Philosophical Review

Disappointment, Sadness, and Death
Author(s): Kai Draper
Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (Jul., 1999), pp. 387-414
Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2998466
Accessed: 03-07-2015 23:30 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Duke University Press and Philosophical Review are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review.*

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 108, No. 3 (July 1999)

Disappointment, Sadness, and Death

Kai Draper

Many find the prospect of death distressing at least partly because they believe that death deprives its subject of life's benefits. Properly qualified, the belief is surely true.[1] But should its truth lead us to conclude that there is something dreadful or awful about death, something that *merits* distress?

A number of contemporary philosophers think so. They advance "arguments from deprivation," arguments from the premise that death involves the absence or loss of a good to some disturbing conclusion about death. I begin this essay by exposing a mistake that is common to many of these arguments. Then I advance my own argument from deprivation. It justifies regarding the typical premature death as a terrible misfortune, but provides little reason to be troubled by the prospect of dying at an advanced age. Accordingly, I proceed to explore the possibility of developing a more ambitious argument from deprivation. Ultimately, I arrive at the conclusion that, with few exceptions, death at any age is apt to be a serious evil.[2]

I would like to thank Philip Clark, Paul Draper, Sean Foran, Michael Ialacci, Jeff McMahan, Michael O'Rourke, Laurie Pieper, Charles Young, Daniel Zelinski, and the editors of the *Philosophical Review* for their valuable contributions to this essay.

[1] I am assuming, of course, that we are mortal, that death is not an illusion, but rather exactly what it appears to be: the end of conscious existence. (This assumption may be false, but every indication I have suggests otherwise.) I am not assuming that death deprives its subject of each and every benefit that he or she enjoyed while alive. Some have argued that one can continue to receive certain benefits (for example, fame) after death, and I want to leave open the possibility that they are right. Thus, when I claim that death deprives its subject of life's benefits, I should be taken to mean that death, understood as the permanent end of conscious existence, deprives its subject of benefits (for example, enjoyment) the receipt of which requires conscious existence.

[2] Perhaps I should mention that I will not consider two very common Epicurean objections to arguments from deprivation. One is the objection that being deprived of a good is an evil for the subject of the deprivation only if the subject misses the good or otherwise suffers as a result of the deprivation. The second is the argument that, since death annihilates its subject, after you die, there is no "you" that can be identified as the victim of a deprivation or any other evil. These objections have been adequately

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

1. Death Is Bad, but So What?

A good illustration of the rather common mistake I want to expose can be found in Fred Feldman's recent book, *Confrontations with the Reaper.* Feldman proposes a general formula for calculating the value for a person S of a state of affairs P and, on the basis of that formula, argues that death is often (though not always) a misfortune. The formula is this:

> D: the extrinsic value for S of P = the difference between the intrinsic value for S of the life S would lead if P is true and the intrinsic value for S of the life S would lead if P is false.[3]

Notice that D assigns value or disvalue to a state of affairs on the basis of whether its obtaining would be good or bad by comparison with its not obtaining. To capture this fact about D, let us refer to it as a formula for calculating the "comparative value" for a person S of a state of affairs P.

Given D, death can have great disvalue for its subject. Feldman offers this example:

> Suppose I am thinking of taking an airplane trip to Europe. Suppose I'm worried about accidents, hijackings, sabotage, etc. I think I might die en route. I think this would be bad for me. D directs us to consider the life I would lead if I do die en route to Europe on this trip, and to consider the value for me of this life. . . . Let's suppose that that life is worth +500 to me. . . . Next, D directs us to consider the life I would lead if I do not die en route to Europe on this trip. The relevant feature of this life is that I do not die a painful and premature death in an airplane accident. Suppose in that life I do live to enjoy the fruits of my retirement. Let's suppose the intrinsic value for me of that life is +1100. Fairly simple calculations then yield the result that such

---

refuted by others. See, for example, Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 127–56, and Thomas Nagel, "Death," reprinted in his *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1–10.

[3]Feldman, *Confrontation,* 150. I have a few quibbles with Feldman's formulation of D. One is the awkwardness in speaking of a state of affairs as being true or false. Another is that, unless I am mistaken, the *definiendum* in D should be the *total* (extrinsic and intrinsic) value for S of P rather than the *extrinsic* value for S of P. For the difference between the intrinsic value for S of the life S would lead if P obtains and the intrinsic value for S of the life S would lead if P does not obtain would depend partly on how much intrinsic value P would have for S.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

a death would have a value of −600 for me. It would be a *terrible misfortune.*[4]

At first glance, there appears to be little to disagree with here. Feldman's death in the plane crash would prevent him from receiving the huge benefit of surviving his trip to Europe. Hence, D yields the plausible conclusion that the disvalue for Feldman of such a death would be very large.

