

# A dilemma for Epicureanism

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

**Keywords** Epicureanism · Deprivationism · Death · Harm · Well-being · Verbal dispute

Anyone who has been born must wish to remain in life so long as the caresses of pleasure hold him there. [Lucretius (2001/50 B.C.E.: Book V, lines 177–178)].

Lucretius (ancient Epicurean)

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Any argument that implies that it is irrational to avoid dying is clearly wrong...it is perfectly rational to want more good rather than less. When death would give us less, it is perfectly rational to want more. [Smuts (2012: 216)].  
Aaron Smuts (contemporary Epicurean)

## 1 Introduction

I'll understand Epicureanism as the view that death cannot be bad for the person who dies. Epicureans argue that death cannot harm a person when she is alive (as death has not yet happened) nor when she is dead (as one does not exist by the time death comes).<sup>1</sup> So, the Epicurean reasons, if there is no time at which death is bad for a person, it follows that death is not bad for a person. Epicureanism's main contender is deprivationism. Deprivationists hold that death can be bad for the person who dies. Current forms hold that death is bad for one to the extent that it deprives that person of good life she would have had were her actual death not to occur. So, according to deprivationism, the more good (and less evil) of which death deprives its victim, the worse death is for that person.

At first glance, deprivationism and Epicureanism not only appear to be substantively different, but simple contraries of each other. To be sure, some versions of Epicureanism are incompatible with some versions of deprivationism. However, I will argue that these forms of Epicureanism are demonstrably false. I will also argue that deprivationism and viable versions of Epicureanism are involved in a merely verbal dispute with respect to the central issues over which they purportedly disagree. This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I defend what I refer to as the *Essential Desideratum* (ED), which any viable account of death must be able to accommodate. In the third section, I briefly review how most contemporary Epicureans and deprivationists accommodate ED. In the fourth section, I review what it means for a dispute to be merely verbal. After doing so, I argue that Epicurean views developed to accommodate ED are involved in a merely verbal dispute with standard forms of deprivationism.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This view and argument originates with Epicurus and was rigorously defended by Lucretius in his epic poem *De Rerum Natura*. I take all contemporary Epicureans to endorse this argument in one form or another.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, this phrasing should be understood as the equivalent of "Deprivationism is involved in a merely verbal dispute with Epicurean views developed to accommodate such claims." In arguing that one view is involved in a merely verbal dispute with another view, I am not claiming that one view is getting something correct in some way that the other view is not. Rather, I am merely claiming that proponents of the views appear to disagree about some subject matter, but that the appearance of disagreement is illusory. In sections three and four, I address the question of whether Epicureans or deprivationists are getting something right in a way their supposed opponents are getting wrong. Those claims, however, are logically independent of my argument that Epicureanism and deprivationism are involved in a merely verbal dispute about the central issues over which they purportedly disagree.

## 2 The essential desideratum

### 2.1 Two principles

A basic *desideratum* for any account of death is that it can accommodate the fact that a person's self-regarding<sup>3</sup> preferences about when they die (and reasons for seeking/avoiding death) ought to track how well one's life would go were one's actual death to not occur. For lack of a better term, I'll refer to this desideratum as the *Essential Desideratum* (ED). ED can be captured by the following, seemingly axiomatic, principles.

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

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

*Preferring Life* and *Preferring Death* are modest principles. They are not intended to capture all reasons concerning death. PL and PD can be supplemented with principles concerning people's other-regarding reasons to seek or avoid death. For instance, they can be supplemented with principles which allow that parents can have reason to prefer continued life if doing so would be good for the parent's child. Additionally, unlike comparativism<sup>4</sup> and other similar principles, PL and PD are not formulated as biconditionals. As such, they even allow that persons can have self-regarding reasons to prefer a particular outcome other than the fact that doing so would result in a higher total well-being for the person in question. For instance, these principles are consistent with views which hold that the narrative structure of one's life also partly determines when it is best to die.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I am using the term 'self-regarding reasons' in a stipulative sense. Self-regarding reasons are the genuinely normative reasons one has to act in light of considerations about one's well-being. Self-regarding reasons may just be prudential reasons, but without the conceptual baggage. It is sometimes assumed, if only implicitly, that prudential reasons concern only what is good for and bad for persons. But, given Epicureans' and deprivationists' divergent uses of terms such as *good for* and *bad for*, no such assumption should be made.

