Death and Decline Aaron Thieme

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**Abstract**: In this paper I investigate backward looking accounts of death’s badness. I begin by reviewing deprivationism—the standard, forward looking account of death’s badness. On deprivationism, death is bad for its victim when it deprives them of a good future. This account famously faces two problems, Lucretius symmetry problem and the preemption problem. This motivates turning to backward looking accounts of death’s badness on which death is bad for its victim (in a respect) when it involves a decline from a good life. I distinguish three different backward looking accounts of death’s badness, and I argue for the attractiveness of one in particular. I conclude by considering how the backward looking consideration of decline should factor into our overall account of death’s badness.

Suppose that Frances’s life is going very well: she is happy, enjoys fulfilling relationships, and successfully pursues meaningful projects. Unfortunately, she dies in a car crash at fifty years of age. Frances’s death seems bad for her. It is not just the process of dying painfully that seems bad. Rather, the very cessation of her existence seems bad, and it appears to be bad for *her*, not only for her family and friends. But what, if anything, makes Frances’s death bad for her?

Frances’s death is not intrinsically bad for her. There is no badness to be found in the intrinsic features of Frances’s postmortem nonexistence. Rather, if we are to vindicate our sense that Frances’s death is bad, we must look to her death’s extrinsic and relational properties. In particular, one might look toward Frances’s counterfactual future and observe that if Frances had not died, then she would have continued to enjoy a good life. One might then conclude that Frances death is bad because, and to the extent that, it deprives her of a good future. This kind of forward looking account of death’s badness is widely accepted by those who think death may be bad for its victims.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Deprivationism*: a person’s death at *t* is bad (good) for them iff they would have been on balance better (worse) off had they not died at *t*.

However, this counterfactual forward looking account faces two serious problems. First, a person’s prenatal nonexistence may deprive them of years of good life, much as Frances’s postmortem nonexistence deprives her of years of good life. Prenatal nonexistence is thus arguably deprivationally on a par with postmortem nonexistence. But intuitively there is an evaluative contrast between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. Only the latter is often bad and regrettable. This is Lucretius’s symmetry problem.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Second, consider a variation on Frances’s death above: had she not died in the car collision, suppose she would have died weeks later of a brain aneurysm. In this case, Frances’s death by car collision preempts a later death by brain aneurysm. Intuitively, preemption makes no difference to our evaluation of Frances’s death: it seems just as tragic as before. But, according to deprivationism, preemption makes a massive difference, the difference between losing out on a couple weeks of life and losing out on decades of good life. Deprivationism implausibly suggests, then, that Frances’s preempted death is much less bad. This is the problem of preempted deaths.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I do not intend to add yet another epicycle to the literature on whether deprivationism can satisfactorily respond to these two problems.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rather, I will investigate a class of accounts of death’s badness—backward lookingaccounts—that solve these problems. The basic motivating thought behind backward looking accounts is that it matters where one starts. Frances enjoys a good life, one filled with many intrinsic goods. Her death thus involves a decline from these goods to the nothingness of nonexistence. On backward looking accounts, this decline is what makes Frances’s death bad for her. This is the core thought shared by all backward looking accounts that I discuss.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*The core thought*: A person’s death is bad for them (in one respect) when it involves a decline from a life containing intrinsic goods.

Let us call an account of death’s badness a *purely* backward looking account just in case it takes decline to be the one and only respect in which death can be bad for its victims. We will soon see that there are a variety of purely backward looking accounts.

My aim in this paper is to develop the core thought and elucidate the role that it plays in our evaluations of death. My view is that this backward looking consideration has an important and underappreciated role to play in our account of the badness of death. Even at this inchoate stage of development, we can see that purely backward looking accounts solve the symmetry and preemption problems facing deprivationism. These solutions follow from accepting the core thought. First, the core thought explains why postmortem nonexistence, but not prenatal nonexistence, is often bad. Only the former can possibly be a decline from a good life.[[6]](#footnote-6) Second, since the core thought is blind to what would or could have happened but for a person’s death, it sidesteps the problem of preemption. Whether a death preempts a later death makes no difference to whether it is a decline.

Given their natural motivation, and that they solve the symmetry and preemption problems, we should take backward looking accounts seriously. To precisify them, we will rely on the notion of a person’s *life sequence*. A person’s life sequence involves all of the states of affairs relevant to judging how they fare over the course of their life. More formally, we assume that, for any given person, there is a finite sequence, *S* = *s*1, *s*2, …, *sn*, of states of affairs that ends with the state *sn* of the person’s being dead and that satisfies two conditions:

*Completeness*: *S* contains all and only the states relevant to evaluating how well things are going for the person with respect to intrinsic value.