But Feldman is not satisfied with this conclusion. He draws the further conclusion that such a death would be a "terrible misfortune" for him. This further conclusion does not follow. For 'P would have (great) *comparative* disvalue for S' does not entail 'P would be a (terrible) misfortune for S.' To suppose otherwise would be to expand the notion of a misfortune well beyond its ordinary boundaries. It would imply that I have suffered a terrible misfortune today in that I did not find Aladdin's lamp and hence have not been granted three wishes by an omnipotent genie. For the intrinsic value for me of the life I would lead should I find the lamp would be far greater than the intrinsic value for me of the life I would lead should I not find it. Hence, given D, the disvalue for me of not finding the lamp is enormous. But surely it would be a peculiar use of the word 'misfortune' to say, "I've suffered a terrible misfortune today, for I have not happened upon Aladdin's lamp." Feldman can, of course, retreat to the conclusion that his death in the plane crash would be comparatively bad. But notice that this conclusion is too modest to be of much interest. Failing to find Aladdin's lamp is also comparatively bad, but it does not merit any distress.[5] It is, as Epicurus said of death, "of no concern to us." Thus, by itself, the conclusion that death is comparatively bad is consistent with the Epicurean position that death is not, in any *troubling* sense, an evil.

Feldman's mistake is not uncommon. Many writers have noted that because death typically deprives its subject of benefits she

---

[4]Feldman, *Confrontations,* 151; my emphasis.

[5]When I describe an emotional response as "fitting," or "merited," or "appropriate," I do not intend to imply that one ought to have that response. If I am cornered by a dangerous beast, for example, the danger would merit fear even if, because the beast is of the sort that is more likely to attack if it senses fear, I ought to avoid feeling fear if I can. (In a similar way, someone's behavior can merit blame or punishment even if special circumstances make it unwise to blame or punish.)

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

would have received had she not died, dying is often comparatively very bad—it is much worse than not dying. But many of these have failed to notice that the truth of the proposition that death is comparatively very bad does not *by itself* justify any disturbing conclusion about death. An argument from deprivation ought to show that death is a *genuine evil* in the sense of being something that merits horror or dread or sadness or despair or disappointment or some other negative emotional response.[6] And there is a logical gap between the premise that death is comparatively bad and the conclusion that death is a genuine evil in this sense.[7]

2. Death and Disappointment

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that not all comparatively bad deprivations merit distress. For each of us is the subject of an

[6]What I am calling a "genuine evil" is to be distinguished from what philosophers often call an "evil." In common philosophical parlance, a good is something worthy of being desired or sought, and, correspondingly, an evil is something worthy of aversion or avoidance (or something the absence of which is worthy of being desired or sought). Given this use of the term 'evil', one can quickly reach the conclusion that being deprived of life's benefits is an evil. But the conclusion is not very interesting given that many deprivations that are not the least bit troubling are also evils. Failing to find Aladdin's lamp, for example, is a deprivation that is quite worthy of being avoided however impossible it may be to avoid it. Accordingly, I am concerned in this essay not with the question of whether death is an evil in the sense of being worthy of avoidance, but rather with the question of whether death is a genuine evil in the richer sense of being a suitable object of fear or sadness or dread or dissatisfaction or some other negative emotional response (in addition to being a suitable object of avoidance). In particular, I am concerned with the question of whether death is a genuine evil *for its subject*—that is, whether it is fitting to be troubled by the prospect of one's own death (and to avoid one's own death if one can).

[7]There is also a general lesson for value theory here. If we assign value or disvalue to a state of affairs on the basis of comparing the value of its obtaining with the value of its not obtaining, then we divorce the concepts of value and disvalue from their usual emotional and attitudinal connections. We are forced to say of certain things that, on the one hand, they have enormous disvalue (or value) for us, but on the other hand, it would be inappropriate for us to be the least bit troubled (or delighted) by them. This shouldn't cause any mischief so long as we are aware of what we are doing. But if we are unaware, then we will be apt to make mistakes in reasoning like Feldman's—leaping from the premise that something would have great comparative disvalue for someone to the conclusion that it would be awful, or dreadful, or a terrible misfortune, for her.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

infinite variety of comparatively bad deprivations, and yet we would regard very few of them as matters of concern. And why should we? The absence of a good, like the absence of an ill, is a mere privation, and so typically equanimity is the appropriate response.

