is already complete. The arc they projected is as long as a life, and the death forecloses it almost at its start. The possibilities are grounded less in a shared history than in the parents' dispositions.

4.3 Before Birth and After Death

The account also answers Lucretius's other argument. If the time before we existed was nothing to us, the time after we die should be nothing either (Lucretius, 1992, *De rerum natura* 3.972–977). Deprivationists usually reply by appealing to an asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future goods (Brueckner & Fischer, 1986), a reply that must then show that asymmetry to be rational. The relational account needs no such defense. With respect to the one who dies, I accept the symmetry, since both times are nothing to them. The asymmetry concerns the living. Relational harm is the foreclosure of a real relation, which requires that both terms exist, and before someone exists there is no such relation, whatever hopes others may have. The asymmetry lies in the presence of a relationship to lose. The account also makes a matching prediction. A prenatal death can harm the parents, because the relation already has two existing terms and their projection has begun to give it an arc. The nonexistence of a child never conceived harms no one in this way; would-be parents lose at most a hope, akin to the third form of loss distinguished in Section 3.3.

5. The Time of Harm and the End of a World

It remains to answer when death is bad, in the cases in which it is. For Fischer (2021), the harm occurs at all times in the interval between the actual death and the death that would have occurred in the hypothetical course. He dates it by the truthmaker of a comparative proposition whose truth is not confined to that interval. What gets dated is part of the ground of an undated comparison. If the timing argument asks for a time at which the deceased fares worse, this dating does not supply one, nor does Fischer claim it does. On my proposal, three

things must be distinguished. The harming event is the foreclosure of the real relation, and it coincides with the death. The harm is the survivor's being deprived of the relational good; it begins with the death and lasts as long as the survivor's attachment to the relationship persists. Ignorance of the death does not interrupt that attachment, and oblivion ends it, so the harm of a given death ends, at the latest, with the last person who remembers. The suffering of the harm occurs when the living miss the deceased, and it is episodic. The answer to the question "when?" is the second. The view is thus subsequentist about the harm, with an onset that coincides with the death, as the harm of any event begins when the event occurs.

The loss transforms the survivor lastingly. Its suffering is episodic, and this explains why someone who has lost a loved one can be happy again.[10] Fischer (2021, p. 2014) rejects the episodic views he attributes to Purves, Bradley, and Feit because they offer a "(potentially) stroboscopic" picture of the badness of death, which could begin on Monday, stop from Tuesday to Saturday, and return on Sunday. With respect to the deceased, the dispute lapses, since for them there is no harm at all. With respect to the survivor, my account is holistic in his sense, and the badness is steady. The loss holds continuously, and only its suffering comes and goes, in the waves that are the natural form of grief. The same distinction answers Moller (2007), who argues that our resilience after bereavement may give us reason for regret, since it may reveal how little we matter to those who love us. Resilience is no evidence that the loss was small. What diminishes is the frequency with which a persisting loss is suffered. The unease that resilience provokes is the sense that a loss still in place has stopped being felt, and that unease is itself evidence that the loss persists.

The consequence is harsh. The death of someone whom no one remembers harms nothing, and most of the dead, after a certain time, are in that situation. Rival views avoid the

[10] Marušić (2018) asks why grief diminishes over time if the reason that motivates it, the death of the loved one, does not go away, and concludes that the problem admits of no complete solution. The distinction between the loss and its suffering offers a partial answer. The reason persists because the loss persists.

consequence only by keeping the dead as bearers of harm, at the price of the Problem of Predication. The most intuitive objection arises in the face of the solitary death, which many regard as the most tragic death of all. I propose to relocate that intuition. While alive, even the most solitary person inhabited a surrounding world, an environment of things, tasks, and places organized around their activity.[11] With their death that world comes to an end, because there is no longer an agent for it to surround. The house, the tools, and the half-sorted papers remain and no longer form a world. That end belongs to the ontological transformation described in Section 2.1, so the solitary death transforms something and harms nothing. What our intuition registers as tragic is the solitude of the life that such a death lays bare. A man found dead in his apartment weeks after his death, because no one noticed his absence, strikes us as tragic, and someone who lived alone by choice and dies serenely at ninety-five does not. Even the first tragedy only *seems* to be one, because from the outside we do not know whether the solitude was suffered or chosen. The judgment is, as in Section 3.1, a counsel.