<sup>4</sup> Comparativism can be formulated as follows: For any person *S* and event *E*, *E* is extrinsically bad (good) for *S* if and only if, and to the extent that, *S*'s total net receipt of intrinsic goods over intrinsic evils would have been greater (or smaller) if *E* had not occurred. See Ekendahl and Johansson (2016: 40). For other formulations of comparativism, see Feldman (1992), Feit (2002), Johansson (2005), and Luper (2009: 86–87). Many deprivationists accept comparativism, while Epicureans often deny it. According to Ekendahl and Johansson, to avoid absurdity, Epicureans should accept that death can reduce a person's net receipt of intrinsic goods, but deny that such a death would be extrinsically bad (2016: 40–41). Severing the connection between extrinsic goods and the receipt of intrinsic goods seems no more plausible to me than denying that death can reduce a person's net receipt of intrinsic goods. At any rate, PL and PD are weaker than comparativism and consistent with either accepting or rejecting it.

<sup>5</sup> For more on narrative structure, see Jones (2012). These principles also allow for other potentially relevant considerations, such as one's reasonable attachment to the actual Harman (2011), fission cases Parfit (1984: §90), considerations of autonomy, and any other potentially relevant features.

Finally, neither PL nor PD aim to pick out what a person has most reason, all things considered, to do.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 Two cases

*Preferring Life* and *Preferring Death* merely posit a connection between a person's interest in continued life (or death) and how well that person's life would go, as a whole, for that person were she to continue living (or were she to die) at the time in question. Rejecting these principles amounts to rejecting the idea that it is ever in one's interest to live a longer better life rather than a shorter, less good, life. This strikes me as utterly absurd. Unfortunately, many philosophers have a bad habit of accepting the absurd. So I will now provide two cases to further motivate *Preferring Life* and *Preferring Death*. Following Smuts (2012: 205–206), my first case draws from the modern classic *No Country for Old Men*.

**Two Choices:** Convenience store clerk Carl crosses paths with psychopathic killer Anton Chigurh, who happens to be in a good mood. Chigurh offers Carl the following deal. If Carl walks out the front door, he will receive a satchel filled with two million dollars cash. If Carl doesn't do this, then Chigurh will painlessly and instantaneously murder Carl.

Carl is both a happy person and a hermit. If he is murdered, no one would mourn his loss. But if Carl receives the cash, he would use the money to live a long and incredibly good life according to any account of well-being.

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

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

**Torturing the Spy:** Sage the spy has been captured and is about to undergo years of constant torture followed only by death. If Sage continues living, her

<sup>6</sup> In certain cases, death may benefit a person, yet be part of a larger series of events that collectively harm a person. PD entails that this person has some self-regarding reason to seek death, but still allows that the individual has most reason, all things considered, to prevent the collective harm, which requires avoiding death. For more on plural harm and death, see Feit (2015, 2016).

well-being at every subsequent moment would be negative according to any account of well-being. Sage can avoid such a fate iff she immediately takes the cyanide capsule she has hidden on her.

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

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

### 3 Accommodating the essential desideratum

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

#### 3.1 Deprivationism

According to the deprivationist, the goodness or badness of a person's death is determined by how that person's life would<sup>7</sup> have gone in the nearest possible world where the person's actual death did not occur.<sup>8</sup> All deprivationists mean when they claim that an event is *bad for* a person is that the person's total well-being is lower than it would have been if the event had not occurred. All deprivationists mean when they claim that an event is *good for* a person is that the person's total well-being is higher than it would have been if the event had not occurred. I'll refer to the deprivationists' use of such terms as *bad for<sub>D</sub>*, *good for<sub>D</sub>*, and so on. Since everyone has defeasible self-regarding reason to prefer events that are good for them over events that are bad for them on any meaningful sense of these terms, deprivationists have a straightforward way to account for PL and PD. Those principles track which deaths are good for, and which deaths are bad for, people.

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<sup>7</sup> In his (1970), Nagel argues that the badness of death is determined by how one's life *could* have gone, not *would* have gone. However, every subsequent form of deprivationism is formulated in terms of how one's life *would* have gone had the person's actual death not occurred.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Brueckner and Fischer (1986), Feldman (1992), Luper (2009), and Bradley (2009). Note also that Bradley's view is contextualist, so the nearest possible world is picked out relative to similarity relation *R*, which is determined by context.

### 3.2 Epicureanism

Epicureans do not have this explanation at their disposal. To see why, recall that Epicureans hold that death can never be good for, or bad for, people, at least in their favored senses of the terms. An Epicurean who wants to hold that persons can have self-regarding reason to prefer continued life over death (or vice versa) needs to ground those reasons in something other than the Epicurean senses of *good for* and *bad for*. Sure enough, this is the strategy employed by almost all contemporary Epicureans.