Typically, but not always. In a variety of cases, and for a variety of reasons, it is fitting to be troubled by certain comparatively bad deprivations. Let us suppose, for example, that unexpected jury duty deprives me of the enjoyment of making a long-awaited trip to Barcelona in the company of my dearest friends. This deprivation is apt to be comparatively bad, but not nearly as bad as the deprivation involved in not finding Aladdin's lamp. Nevertheless, we are inclined to say that it is a misfortune (though perhaps not a great one) and that disappointment is a fitting response to this misfortune.

What distinguishes my canceled trip from my failure to happen upon Aladdin's lamp? No doubt I would have had my heart set upon the trip to Spain, whereas I have never hoped to find a magical lamp that, as everyone knows, does not even exist. But it is easy to see that this cannot be the crucial difference between the two cases. For even if I did hope to find Aladdin's lamp, even if finding it were my life's central concern, my failure to find it would not be a misfortune for me, nor would disappointment be the appropriate response to this failure. Rather my misfortune would be that I desire to find, hope to find, and waste my time trying to find a lamp with a genie in it.

One might think that the crucial difference is that, whereas the jury duty prevents me from receiving a benefit that otherwise I would have received, the benefit of finding Aladdin's lamp is not one that I would have received had I not been prevented from doing so. It does seem plausible to suppose that the absence of a good within a life counts as a misfortune only if one would receive that good were it not for the intervention of an identifiable preventing condition. Thus, the absence of such a condition preventing me from finding Aladdin's lamp may adequately explain why my failure to find it cannot be a misfortune. Be that as it may, we still lack an explanation of why my failure to go to Barcelona with my friends is a misfortune. For it is not always a misfortune to be prevented from receiving a benefit. If $1,000,000 were offered to the first person who manages to climb Everest barefoot, the cold weather on the mountain inevitably would prevent anyone from

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

acquiring the money by fulfilling the terms of the offer. And even if some foolish, barefoot climber would reap the reward of reaching the summit were it not for this preventing condition, there would be no misfortune in his inevitable failure.

Like the benefit of finding Aladdin's lamp, any benefit that can be secured only by climbing Everest barefoot is among those countless imaginable benefits that we fail to receive as a matter of course, benefits that we cannot *reasonably* expect or want because there is no reason at all to think that we will receive them, or that we ought to receive them. Typically there is nothing *amiss* in being prevented from receiving such a benefit; and so there is no basis for regarding the deprivation as a *mis*fortune rather than as a mere absence of unreachable good fortune.

On the other hand, if one of us fails to receive a significant good to which she is entitled, or if an individual or a society or nature arbitrarily denies her the goods that most others receive, or if a freak accident prevents her from receiving a substantial benefit that she was about to receive, then it is likely that she has suffered both a misfortune and a genuine evil. For ordinarily, it is reasonable to resent being denied a benefit to which one is entitled, and to feel dissatisfied with one's allotment if one is arbitrarily denied the goods that most others receive, and to feel disappointed when a substantial benefit that one reasonably expected to receive is snatched away by some unlikely turn of events. In cases like these (and in other kinds of cases as well) there is apt to be something amiss in being deprived, something that merits a negative emotional response and so provides a basis for regarding the deprivation as a misfortune.

These remarks suggest a way to explain why being denied my anticipated trip to Barcelona is both a misfortune and a suitable object of disappointment. For it was highly likely that I would go to Barcelona with my dearest friends; this benefit was within my reach and would have been mine but for an unlikely confluence of events that caused it to slip through my fingers. Thus, my *reasonable* expectation that I would receive the benefit was frustrated by what we would ordinarily refer to as "bad luck." By contrast, it is impossible to receive the benefit of finding Aladdin's lamp, or the benefit (supposing there is one) of climbing Everest barefoot. Thus, no reasonable expectation or hope is frustrated by the failure to receive such a benefit and, of course, it would be absurd to

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

attribute to bad luck one's failure to receive a benefit the receipt of which is humanly impossible.

There are, of course, cases that fall between these two extremes. If my state lottery ticket does not have the winning numbers, for example, then I am deprived of a huge financial benefit the receipt of which was possible but highly unlikely. Is failing to have the winning numbers a misfortune? I am inclined to say no—picking the wrong numbers would have to be much less likely to count as a misfortune, or as a suitable object of significant disappointment. One can, perhaps, reasonably hope to get lucky, but setting one's heart on winning in a way that would make losing anything more than the mildest of disappointments would be foolish. On the other hand, suppose that my lottery ticket has the winning numbers, but in my haste to collect my winnings, I trip and fall and drop the ticket down a storm drain. Once again a large benefit that I was very likely to receive manages to elude my grasp, and once again we have a misfortune to which disappointment is a fitting response (although the disappointment here may be tempered by the knowledge that I was unlikely to have chosen the winning numbers in the first place).