*Order*: If two states, *si* and *sj*, are relevant in the sense specified above and *si* obtains before *sj*, then *si* appears before *sj* in the sequence S (i.e., *i* < *j*).

We need life sequences to satisfy Completeness because we will use them to apply backward looking accounts of death’s value. Their evaluation of death may easily be mistaken if they rest on an incomplete story of how things go with respect to intrinsic value. Similarly, we need life sequences to satisfy Order because temporal order is evaluatively significant on backward looking accounts. As a heuristic for generating your own life sequence, imagine looking back on your life and telling a complete story of how things went. Imagine that your story does not leave out any important details for saying how well you fare intrinsically (satisfying Completeness) and that you describe the events in order (satisfying Order).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Backward looking accounts say that a person’s death is bad in a respect when it is a decline from some set of preceding states in their life sequence. These antecedent states constitute what we may call the comparison class for death.[[8]](#footnote-8) We can distinguish between various backward looking accounts according to how they fix this comparison class. At the extremes, we may either include every state, or we may exclude every state but the most recent.

*Impartial Inclusivism*: Given a person’s life sequence, *S* = *s*1, *s*2, …, *sn*, the value (with respect to decline) of *sn* equals the sum of the differences between the intrinsic value of *sn* and each preceding state *si* (where 1 *i* < *n*).

*Exclusivism*: Given a person’s life sequence, *S* = *s*1, *s*2, …, *sn*, the value (with respect to decline) of *sn* equals the difference between the intrinsic value of *sn* and *sn-1*.

In defense of impartial inclusivism, one might observe that death is the end not of just one moment but of one’s life as a whole. To appreciate death’s decline, we must have a complete sense of the life that it ends. Only once we have appreciated the total amount of good in one’s life can we appreciate the extent to which death is a decline. This line of thought provides at least an initial motivation for accepting impartial inclusivism.

Given a life that is on balance constantly good, impartial inclusivism says that a later death is always worse than an earlier death. In this respect, impartial inclusivism is just the reverse of deprivationism which says that earlier deaths are always worse (under the same assumption). But impartial inclusivism fails to account for the special significance of a decline’s location: it can clearly be worse to die at a peak than at a later valley. For example, suppose Gerald’s life peaks in middle age and declines in old age to be barely worth living in his last decade. Holding fixed the shape of Gerald’s life, impartial inclusivism implies that death in old age is worse than death in middle age. But intuitively it would be worse for Gerald to die in middle age when his life is going best. Impartial inclusivism is therefore blind to the special significance of decline’s location. It can be worse to die at a peak than at a later valley.

Exclusivism in contrast vindicates the thought that dying at a peak is worse. It goes too far, however, in being sensitive to the location of death’s decline. Because exclusivism’s comparison class is the singleton set of the most recent state before death, its evaluation of death is extremely fragile. For example, suppose that before Frances dies in the car accident, she experiences a great deal of pain. Since this state is on balance intrinsically bad, death is a local incline. According to exclusivists, then, Frances’s death is good for her. But this is unacceptable. We cannot make a person’s death good for them by momentarily torturing them before their death.

For a more plausible backward looking account, we must find a middle way between the fanatical impartiality of impartial inclusivism and the myopia of exclusivism. We must vindicate the significance of a decline’s location without offering objectionably fragile evaluations of death. The most natural middle way *partially* counts every preceding state in death’s comparison class.

*Partial Inclusivism*: Given a person’s life sequence, *S* = *s*1, *s*2, …, *sn*, the value (with respect to decline) of *sn* equals the sum of the *weighted* differences between the intrinsic value of *sn* and each preceding state s*i* (where< *n*).

The hope for partial inclusivism is that, by weighting more recent states more heavily, our evaluations of a death’s decline can be sensitive, but not too sensitive, to its location. To make good on this promise, we must motivate and develop a weight.

One option is to weigh more recent states more heavily just because they are more recent. But it is hard to see why recency itself should matter. Returning to the initial motivation for inclusivism, we include distant states in death’s comparison class because they are parts of the life from which death is a decline. It should not matter in itself whether they are more recent or more distant parts of this life.