This Epicurean strategy can be explained more precisely, and clearly, in three steps. First, Epicureans who accommodate ED invoke a sense of terms such as *good for* and *bad for* that is more narrow than the deprivationists' broad sense of these terms (e.g. bad for =<sub>df</sub> a painful state). Second, the Epicurean argues that death cannot be good for or bad for a person in the narrow sense in question (e.g. death cannot be a painful state). Crucially, the narrow Epicurean senses of good for and bad for still allow that death can be good for<sub>D</sub> or bad for<sub>D</sub> a person (e.g. even though death cannot be painful, it can result in a person having a lower total well-being than they otherwise would have had). Third, the Epicurean then accommodates ED by holding that self-regarding reasons track events that are good for or bad for a person in the narrow Epicurean sense in question as well as in the broader deprivationist sense (e.g. one has self-regarding reason to avoid events that are painful, as well as events that reduce one's total well-being). In doing so, the Epicurean often coins their own unique well-being terminology to refer to events that are good for<sub>D</sub> or bad for<sub>D</sub> people, but not good for or bad for people in the narrow Epicurean sense in question (e.g. death is never *bad for* a person, but can result in *less good* for a person). I will now review what I take to be the most prominent and representative contemporary defenses of Epicureanism.<sup>9</sup> Such Epicurean views accommodate ED by employing the strategy outlined above.

I do not canvas the entire Epicurean literature for two reasons. First, that project is far too lengthy for this paper. Second, and more importantly, doing so is entirely unnecessary for the purposes of my argument. This is because I am arguing that each Epicurean view is subject to a dilemma. On one horn, the Epicurean view in question accommodates ED and, consequently, is involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationists about the central issues over which they purportedly disagree. If an Epicurean view fails to do this and posits no connection between one's self-regarding reasons and one's total well-being, then the Epicurean view falls on the other horn. Such views are demonstrably false. Any version of Epicureanism not discussed in this paper will still be subject to this dilemma. As

<sup>9</sup> See also Draper (2004), Hetherington (2013), Olson (2013), and Suits (2001). I do not discuss ancient Epicureans, such as Lucretius or Epicurus, since historical interpretations of their work are contentious and because I do not need to take a stand on the correct interpretation of their positions for the purposes of my argument. That being noted, I am inclined to interpret Lucretius and Epicurus as attempting to assuage worries that death is intrinsically bad. Consequently, ancient Epicureanism can be seen as consistent with deprivationism without succumbing to anachronism. But whatever the correct historical interpretation, Epicurus' and Lucretius' version of Epicureanism is still subject to my dilemma. For a compelling historical interpretation of ancient Epicureanism, see Warren (2001).

such, it ultimately does not matter, for the purposes of my argument, whether any particular Epicurean view accommodates ED. Either it does and so is involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism or it doesn't and so should be rejected.

### 3.3 David Hershenov

I'll start with David Hershenov's compelling defense of a "more palatable" Epicureanism. Hershenov aims to demonstrate that one could preserve "common-sense ethics" and deny that death is bad for anyone.<sup>10</sup> His strategy is to sever conceptual ties between *bad for* and *more good*. Specifically, Hershenov argues that additional life can be good for a person, yet death (which is stipulated to prevent additional good life) not be bad for that person. Hershenov reasons that if one continues living a good life, one would continue to have some well-being level and one's total well-being would be higher as a result.<sup>11</sup> Once a person dies, however, Hershenov believes that this person ceases to have a well-being level. This prevents death from being bad for this person according to Hershenov's sense of *bad for*, even if this death prevents one from living additional good life. In short, Hershenov restricts the use of the terms *good for* and *bad for* to refer to events that do not result in a person immediately ceasing to have a well-being level. I will refer to Hershenov's use of these terms as *good for<sub>H</sub>* and *bad for<sub>H</sub>*.

By severing the conceptual tie in the way he does, Hershenov is able to maintain a form of Epicureanism and accommodate ED. To see how this works, let's apply Hershenov's strategy to my two cases. In *Two Options*, going out the front door would be good for<sub>H</sub> Carl and not going out the front door would be neither good for<sub>H</sub> nor bad for<sub>H</sub> Carl. Going out the front door would be good for<sub>H</sub> Carl because doing so would result in Carl having a higher total well-being than if he doesn't *and* he would continue to have a well-being level after going out the front door. On the other hand, not going out the front door would not be bad for<sub>H</sub> Carl because that would result in instantaneous death and Carl would supposedly cease to have a well-being level once he is killed. So, not going out the front door isn't bad for<sub>H</sub> Carl even though doing so results in him having a lower total well-being than he otherwise would have. Now, here is the important point. On Hershenov's view, Carl still has self-regarding reason to go out the front door because doing so is good for<sub>H</sub> him. Moreover, whenever an event is good for<sub>H</sub> a person, it will necessarily be good for<sub>D</sub> that person too. The same reasoning applies in *Torturing the Spy*. Sage's continued life would be bad for<sub>H</sub> her, yet her death would not be good for<sub>H</sub> her. Nevertheless, Sage has self-regarding reason to bite the cyanide capsule because not doing so would be bad for<sub>H</sub> (and therefore bad for<sub>D</sub>) her.