It appears, then, that whenever someone is prevented from receiving a large benefit that she was very likely to receive and, hence, reasonably hoped to receive, she has suffered a misfortune. And at least typically, disappointment is a perfectly reasonable response to this kind of misfortune.[8] E below is an attempt to formulate these suggestions with greater precision:

> E: For any person S and event P, if (1) it is highly likely that S will receive a large benefit and, knowing this, S hopes to receive it, but (2) P prevents S from receiving it and, consequently, prevents S from leading a life that would have much more value for S than the life S does lead, then (3) *ceteris paribus,* P is a misfortune for S, and severe disappointment on the part of S would be a fitting emotional response to this misfortune.[9]

[8]Notice too that it is equally plausible to suggest that when someone is prevented from being harmed in a way that was likely, she is the recipient of good fortune. It would be good fortune for me, for example, should the police lose the evidence that will otherwise put me behind bars.

[9]Condition (1) stands in need of clarification, for there are many senses in which the receipt of a benefit might be "likely." The notion of likeli-

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Notice that E does not say that (1) and (2) are necessary conditions for (3). (2) may be necessary, but I suspect that (1) is not. Suppose, for example, that I am a finalist in a sweepstakes, with a one in three chance of having a winning number and collecting $1,000,000. It is not likely that I will receive the benefit of winning. Nevertheless, because winning is not terribly unlikely, and the benefit of winning would be very large, I am (at least somewhat) inclined to say that losing would be both a misfortune and a suitable object of rather severe disappointment.[10] Accordingly, E claims only that (1) and (2) are jointly sufficient for (3).

The *ceteris paribus* clause in (3) is necessary because, although the truth of (2) ensures that P is (comparatively) undesirable *for S,* P might be desirable in other respects and, in some cases, this can make P unsuitable as an object of disappointment. Suppose, for example, that I am likely to receive a huge inheritance because a wealthy aunt, whom I have never met, is gravely ill. Suppose further that, against all odds, she recovers her health. Then even if my aunt's recovery is comparatively very bad for me—perhaps I have an immediate need for a large sum of money—disappointment is apt to be unfitting. For if I hoped to receive the inheritance, and consequently I am disappointed to learn that I will not receive it, then I must have been hoping that my aunt would die and disappointed that she survived. And that would reflect very poorly on me.[11] Thus, to accommodate this sort of case, we need

---

hood that I am employing here is sometimes referred to as "objective chance." The objective chance of a fair coin coming up heads on a given toss is one half, to cite the usual example. In appealing to this notion, I do not intend to invoke any mysterious metaphysical categories. For statements about objective chances may be translatable into statements about relative frequencies, as some have argued. What is crucial here is to avoid defining 'likely' in a way that makes it a purely subjective matter whether an event is likely. For if something could be likely simply because one regards it as so, then E would wrongly imply that, for example, the barefoot climber who believed that he was likely to reach the summit and so win the million dollars would be the victim of a misfortune when he failed to do so.

[10] I owe this example to Charles Young.

[11] On the other hand, assuming that my aunt's recovery is comparatively quite bad for me, I am inclined to describe her recovery as a misfortune for me. If I am right about this, then this case suggests that, just as we should resist the temptation to leap to the conclusion that death is a genuine evil from the premise that death is comparatively bad, we should also

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

to stipulate that the *ceteris paribus* clause in (3) is not satisfied if P (my aunt's recovery, for example) is desirable enough to make severe disappointment on S's part unfitting in spite of P's undesirability for S.

E can serve as the cornerstone of a plausible argument from deprivation. Let us return to Feldman's hypothetical plane crash. When Feldman boarded the plane, it was highly likely that he would receive the huge benefit of surviving his trip to Europe; and knowing this, he no doubt hoped to receive this benefit. But his death en route to Europe prevented him from receiving it and, consequently, prevented him from leading a life that, because it would have included things like enjoying the fruits of his retirement, would have had more than twice as much value for him as the life he did lead (by hypothesis, +1100 as compared to +500). Thus, if E is true then, *ceteris paribus,* Feldman's death en route to Europe was a misfortune for him, and severe disappointment on the part of Feldman would have been a fitting response if and when he became aware that he would suffer this misfortune.