It will be instructive to consider how the deprivationist responds to a similar issue. Opposite of impartial inclusivism, recall, deprivationism judges earlier deaths worse when life is constantly on balance good. But this is implausible. The most plausible form of deprivationism is partial, weighing some deprivations more heavily than others. But, it is not plausible that more distant deprivations are less grave merely because they are more distant in time. Rather, on the most attractive version of partial deprivationism, for a person at time x, the deprivation of some good at time y is less grave for the person at x when they are less prudentially connected to the person at time y who would have received the good.[[9]](#footnote-9) Dying in infancy is less bad for Gerald the infant because many of the goods of which death deprives Gerald the infant would have been enjoyed by later person stages who are only weakly psychologically connected to Gerald the infant. These later person stages share essentially no memories, beliefs, values, or plans with Gerald the infant. In contrast, Gerald in middle age is much more psychologically connected to his later selves, sharing many memories, beliefs, values, plans, and so on with them. As a result, death’s deprivation of benefits to them makes his death in middle age much worse for him.

The background assumption here is that psychological connectedness matters.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is of course controversial, but taking it on provides the most natural explanation of our sense that death is a graver deprivation for Gerald in middle age than Gerald in infancy. Similarly, if we think that psychologically connectedness is what matters, then we can naturally explain why some parts of a person’s life should be weighed more heavily in evaluating their death. In evaluating the gravity of death’s decline for a person at the end of their life, we should care about how well their person stages fared in the past, adjusting for their degree of psychological connectedness with them. For example, if Gerald dies in old age, then it matters quite a lot that he fared so well in middle age, as long as he retains a high degree of psychological connectedness with his middle-aged self. Accordingly, the difference between the nothingness of death and the high amount of well-being in Gerald’s middle age should be weighted heavily in determining the overall gravity of death’s decline for Gerald.

We can now see what goes wrong in the initial motivation for impartial inclusivism. For evaluating the gravity of death’s decline, what matters is life’s total value, looking back from the point of view of the final person stage. The total value of a life for its final person stage cannot be a simple aggregation of the value of its parts for their respective person stages. Rather, the value of each part of a life for its person stage contributes to the value of life on the whole for its final person stage only to the degree that the final person stage is psychologically connected to the earlier person stage. If we accept that psychological connectedness is what matters and that the gravity of death’s decline depends on the value of life on the whole, we are led to partial inclusivism.

All other things being equal, then, death’s decline is graver the more psychologically connected one is to their prior selves. Partial inclusivism should weight differences between death and a prior state *si* more heavily when the person stage who dies is more strongly connected to the person stage in *si*. Partial inclusivism can then vindicate our sense that dying at a peak is especially terrible. Gerald’s death, for instance, is especially terrible because he is (let us suppose) psychologically well-connected to his person stages who fared so well in his middle age. A later death is less bad for Gerald when his psychological connections to his person stages at life’s peak have weakened and when his more recent person stages, to whom he is tightly connected, have fared less well.

Moreover, like impartial inclusivism, partial inclusivism avoids the fragility of exclusivist evaluations of death. If Frances has had a good life with some degree of prudential unity, then death is a terrible decline for her even when her last moments are bad. For Frances’s death to be an incline on partial inclusivism, the final parts of her life would have to be bad, and she would have to lose psychological connections to her prior, well-faring selves. Suppose for instance that Frances’s last decade involves significant suffering as she slowly succumbs to dementia. In this case, it looks reasonable to judge Frances’s death an incline, an improvement, for Frances. In the deterioration of her psychological connections to her well-faring selves, Frances would have undergone a series of small deaths. By the end, what seems most significant is that death ends her suffering.

I have argued that backward looking accounts of death have much to offer. They can explain why postmortem nonexistence, but not prenatal nonexistence, is bad and why preempted deaths are bad. In developing these accounts, we must precisify what makes for worse declines, and towards this end I have defended partial inclusivism, which inherits the virtues of impartial inclusivism and exclusivism while avoiding their vices.

However, one might resist the thought that purely backward looking accounts give the full story of death’s badness. One might instead conclude that death’s badness is a function of both its decline and its deprivation.[[11]](#footnote-11) I am open to such a conclusion, but before reaching it, we should take backward looking accounts as far as they can go on their own terms. In that spirit, I will introduce and respond to an objection to purely backward looking accounts of death’s badness. I will conclude by sketching and briefly assessing a mixed account that includes backward and forward looking considerations.

Suppose Frank’s life has not been worth living: he has a disease that causes him agony and prevents him from maintaining meaningful relationships and pursuing fulfilling projects. But everything seems about to change: he has just learned of a new drug that will cure his disease. As he drives to the hospital to receive the miracle drug that would make the last few decades of his life well worth living, he dies in a car collision. On a purely backward looking account, Frank’s death is good for him since it ends his suffering. It may be natural to think, however, that death is bad for Frank because it deprives him of a very good future. This may lead us to conclude that deprivation has an important part to play in the overall story about the badness of death.