<sup>10</sup> Hershenov (2007: 176).

<sup>11</sup> Hershenov appears to assume that accepting the deprivation account of the badness of death requires assuming that the deceased have well-being levels of 0 (2007: 177). But, as was later shown in the literature, this isn't the case. See Bradley (2009: 98–105) and Purves (2016).

### 3.4 Aaron Smuts

Aaron Smuts' strategy parallels Hershenov's strategy. Smuts restricts the terms *good for* and *bad for* to refer to events that are experientially (and he thinks intrinsically) good for and bad for people. Smuts also draws a distinction between *bad for* and *less good*. On Smuts' use of these terms, an event that is bad for a person involves a painful state, while an event that results in less good for a person will involve the prevention of a pleasurable state.<sup>12</sup> I'll refer to Smuts' use of *bad for* as *bad for<sub>S</sub>*. Smuts can maintain a form of Epicureanism by claiming that death is never bad for<sub>S</sub> a person, as death is never painful. It is only an experiential blank. At the same time, Smuts accommodates ED by holding that persons can have self-regarding reason to seek or prefer continued life if death would result in less good for a person than continued life. Any death that results in less good for a person will necessarily be bad for<sub>D</sub> that person as well.

### 3.5 James Stacey Taylor

James Stacey Taylor defends a rather unique version of Epicureanism. Taylor draws a distinction between a harm *for* a person and a harm *to* a person. Harms *to* persons affect their [momentary] well-being, while harms *for* persons do not affect their [momentary] well-being, but prevent the existence of a state of affairs the person values independently of her [momentary] well-being.<sup>13</sup> This distinction gives Taylor room to accommodate ED by holding that death can be a harm *for* persons, but not a harm *to* them and that persons have self-regarding reason to avoid things that are harms *for* them, as well as harms *to* them. Whenever death is a harm *to*, or a harm *for*, a person it will necessarily be bad for<sub>D</sub> them as well.

To see how this works, consider *Two Options* again. Death would be a harm *for* (but not *to*) Carl because the nearest possible world in which Carl does not die is one where his subsequent life is very good according to any account of well-being. Carl's death prevents the existence of such a state of affairs; one that Carl has self-regarding reason to value. Applying Taylor's view to *Torturing the Spy* yields similar results. Sage's death presumably would not be good *to* Sage (as she cannot experience said good), but it would be good *for* Sage since it prevents a state of affairs Sage has self-regarding reason to avoid. This allows Taylor to preserve a form of Epicureanism by claiming that death is never a harm *to* a person, yet

<sup>12</sup> Smuts (2012: 211–213).

<sup>13</sup> Taylor (2012: 44) Taylor's distinction between harms *to* and harms *for* persons is a bit under-described. As I understand him, harms *for* persons can affect a person's *total* well-being (i.e. the net total non-instrumental good accrued in one's lifetime), but cannot affect a person's *momentary* well-being (i.e. the net non-instrumental good possessed at any moment in time). I take this to be the charitable interpretation of Taylor. If, contrary to my interpretation, Taylor suggests that harms *for* persons cannot even affect one's total well-being, then Taylor would either be committed to holding that (i) death can be a harm to persons, thereby giving up his Epicureanism or holding that (ii) death can never affect one's total well-being. I find (ii) wildly implausible and presume Taylor would not want to accept (i). See chapter five of Taylor (2012) for an extended discussion of this distinction.



preserve ED by allowing that people have self-regarding reason to avoid deaths that are harms *for* (and therefore bad for<sub>D</sub>) them.