Furthermore, in all likelihood, the *ceteris paribus* clause is satisfied. For Feldman's premature death is not apt to be desirable in any respect; and even if some good does come from it, this good is not apt to be of the kind and degree necessary to have made it inappropriate for him to have been severely disappointed by the fact that he would be deprived of the substantial benefit of surviving his trip to Europe. Perhaps severe disappointment on Feldman's part would have been unfitting had he been guilty of some crime so heinous that he deserved to die. Perhaps there are other possibilities here as well. But I think it is safe to assume that, in general, the list of possible goods that might make severe disappointment an inappropriate response to the knowledge that one will suffer a premature death like Feldman's hypothetical one is rather short, and the possibilities on it are rarely actualized.

Given E, then, we can conclude that, with few exceptions, a highly unlikely death that dashes its subject's hopes for the future by depriving her of a future that would have great value for her is a misfortune, a genuine evil and, more specifically, something to which severe disappointment is a fitting emotional response.

---

avoid leaping to this conclusion from the premise that death is a misfortune.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Nor is this conclusion threatened by Lucretius's well-known worry about temporal asymmetry.[12] Endorsing E does not commit one to the proposition that there is any misfortune or evil to be found in failing to receive life's benefits prior to the time at which one came into existence. For it is never true of anyone that it was likely that she would receive life's benefits prior to that time.[13]

3. The Evils in Death May Be Legion

Although I believe that E justifies regarding many deaths as (genuine) evils, perhaps I should say immediately that I do not believe that E provides the only adequate basis for regarding death as an evil. E justifies thinking that disappointment is typically a fitting response to the discovery that one's life will be cut short by an unlikely death. But disappointment is certainly not the only, or even the most common, negative emotional response to the discovery that death is near. Fear, horror, despair, depression, sadness, and anger are other common responses, and while some of these may be unfitting—we shouldn't assume the worst about death—it would be rather surprising if none of them were ever appropriate.

As shall become apparent below, I am convinced that a complete account of the evils in death must be pluralistic. E has a significant role to play in such an account, especially in accounting for the misfortune in a premature death. But even here E's role may be limited, for I suspect that there are several routes to the conclusion that premature death is an evil. It may be possible, for example, to construct a plausible argument to the effect that inasmuch as most of us receive the benefit of reaching old age, someone who is arbitrarily denied that benefit can reasonably be dissatisfied with her relatively meager allotment of life.

---

[12] Lucretius, *On Nature* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 3.969–74.

[13] Of course, it may be possible to construct imaginary cases of persons so deprived. Perhaps we can imagine, for example, a fetal human being suffering a freak accident that prevents its brain from developing for, say, fifty years. Begging a few metaphysical questions, we can then say that this individual whose life is decades shorter because he comes into existence decades later than he might have was deprived of many good years of life that he was likely to enjoy. But given that description, I think we would also want to say that, barring any compensating benefits from the accident, the individual in question was the victim of a misfortune. Moreover, while disappointment would not be a fitting response here, clearly dissatisfaction of some sort would be appropriate.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Furthermore, notice that E does not provide a basis for the plausible view that any premature death that has great comparative disvalue for its subject is an evil. For we can at least imagine circumstances in which a premature death would not be an unlikely event. In a plague-ridden world, for example, it might be highly unlikely for a human being not to die young. And then E would not generate the conclusion that the prospect of an early death would merit distress. This should not raise doubts about E (since E only offers sufficient conditions for an event's being an evil). But it does give us another reason to doubt that E can offer a complete account of the disvalue of premature death.

E's limitations are even more pronounced if our concern is to account for the disvalue of dying at an advanced age. This is partly because it is often unlikely (or, at least, not highly likely) that an elderly person will live substantially longer. It is also partly because the death of an elderly person often prevents this person from receiving only a relatively small amount of extra life. Furthermore, I do not think it is ageist to suggest that there are many elderly individuals who, because of ill health, or loneliness, or some other source of unhappiness, would not benefit greatly from receiving a few more days, months, or (in some cases) even years of life.

Of course, there remain many cases in which the death of an elderly person deprives him of many good years of life that he was very likely to receive. An eighty-year-old who has enjoyed excellent health, for example, might reasonably hope to receive the likely benefit of several good years of additional life. And then E would yield the conclusion that it would be appropriate for him to be disappointed should he learn that he will not receive this benefit because death will arrive sooner than he had reasonably expected. Nevertheless, it might be worth noting that his disappointment is apt to be tempered if he considers the fact that, given the number of persons who die before the age of eighty, to receive eighty years of life is to be dealt a pretty good hand. So long as one does well with respect to a given sort of good (for example, wealth, friendship, success, or life span), not doing as well as one was likely to have done with respect to that good is typically not *terribly* disappointing. Thus, put into perspective, the discovery that an unlikely death at an advanced age will deprive one of several additional years of life is apt to be less disappoint-