But if we take purely backward looking accounts seriously, we may wish to avoid this conclusion. Towards that end, recall our judgments about preempted deaths. We do not judge Frances’s preempted death any less bad because she would have died shortly later. The core thought behind backward looking accounts vindicates this judgment: Frances’s death is a decline and thus bad for her, regardless of whether she would have died later. If we find this judgment about Frances’s preempted death to be stable, we may appeal to it to justify revising our judgments about Frank’s death. If we judge declines no better when they preempt later declines, we should judge inclines no worse when they preempt later inclines. In particular, Frank’s death is an incline that preempts a later incline. Thus, even though Frank’s death deprives him of an incredible improvement, we may arguably refrain from judging it bad on that account. To be good, it is enough that it is an improvement. It is of course not the best possible improvement available for Frank. But to be good does not require being the best.

In this way, purely backward looking accounts exemplify an admirable consistency and elegance. By expressing the core thought that declines are bad, they avoid the problems of asymmetry and preemption while explaining our intuitions about a number of cases. In some cases, such as Frank’s unfortunate death above, they require revision to our intuitions. But such revisions can be motivated, and we may come to see them as reasonable.

This being said in favor of purely backward looking accounts, many may find the purist revisions too radical to accept; many may remain committed to the thought that Frank’s death is all things considered bad for him. Those who wish to retain this judgment may accept a mixed account that includes both backward and forward looking considerations.

*Backward looking consideration*: Death is bad for its victim in one respect when it involves decline.

*Forward looking consideration*: Death is bad for its victim in one respect when it deprives them of future intrinsic goods.

Frank’s death involves only a modest incline while being a severe deprivation. A mixed account is thus able to explain our intuition that all things considered Frank’s death is bad for him. By including a backward looking consideration, the mixed account is also able to avoid the problem of preemption. While Frances’s death that preempts a later death does not deprive her of much, it does end a good life, and so it is all things considered bad for her.

While the mixed account inherits many advantages from its backward looking element, it does not inherit the advantage of straightforwardly solving Lucretius’s symmetry problem. The mixed account establishes an asymmetry between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence *with respect to decline*. But so far it remains open whether prenatal nonexistence is on a par with postmortem nonexistence *with respect to deprivation*. If both periods of nonexistence can be symmetrically deprivational, then both periods of nonexistence may be all things considered bad, and so there remains a puzzle about why we only consider postmortem nonexistence to be bad.[[12]](#footnote-12) So adopting the mixed account does not release deprivationists from their duty to establish an asymmetry in deprivation between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. That being said, the mixed account does not exacerbate the problem of explaining why only postmortem nonexistence may be deprivationally bad. Therefore, on balance deprivationists stand only to gain by accepting the mixed account.