### 3.6 Stephen Rosenbaum

Stephen Rosenbaum takes a different approach, creating two avenues for his Epicureanism to accommodate ED. First, he allows that *being dead* can be *bad* without being *bad for* anyone.<sup>14</sup> So, ED may be preserved if one has self-regarding reason to avoid being dead when it is bad simpliciter. However, Rosenbaum also has another strategy at his disposal that is more explanatorily robust. He claims that *death* can be *bad for* the deceased, even though *being dead* cannot be *bad for* the deceased. Rosenbaum accepts that death can be bad for the deceased when it results in the person having a lower total well-being than they otherwise would have. Being dead, however, cannot be bad for the deceased in Rosenbaum's sense of the term because he is restricting the use of *bad for* to preclude events that occur at a time a person does not exist. I'll refer to this restricted sense of bad for as *bad for<sub>R</sub>*. A death that is bad for<sub>R</sub> a person should necessarily be bad for<sub>D</sub> a person as well. Rosenbaum uses the term *death* to refer to the "time at which a person becomes dead," which may be an instant in time or no time at all and *being dead* follows death.<sup>15</sup> So, Rosenbaum can, and seemingly wants to, accommodate ED by holding that one has self-regarding reason to avoid *death* when it would be bad for<sub>R</sub> (and therefore bad for<sub>D</sub>) for them. Yet, he can preserve his Epicureanism by holding that *being dead* is never bad for<sub>R</sub> anyone.

### 3.7 O. H. Green

O. H. Green distinguishes between *objective* and *subjective* evils. Objective evils are those that impede normal functioning, while subjective evils require painful conscious states of some sort.<sup>16</sup> Green defends his version of Epicureanism by restricting its scope to subjective evils, rendering the view practically tautological. When the death of a person is understood, by definition, to entail a lack of consciousness, it follows that death can never be a subjective evil. Now, Green can preserve ED by holding that death can be objectively good for or bad for a person, while also holding that people have self-regarding reason to avoid or disprefer events that are objectively bad for (and therefore bad for<sub>D</sub>) them and to seek or prefer events that are objectively good for (and therefore good for<sub>D</sub>) them.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Rosenbaum (1986: 218).

<sup>15</sup> More precisely, Rosenbaum writes that death "is roughly the time at which a person becomes dead...Several facts should be noted about death, in this sense. It is not clearly a part of a person's lifetime, although it may be a (very) small part. Also, it is not clear that it takes time or, if so, how much time it takes. It may be a mere moment in time separating being alive from being dead." Rosenbaum (1986: 217–218).

<sup>16</sup> Green (1982: 100).

<sup>17</sup> Green might actually understand any event that impedes normal functioning to be an objective evil regardless of how the event affects a person's total well-being. If so, then Green's view can be precisified

## 4 Epicureans, deprivationists, and merely verbal disputes

Now that we have seen how Epicureans can (and do) accommodate ED, we are in a position to see why such views are involved in a merely verbal dispute with standard forms of deprivationism. Before I defend that claim, however, I want to make a qualification and a related point. First, the qualification; I am not arguing that there is no substantive disagreement between every Epicurean and every deprivationist about every philosophical issue related to death. As I explain in this section, some may very well disagree about closely related issues, such as those concerning fitting attitudes toward death or the correct use of certain terminological claims. Rather, I am arguing that deprivationists and Epicureans (who accommodate ED) are involved in a merely verbal dispute specifically about (1) whether death can be bad for a person on any precise sense of *bad for* and about (2) what self-regarding reasons one has (or self-regarding preferences one ought to have) concerning death.<sup>18</sup> It is important to get clear on where the substantive disagreement does, and does not, lie in order to further the philosophical debate.

### 4.1 Characterizing merely verbal disputes

Consider the following scenario. Tim and Tom both work at Chase bank, far away from a river with geese. They have this short conversation.<sup>19</sup>

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

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

Tim and Tom's conversation reveals there to be a *prima facie* dispute,<sup>20</sup> but any appearance of a substantive dispute is illusory. Tim and Tom agree that there are geese by the river bank and agree that there are no geese by Chase bank. Their conversation nevertheless has the appearance of a substantive dispute because Tim and Tom are unwittingly using the term *bank* differently. Once each comes to understand how the other is using the term *bank*, the *prima facie* dispute disappears.

Tim and Tom's conversation is a paradigmatic instance of a merely verbal dispute. From this example, we can see that merely verbal disputes are situations where (a) those engaged in the dispute take themselves to be disagreeing about a substantive issue, yet (b) there is no "substantive, relevant disagreement between the parties" and (c) the dispute "arises in virtue of differences concerning

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Footnote 17 continued

to either accommodate or reject ED. If it is precisified to be incompatible with ED, it should be rejected. If it is precisified to accommodate ED, then as I argue in the next section, Green will be involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism.

<sup>18</sup> More broadly, (*i*) should be read to encompass any closely related evaluative claims about death (e.g. Death can be good for a person). For ease of the dialectic, however, I will focus on the question of whether death can be bad for a person.

<sup>19</sup> This is drawn from Jenkins (2014: 16).