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

ing than the discovery that one will suffer a comparable deprivation of life at an early age.[14]

4. Gluttony and the Insatiable Hunger for Life

If my own feelings can be trusted, death at an advanced age is apt to be a genuine evil even when it is not disappointing at all. For I find it disturbing that, inevitably, I will die within the next few decades, having received, at most, only a few score years of life. Thus, what troubles me now is not some contingent fact about my life span (for example, that I will not live as long as my friends will, or that I will die before finishing my life's work, or that I will not live as long as I had reasonably expected to live), but rather a necessary fact about my life span given the human condition.[15] Let us turn, then, to the question of whether an argument from deprivation can reach the conclusion that it is a genuine evil not to live longer than a human being possibly can.

Lucretius argued that someone blessed with a long, full life is foolish if she is distressed by the fact that her life will soon be over. He suggested that this fortunate individual ought to "depart like a guest satisfied at the banquet of life, and with a calm mind . . .

[14]There are, then, at least two ways that certain unlikely deprivations can be "put into perspective," thereby tempering the disappointment that typically attends such deprivations. First, the fact that one has done well with respect to some kind of good can temper one's disappointment when one does not do as well as one was likely to have done. And second, the fact that it was unlikely that one would receive a benefit can temper one's disappointment when, even though it subsequently became likely that one would receive it, one is nevertheless deprived (as in the example of losing the winning lottery ticket down the storm drain).

Some may want to insist that in certain cases of this sort, disappointment is unfitting even if conditions (1) and (2) of E are fulfilled. My own intuitions do not support this conclusion. But if the objection were pressed, I could respond by stipulating that the *ceteris paribus* clause in E is satisfied only if the deprivation in question cannot be put into perspective in one of these two ways. This would narrow the scope of E, but E would still justify regarding the typical premature death as a misfortune and a genuine evil.

[15]Perhaps I should say, "given the human condition as we know it." Advances in the biological sciences may extend the human life span beyond a few score years. It is not clear, then, how long it is possible for a human being to live. Nevertheless, as shall become apparent below, I would not be satisfied with any finite life span that progress might bestow upon our descendants.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

welcome a carefree sleep."[16] By implication, he likened the individual who cannot accept death after enjoying a long, full life to a glutton who, having had the good fortune to be a guest at a banquet, and to feast heartily there, is nevertheless dissatisfied because he must soon depart. The proposal seems to be that such dissatisfaction manifests excessive desires.

As we have seen, E provides a basis for thinking that at least some individuals who have lived a long, full life can reasonably be dissatisfied with not having the good fortune to live even longer. For again, if an elderly individual is likely to live substantially longer, but is prevented from doing so, then (in accordance with E) some disappointment on her part is apt to be perfectly reasonable. Nevertheless, one might insist that Lucretius is at least partly right. For it is not implausible to suppose that someone who has already enjoyed a long life does display excessive desires if she is troubled by the fact that, given the natural limit on the human life span, her life *inevitably* must end in the not too distant future. To be troubled by the prospect of this humanly unavoidable deprivation of life would reflect a desire to receive more years of life's benefits than is humanly possible. And any desire for a humanly unattainable benefit is certainly a good candidate for being excessive.[17]

Some, however, have been quick to dismiss the idea that the inevitability of a deprivation can be a basis for denying that its prospect merits distress. Thus, Thomas Nagel writes:

> Suppose that we were all inevitably going to die in *agony*—physical agony lasting six months. Would inevitability make *that* prospect any less unpleasant? And why should it be different for a deprivation?[18]

---

[16]Lucretius, *On Nature*, 3.935–36.

[17]Perhaps Lucretius was thinking along these lines when he offered this advice to the old who cannot bear the thought of their passing: "Come now, give up all these things which are foreign to your time of life, and with a calm mind yield them to your sons, for yield you *must*" (my emphasis). Here Lucretius seems to move from the premise that *inevitably* the elderly are soon to be deprived of life's benefits to the conclusion that it is inappropriate for the elderly to be troubled by the prospect of this deprivation. See Lucretius, 3.959.