This conclusion does not settle whether the mixed account is overall preferable to purely backward looking accounts of death’s badness. But, in any event, I hope to have shown that there is a powerful case for thinking that death is bad (in one respect) when it involves decline. In my view decline has a significant role to play in our account of death’s badness.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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1. For some of the classic works defending deprivationism, see Thomas Nagel, “Death,” *Noûs* *4*, no. 1 (1970): 73–80; Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, “Why is Death Bad?” *Philosophical Studies* *50*, no. 2 (1986): 213–223; Fred Feldman, “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death,” *The Philosophical Review 100*, no. 2 (1991) 205–227; Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Epicureans, those who deny that death is bad, may argue instead for a different forward looking account, such as a causal account on which a person’s death is not bad since it does not cause them to suffer. For instance, see Aaron Smuts, “Less Good But Not Bad: In Defense of Epicureanism About Death,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 93* (2012): 202. Alternatively, Epicureans might deny that there is any interesting account of extrinsic value at all, forward looking or not. On this strategy, for the regulation of our actions and attitudes, all that matters is intrinsic value. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Lucretius’s exposition, see Lucretius. *On the Nature of the Universe*, translated by R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951): 125. For some attempts to resolve the symmetry problem, see Christopher Belshaw, “Asymmetry and Non-Existence,” *Philosophical Studies 70*, no. 1 (1993): 103–116; Frederik Kaufman, “Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence,” *American Philosophical* *Quarterly 36*, no. 1 (1999): 1–19; Jon Robson, “A-time to die: A growing block account of the evil of death,” *Philosophia* *42* (2014): 911–925; Natalja Deng, “How A-theoretic deprivationists should respond to Lucretius,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* *1*, no. 3 (2015): 417–432; Travis Timmerman, “Avoiding the Asymmetry Problem,” *Ratio* *XXXI* (2018): 88–102. For objections to proposed solutions, see Jens Johansson, “Past and Future Nonexistence,” *The Journal of Ethics 17*, no. 1/2 (2013): 51–64, and “The Lucretian Puzzle and the Nature of Time,” *The Journal of Ethics 21* no. 3 (2017): 239–250. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For proposed solutions to the preemption problem, see Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 52–60; Justin Klocksiem, “A defense of the counterfactual comparative account of harm,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* *49*, no. 4 (2012): 285–300. For objections to the proposed solutions, see Jens Johansson and Olle Risberg, “The Preemption Problem,” *Philosophical Studies 176* (2019): 351–365. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are of course other problems facing those who deny Epicureanism. For instance, there is also the timing problem: if death is bad for the one who dies, *when* is it bad for them? These problems that face anti-Epicureans, however, will trouble both forward and backward looking accounts of death’s badness alike. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Another backward looking consideration—distinct from the one I investigate here—has recently been proposed by Frances Kamm. Death limits how much good *will have been* contained in one’s life, and when one’s life has been less good, one has a greater *need* for more good life. In general, one might think, death is worse (in one respect) when one’s life has contained less good. Kamm calls this view *Willhavehadism* or *Needism*—see F. M. Kamm, *All Over* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 9. Since a person’s death involves less decline when their life contains less good, the backward looking consideration of need pulls in the opposite direction from the backward looking consideration of decline. My own view—which I can state but not defend here—is that need should not factor into our account of whether a person’s death is bad for them. This being said, need may yet have a role to play in our thinking about distributive justice. It may be that we have moral reason to give priority to the worse off. The literature on prioritarianism is substantial and complex, but for a clear entry point, see Derek Parfit, “Equality and Priority,” *Ratio X*, no. 3 (1997): 202–221. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kamm identifies decline as one of the factors that may explain our thinking about why death is bad and worse than prenatal nonexistence. Kamm also points to other factors, including that death annihilates its victims and shows them to be vulnerable. In earlier work, Kamm concluded that deprivation plays a greater role in accounting for death’s badness than these factors. (See F.M. Kamm, *Morality, Mortality Volume I: Death and Whom to Save From It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 48.) But more recently, Kamm seems to treat (at least some) non-deprivational factors as on a par with deprivation. See F. M. Kamm, *Almost Over*, 1–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the sake of simplicity, in the cases I discuss, I assume that each person’s life sequence begins with the end of their prenatal nonexistence and ends with the beginning of their postmortem nonexistence. This assumption rules out the occurrence of prenatal or postmortem events which are intrinsically good or bad. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On my preferred framing, backward looking accounts compare the state of being dead to prior states of life. Similarly, deprivationism can be framed as an account that compares the state of being dead to future, counterfactual states of life. However, Epicureans sometimes object to such comparisons. According to the objection, the state of a subject being dead cannot be assigned an intrinsic value—not even a neutral or zero value—for the dead. In response to this objection, some deprivationists have framed their views so as not to require the allegedly illicit comparison. (For instance, see Fred Feldman, “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death,” *The Philosophical Review 100*, no. 2 (1991): 219–220.) They say that dying at time t is bad for a person just in case their actual life is worse than the life they would have led had they not died at t. This does not compare a person’s being alive to their nonexistence but rather a person’s actual life to their counterfactual life. If one wants their backward looking account to avoid comparing life with nonexistence, they may reframe it as well: A person’s death is bad (in one respect) for them to the extent that their life contains intrinsic goods. As I see it, however, this is only a matter of framing insofar as it does not affect what verdicts the accounts deliver. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 169–174. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the locus classicus of this view, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For instance, Michael Rabenberg defends an account of harm in general which combines forward and backward looking elements. See Michael Rabenberg, “Harm,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* *8*, no. 3 (2015): 1–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As a result, to respond to Lucretius’s symmetry problem, it is not enough to argue that death is worse in some respects than prenatal nonexistence. This represents a serious challenge to Kamm’s suggested solution to Lucretius’s symmetry problem. See Kamm, *All Over*, 20–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I am grateful to Christian Coons, Molly Gardner, Alex Worsnip, Matt Wyss, and an anonymous referee for their comments on this paper and its ancestors. I am also grateful to Charlene Elsby and Abraham Schwab who, through many conversations several years ago, helped me to first think about the philosophy of death. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)