<sup>20</sup> As Jenkins (2014: 21) uses the term, a *prima facie* dispute is anything that, at first glance, has the appearance of a real dispute.

language.”<sup>21</sup> In this section, I will argue that Epicurean views that accommodate ED are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism with respect to (1) whether death can be bad for a person on any precise sense of *bad for* and about (2) what self-regarding reasons one has (or self-regarding preferences one ought to have) concerning death. That is, such views are involved in a merely verbal dispute about the central issues over which they purportedly disagree. In order to make my case, however, it is necessary to make a few preliminary points and to adopt a heuristic for identifying merely verbal disputes.

Here are the preliminaries. First, I am going to remain neutral about the best way to characterize merely verbal disputes. There is a variety of characterizations on offer<sup>22</sup> and an important emerging metaphilosophical literature on reasons for accepting, or rejecting, various characterizations. This literature is orthogonal to the issue at hand since the merely verbal dispute between Epicureans and deprivationists can be captured by each viable characterization on offer. Second, it is important to be clear about the scope of my argument. I am not arguing that every Epicurean view is involved in a merely verbal dispute with every deprivation view. I am just arguing that deprivationism and Epicurean views that accommodate ED are involved in a merely verbal dispute with respect to the central issues of the debate, viz. (1) and (2). Epicurean views that fail to accommodate ED are substantively different from any form of deprivationism. They are also demonstrably false. Third, it’s worth reiterating that my argument even allows that there can be substantive differences between particular Epicureans (that accommodate ED) and deprivationists. The substantive disagreement just won’t be about whether death can be bad for people in any particular sense of *bad for*, about what self-regarding reasons one has to seek or avoid death, or about when one should prefer continued life over death (and vice versa). Rather, any substantive disagreement would have to concern related issues, such as whether deceased persons have well-being levels or which attitudes are fitting to have toward death.<sup>23</sup> These substantive issues concern related, but different, debates in the philosophy of death literature. There may even remain a substantive dispute about which use of certain well-being terms are correct, which is an issue I address at the end of this section.

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

**MVD+:** Holding the conversational context fixed, parties A and B are having a merely verbal dispute iff they are engaged in a sincere *prima facie* dispute D, but do not disagree over the subject matter(s) of D, and merely present the

<sup>21</sup> Jenkins (2014: 20).

<sup>22</sup> In addition to Jenkins (2014), see Hirsch (2005), Bennett (2009) and Chalmers (2011).

<sup>23</sup> Epicureans usually argue that death is not to be feared. Some deprivationists have argued that fear is a fitting attitude, while others deny this. See Scheffler (2013: 87) and Draper (1999). To be clear, Epicureans and deprivationists can consistently accept or reject the claim that people should fear deaths that are bad for<sub>D</sub> them. So, debates about fitting attitudes toward death cut across debates about the badness of death. See Bradley (2015) and Timmerman (2016) for recent deprivationist discussions of fitting attitudes toward death.

appearance of doing so owing to their divergent uses of some relevant portion of language.<sup>24</sup>

## 4.2 Epicureans' and deprivationists' merely verbal dispute

We can now see why deprivationists and Epicureans (who accommodate ED) are involved in a merely verbal dispute. D should be relatively fine-grained, so take it to pick out (1) and (2). That is, D will concern the central issues of the debate, viz. whether death can be bad for (or harm) a person on any specific sense of *bad for*, what self-regarding preferences people ought to have about their death, and what self-regarding reasons they have to seek or avoid their death. Of course, the relevant parties are deprivationists and Epicureans who accommodate ED. The appearance of disagreement is the product of divergent uses of well-being terms, such as *harmful*, *harm for*, *bad for*, and *good for*.

When deprivationists assert that death can be bad for (or harm) a person, they are simply using these terms to refer to any event that has the consequence of a person's total well-being being lower than it otherwise would have been. Again, I'll refer to the deprivationists' use of these terms as *harm<sub>D</sub>* and *bad for<sub>D</sub>*. When Epicureans who accommodate ED assert that death cannot harm (or be bad for) a person, they are using these terms in a different sense. Once we eradicate the divergent use of these terms, the *prima facie* dispute over D disappears since each party should agree about (1) whether death can be bad for a person on any specific sense of *bad for* and about (2) what self-regarding reasons one has (or self-regarding preferences one ought to have) concerning death.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, they should agree that agents have self-regarding reasons to prefer or seek death when it would be good for<sub>D</sub> them and prefer or seek continued life when death would be bad for<sub>D</sub> them. I will now illustrate this and do so using the previously discussed versions of Epicureanism as examples.

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

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins (2014: 21).

<sup>25</sup> Again, they may still disagree about which of the specific senses of *bad for*, *harm*, and so on are the correct senses of these terms. That could be a substantive dispute, but that is a substantive dispute over an issue that cuts across the *prima facie* dispute over D.