[18]Nagel, "Death," 10. To be fair to Nagel, there are indications (9–10) that he may not regard this dismissal of the relevance of inevitability as decisive. He does concede that "we have to set some limits on *how* possible a possibility must be for its nonrealization to be a misfortune (or good fortune, should the possibility be a bad one)." And he suggests that the "most serious difficulty with the view that death is always an evil" is to justify regarding as a misfortune a "limitation, like mortality, that is normal

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

But surely this sort of dismissal is too facile. Granted, the prospect of inevitable agony merits distress. But agony inherently involves distress, whereas deprivations do not. And although there are deprivations that clearly merit distress even though they are, in some sense, inevitable,[19] I have been unable to discover a deprivation that is inevitable in the strong sense of being humanly unavoidable and is, nevertheless, unquestionably a genuine evil. Furthermore, there are countless examples of humanly unavoidable deprivations that, unquestionably, are not genuine evils. Clearly it would be silly, for example, to be troubled by lacking omnipotence, or the service of a genie, or the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound. And if such benefits were not humanly unreachable, then it would not be so unreasonable to be troubled by their lack. If deserts were littered with lamps containing all-powerful yet servile genies, for example, then (in accordance with E) we would regard the unlikely event of failing to find one as a misfortune to which disappointment would be a fitting response. At the very least, then, it is not an obvious mistake to suppose that it is precisely because certain deprivations are inevitable, in the sense of being humanly unavoidable, that they cannot possibly merit dissatisfaction.

Nor is it an obvious mistake to suppose with Lucretius that such dissatisfaction would manifest excessive desires. Imagine someone saying, "I have a wonderful family, excellent friends, and a great career, and my many meaningful projects and pursuits have all yielded much fruit, but look at what I lack: I'm not omnipotent,

---

to the species." Clearly struggling with this issue, he goes on to make a series of puzzling remarks. He says, for example, that a "man's sense of his own experience . . . does not embody this idea of a natural limit," and that human beings do not have an "essentially limited future." No doubt, but it is not clear what conclusion can be drawn from these facts. He then says, "Normality seems to have nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer." Here he seems to make the same mistake made by Feldman. Granted, even if death in a few score years is inevitable, it may be good to live longer and, hence, comparatively bad not to live longer. But again, the real issue is not whether death is comparatively bad for the one who dies, but whether it is a genuine evil for the one who dies.

[19]For example, a woman whose society has deeply rooted sexist norms suffers a misfortune when, inevitably, she is denied benefits (such as the opportunity to develop her talents) that she ought to receive. And although disappointment would not be the appropriate response to her inevitable deprivation, a variety of other negative emotional responses (for example, dissatisfaction and resentment) would be quite fitting.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

I'm not adored by all, and I can't even fly like a bird. Woe is me." Clearly this person wants too much, and it seems plausible to suppose that he wants too much precisely because he wants more than is humanly possible.[20] Perhaps, then, the same is true of someone who is dissatisfied with a normal human life span. Immortality is no more a human possibility than omnipotence. Thus, it is tempting to conclude that those who want to live longer than a human being can possibly live unreasonably want more than a human being can possibly receive. Like the glutton who cannot bear the thought of leaving the banquet, their misfortune is that they want too much, not that they fail to get what they want.

If we concede the premise that it is excessive for a human being to want a humanly unreachable benefit, then I can see no way to avoid the conclusion that it is unfitting to be troubled by the fact that one will not receive more years of life's benefits than is humanly possible. But should we concede the premise? Granted, it does provide an initially attractive explanation of why lacking a benefit like omnipotence does not merit dissatisfaction. But consideration of other cases raises some doubt about this explanation. Suppose, for example, that human beings inevitably lost their ability to enjoy themselves during the last six months of their lives. I am somewhat inclined to say that it would be appropriate to be troubled by the prospect of this deprivation even though it would be humanly impossible to avoid it. Or suppose that, as many people rightly or wrongly believe, aging inevitably brings with it a decline in mental acuity, or in the capacity to experience intense sensual pleasures, or in some other desirable human capacity. Again, I feel some temptation to say that it is reasonable to be troubled by the prospect of the deprivation regardless of how inevitable it might be.

Perhaps, then, it can be appropriate to be troubled by a humanly unavoidable deprivation. But until we discover a convincing expla-

[20]My use of the terms 'want' and 'desire' in this essay is rather narrow. Most of us would (very reasonably I think) prefer to be omnipotent, but we do not desire omnipotence in the sense I intend. That is, we do not want it in the sense that implies that we will be dissatisfied if we do not receive it. This sense of 'want' and 'desire' is not uncommon. If I told you, for example, that I want to be omnipotent, you would be more likely to respond, "Too bad," or, "You want too much," rather than, "Who doesn't?"

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

nation of why certain humanly unavoidable deprivations merit distress while others do not, any conclusion to this effect must remain highly tentative. Hence, at the very least, the argument we have been considering poses a serious challenge to someone who wants to claim that it is a genuine evil not to receive more years of life's benefits than is humanly possible. For in order to establish that this deprivation is a genuine evil, one must find a way to distinguish it from the many humanly unavoidable deprivations that clearly cannot be regarded as genuine evils.