6. Three Objections

The first objection is prudential. If death is not bad for the one who dies, what makes it rational for someone to prefer not to die tomorrow, or to undergo risky surgery to prolong their life? Someone who is alive has present desires and projects, and some of them, the categorical desires mentioned in Section 3.1, are not conditional on remaining alive. They are reasons to remain alive. That their death will not harm them afterward does not cancel those reasons, just as it is not irrational to work toward an outcome one will not live to see. This does not reintroduce the model rejected in Section 3.1, which attributes a harm to the antemortem person and measures it by the interests they had at death. The present claim

[11] I take the notion from Heidegger, for whom the surrounding world (*Umwelt*) is the nexus of equipment and references articulated through someone's everyday concern (Heidegger, 1927/1962, §§15–18). I do not take on his existential analytic.

attributes no harm and measures nothing. It concerns practical reasons, which need not be grounded in the agent's welfare. An agent who loves others has a further reason, since their death will harm those others.[12]

The second objection is moral. If the only harm of a death is relational, painlessly killing someone who leaves no one to miss them would harm no one. This article offers a theory of the harm of death, and the wrongness of killing calls for a separate theory, for which resources are available. Killing is an act performed on a living person and against the reasons they have to go on living. It wrongs them while their will to live, a standing disposition present even in sleep, is still a fact. One can wrong someone without harming them, as when their consent is violated without consequences for their well-being. The dominant theories ground the wrongness of killing, wholly or in part, in what death takes from the victim (Marquis, 1989; McMahan, 2002), and the critique of the continuity assumption in Section 3.1 suggests that this measure is less firm than it appears. Someone who dies without ties is unharmed by their death and gravely wronged by whoever kills them.

The third objection points out that avoiding the Problem of Predication does not require denying that the deceased is harmed. Feldman's (1991, 1992) atemporalism holds that death is bad for the one who dies because it is true, timelessly, that their life is worse than it would have been, and a pluralist position could combine this view with relational harm. I do not adopt such a position, for three reasons. First, atemporalism meets the timing argument, which I accepted with respect to the deceased, only by exempting this harm from the dating every other harm admits. Second, the comparative proposition it declares true presupposes a determinate hypothetical course. If some equally close worlds are better and others are not,

[12] This answer does not require that death be a fitting object of fear. It is compatible with Bradley's (2015) argument that existential terror at one's own future nonexistence is irrational and with Timmerman's (2022b) claim that death does not merit fear, since preferring not to die can be rational even if fearing death is not. Nor does the account deny that the dying suffer; their distress at leaving others is a harm they bear while alive.

the proposition is false and only the corresponding "might" claim is true, and even with a single course it is at best a counsel. Third, it is explanatorily redundant. Every datum that motivated attributing the harm to the deceased is explained, in relocated form, by relational harm together with the prudential reasons just discussed, and the unmourned death is relocated in Section 5. The pluralist position is coherent, and nothing in the relational account excludes it. Its atemporal component adds a thesis that is at best unverifiable and at worst false, and that explains nothing the proposal leaves unexplained.

7. Conclusion

Under the Termination Thesis, Epicurus is right that death is never bad for the one who dies, since there is no longer anyone whom it could harm. His answer is correct and incomplete. The harm that our intuitions about death register falls on the survivor, whose real relation with the deceased becomes an exclusively intentional one. Located there, the harm has a bearer who exists, truthmakers that exist now, a date, and a shape, and it accounts for the five data with which I began without a determinate fact about what would have happened.

The proposal has costs that I have chosen to accept. Its specificity depends on the Termination Thesis. It implies that the death of someone whom no one remembers harms no one, and, on a subjectivist filling, that Hitler's followers suffered real losses with his death, losses that do nothing to soften the moral judgment of him. It leaves judgments about the value of a death, wherever the balance is uncertain, in the realm of counsel. And it needs a separate theory of the wrongness of killing, which it can ground in the violation of the victim's agency.

Fischer opens his article with a line Harold Pinter addressed to his wife, "I will miss you so much when I'm dead" (2021, p. 2003). On the view I have defended, the line is literally false, since once dead, Pinter would miss no one. The verb is well chosen and belongs on the

other side. Montaigne uses it from there, after the death of La Boétie. He writes that he had grown so accustomed to being his double in all things "that methinks I am no more than half of myself," and that "there is no action or imagination of mine wherein I do not miss him" (Montaigne, 1580/1877, Vol. 1, Book I, Chapter 27, pp. 222–240). Pinter imagines the dead man missing; Montaigne describes the living man split in two. That is where death harms, in the one who remains and in the half of the self that lived in the relationship.

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