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

Recall Taylor's distinction between a harm *for* and a harm *to* a person. Deprivationists don't distinguish between these two senses of harm, although nothing prevents them from adopting this more fine-grained distinction. Now, Taylor and deprivationists agree that death can be bad for<sub>D</sub> a person. Moreover, they both agree that self-regarding reasons track events that are bad for<sub>D</sub> people. Finally, deprivationists who believe that the deceased do not have well-being levels can agree with Taylor that death can be a harm *for*, but not a harm *to*, a person. The substantive disagreement that remains is not between Taylor's Epicureanism and deprivationism, but between those who think that the deceased have well-being levels and those who deny this. Again, however, that issue cuts across D, and more generally, the debate about the badness of death.

Remember that Rosenbaum still allows that death can be bad for<sub>R</sub> a person. So deprivationists and Rosenbaum should agree that death can be both bad for<sub>D</sub> and bad for<sub>R</sub> a person. They should also agree that self-regarding reasons track events that are bad for<sub>D</sub> people. Recall Green's slightly different terminology of objective and subjective evils. Deprivationists, along with Green, will accept that death can be an objective, but not a subjective, evil. This is because death can impede normal functioning, but cannot result in a painful conscious state. Moreover, Green and deprivationists should agree that death can be bad for<sub>D</sub> a person and that one's self-regarding reasons track events that are bad for<sub>D</sub> them.

To use David Chalmers' (2011: 517) apt analogy, diagnosing merely verbal disputes has the "potential to serve as a sort of universal acid in philosophical discussion, either dissolving disagreements or boiling them down to the fundamental disagreements on which they turn." Epicureans (who accommodate ED) and deprivationists do not disagree with each other about the self-regarding reasons one has, or about the self-regarding preferences one ought to have, concerning death. Nor do they disagree about the particular senses in which death can, and cannot, be bad for people. This shows that deprivationists and Epicureans (who accommodate ED) are involved in a merely verbal dispute about the central issues of their debate.

### 4.3 Disagreeing about terminology

Some lingering disagreement, related to D, that may not have been resolved by this universal acid concerns the question of whether certain Epicureans or deprivationists can be said to be using these well-being terms (e.g. *bad for*) correctly. For example, there may be disagreement about whether an Epicurean sense of *bad for* is the correct one, whether the deprivationist sense is the correct one, or whether multiple senses are correct. To be clear, Epicureans and deprivationists do not disagree about whether death is bad for a person on any of the specific senses of *bad for* on offer. Yet, they may disagree about which of these senses on offer picks out

the correct use of the term. Disagreement about this particular issue need not be merely verbal.

Which sense, if any, of *bad for* is the correct one? This is an interesting question. To be clear, disagreement about how to best use terms such as *bad for* cuts across D, so the arguments I have made thus far do not hinge on how I answer this question. Nevertheless, it is a question worth addressing. Here I can do so only briefly, as fully exploring this issue would require writing an entirely separate paper. I am of two minds about how to answer. On the one hand, these terms (e.g. harm, bad for, good for) at least seem like reasonable candidates for being semantically ambiguous. As already illustrated, they are used in a variety of different ways in different contexts. If the ways these well-being terms are used in different contexts are distinct enough, then we may infer that these terms have different meanings. The phrase *bad for* has been used to pick out events that are intrinsically bad, extrinsically bad, *prima facie* bad, and all things considered bad, to name a few. For example, Smuts uses *bad for* to pick out (what he takes to be) intrinsic bads and deprivationists use *bad for* to refer to events that are, all things considered, extrinsically bad. Both uses of the term *bad for* may be correct and one should not necessarily be favored over the other. If the deprivationist sense of the term coupled with each of the Epicurean senses of the term reveals a semantic ambiguity, then it's at least possible that every use discussed is correct. Whether this is so will depend, in part, on which semantic theory of truth is correct.

So, on the one hand, it's possible that each party is using these terms correctly, where no one use is privileged. On the other hand, it's possible that some of the ways in which these terms are used may be incorrect. Perhaps *bad for* isn't semantically ambiguous, at least not between certain Epicurean and deprivationist senses of the terms. If this is right, and a particular type of semantic externalism is true, then some uses of the term will be incorrect. For instance, reference magnetism entails that the deprivationist sense of *bad for* should be favored over Hershenov's Epicurean alternative. Stated overly simplistically, reference magnetism holds that a term's meaning is determined, in part, by how it is used and how closely it carves nature at its joints. *Ceteris paribus*, the more fundamental sense of a term take precedence over less fundamental senses. Now contrast Hershenov's sense of *bad for* with the deprivationists' sense. Hershenov uses the term to pick out events that both result in the agent having a lower total well-being *and* which do not result in a person ceasing to have a level of well-being. Deprivationists use the term *bad for* simply to pick out events that result in the agent having a lower total well-being. Since the deprivationist sense of *bad for* is closer to carving nature at its joints, reference magnetism entails that it should be favored over Hershenov's sense of *bad for*.

Reference magnetism is not the only form of semantic externalism. One could instead adopt a more Wittgensteinian picture, where the meanings of terms are solely determined by regularities that govern language. Perhaps the correct use of well-being terms is solely dictated by how ordinary speakers of the language use these terms. This picture would also seem to support the deprivationist sense over, at least some, Epicurean alternatives. Recall the distinction Taylor draws between events that are harms *to* and events that are harms *for* people. This is an especially

fine-grained distinction that is not made by ordinary speakers of the English language. In fact, Taylor invented this locution and appears to be the only person who uses it. Similar claims apply to Green's distinction between so-called objective and subjective evils, which is not a distinction ordinarily drawn in our language. It is interesting to note that each of the Epicureans discussed uses terms such as *bad for* in a way that is different from each of the other Epicureans. Each individual Epicurean use isn't even tracking how other Epicureans use these terms, much less how ordinary speakers of our language use these terms.

The deprivationist sense of such well-being terms is the better candidate for tracking ordinary use. The deprivationist picks out a general, yet unified, account of events that are good for and bad for people and this account usually accords with commonsensical evaluative judgments. Given how these terms are typically used, there seems to be a strong conceptual connection between events that are bad for (or good for) people and reasons to avoid (or seek) said events. For reasons already given, the deprivationist sense of these terms is in a better position to capture that connection than its more narrow Epicurean competitors. Now, no clean and precise philosophical sense of these terms will perfectly capture the "Frankensteinian jumble" that is ordinary use.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that the deprivationist sense comes significantly closer than each of its Epicurean competitors. Given a certain type of semantic externalism, then, the deprivationist is the one using such terms correctly. Ultimately, however, whether an Epicurean or the deprivationists are using these terms correctly does not seem very important to me, at least for the purposes of this debate, since such disagreement simply concerns the meaning of certain well-being terms.

Determining which use(s) of these well-being terms is correct, while interesting in its own right, will not reveal much (if anything) that is interesting with respect to the debate between deprivationists and Epicureans. Once we recognize that Epicureans who accommodate ED and deprivationists agree about the senses in which death is (and isn't) bad for a person, the cases in which continued life is preferable to death (and vice versa), and about what self-regarding reasons people have to seek or avoid death, the interesting questions of concern to those in the literature have already been answered. Although their name may imply otherwise, Epicurean views that grant these facts do not provide reason to reject standard commonsense judgments about death (e.g. the prospect of continued life worth living provides one with self-regarding reason to live). This is so regardless of whether all of the apparent disagreement between each party can be shown to be merely verbal. The fact that everyone in the literature agrees about the aforementioned issues suggests that this debate does not hold promise of shedding light on the issues that concern philosophers of death. Now, I have argued for the stronger claim that the central debate between Epicureans and deprivationists is merely verbal. Yet, one may accept or reject that conclusion while still recognizing that, in light of aforementioned considerations, Epicureans who accommodate ED and deprivationists are spilling ink over a debate that is ultimately uninteresting.

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<sup>26</sup> See Ben Bradley's (2012) for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

## 5 Conclusion

Epicurean views are subject to a dilemma. They either do, or do not, accommodate the *Essential Desideratum* (ED). Epicurean views that do not accommodate ED are demonstrably false. They are inconsistent with the axiomatic principles PL and PD and they generate the incorrect verdicts in cases like *Two Options* and *Sage the Spy*. Epicurean views that accommodate ED are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism, at least with respect to (1) whether death can be bad for a person on any precise sense of *bad for* and about (2) what self-regarding reasons one has (or self-regarding preferences one ought to have) concerning death. To accommodate ED, Epicureans allow that death can be bad for people in the sense deprivationists are concerned with and allow that self-regarding reasons track the deprivationist sense of these terms. Once an Epicurean grants these claims, however, any *prima facie* dispute between them and deprivationists about (1) and (2) can be traced back to divergent uses of terms such as *bad for* and *good for*. Recognizing that many Epicurean views are involved in a merely verbal dispute with deprivationism about the central issues of their debate should play the dual role of eradicating widespread confusion about the debate and help philosophers hone in on the substantive disputes that remain in the literature. If my argument succeeds, we will have passed a major hurdle in developing the correct account of the badness of death.

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