5. The Meager Prospects of the Dying

I shall try to meet this challenge in section 6 below. Here I want to discuss what is perhaps the most common variety of those arguments from deprivation that yield the rather paradoxical conclusion that it can be an evil for a human being not to live longer than a human being possibly can. It is an argument that, if successful, would meet the challenge posed above in a very natural way; but we shall see that substantial obstacles stand in the way of its success.

Consider again the hypothetical race of human beings who inevitably fail to enjoy anything in the six months prior to death. What distinguishes their inevitable deprivation from inevitable deprivations that clearly cannot be regarded as genuine evils, deprivations such as not finding Aladdin's lamp, or not being able to leap tall buildings in a single bound? Notice that one striking difference is this. A human being can flourish without, for example, ever finding Aladdin's lamp. Thus, receiving this benefit is not just impossible; it is unnecessary in the sense that one can fare well enough without it (well enough, that is, to make dissatisfaction an inappropriate response to how well one fares). On the other hand, someone deprived of all enjoyment for a six-month period cannot be described as flourishing or faring well during those six months. Such a person is not even faring "reasonably well" or "fairly well." Enjoyment is indispensable in a way that finding Aladdin's lamp is not: since one cannot possibly fare even reasonably well without it, one cannot fare well enough if one never receives it. And perhaps this explains why it is reasonable for our hypothetical race of human beings to be dissatisfied with the last months of their lives. For deprived of all enjoyment, these impoverished creatures can-

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

not possibly fare even reasonably well during these months. It would seem, then, that they cannot fare well enough.

If this is so, then death at any age may be a serious evil. For inasmuch as the dead do not receive any of life's benefits, they neither flourish, nor fare well, nor fare even reasonably well. They are permanently denied a variety of indispensable benefits, including enjoyment, and so it would seem that they fail to fare well enough to make dissatisfaction an inappropriate response to the prospect of their condition.

Of course, as optimists about death are quick to point out, the dead are not troubled by their impoverishment. Death has liberated them from all of the pain, discomfort, and distress that oppressed them in life. Moreover, some have argued (quite persuasively I think) that the dead can even receive certain positive benefits, posthumous fame, for example, or the posthumous advancement of a central life project. Nevertheless, whatever one might say on behalf of death, its advantages pale by comparison to the usual advantages of life. To see this clearly, one only has to imagine how poor one's prospects for the remainder of one's life would have to be before one could reasonably envy the prospects of the dying. Indeed, I can see no way to plausibly deny that, as judged by the same standards we apply to the prospects of those in the midst of life, the prospects of the dying are extremely poor.

But perhaps some will object that, although the dead fare poorly by comparison with most of the living, it does not follow that dissatisfaction is a fitting response to the prospect of death. For given that life's evils, as well as life's goods, are absent in death, there is no reason to suppose that the dead fare poorly in the noncomparative sense that whatever evils befall them exceed whatever benefits they receive. Presumably, the dead (at least typically) neither fare well nor fare poorly in this sense. And whereas delight is an appropriate response to the prospect of faring well, and distress an appropriate response to the prospect of faring poorly (in the noncomparative sense), it is tempting to think that equanimity is the fitting response to the prospect of neither.

This objection fails, however, because it rests on the false supposition that the prospect of a future in which the evils do not exceed the goods cannot merit distress. Should one of us learn that tomorrow a brain injury will render her incapable of both suffering and enjoyment, and will in every other way make her

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

future existence neither good nor bad, she would be horrified and rightly so. (E captures one reason why it would be appropriate for her to be distressed. For her injury would make her life far worse than it was likely to have been.) Thus, by itself, the supposition that death does not involve faring poorly (that is, does not involve a negative balance of goods to evils) is insufficient grounds for denying that the prospect of death merits distress.

Another tempting objection urges that the standards to which arguments of the sort under consideration appeal are standards of well-being, and so are misapplied when applied to the dead. Since the dead do not exist, they occupy no level of well-*being*. Thus, they cannot possibly occupy a substandard level of well-being.

I would need to be convinced that we cannot sensibly speak of the dead as occupying a level of well-being. For if at least some nonexistent objects have being, as more than a few have argued,[21] then the fact that the dead do not exist does not necessarily preclude them from occupying a level of well-being. Furthermore, I suspect that it makes sense to speak of the dead as occupying a level of well-being because it is possible to refer to the living person who was, and to assign this *past-existent* a level of well-being in the present based on the no doubt limited extent to which he is now being benefited or harmed.

But we needn't resort to exotic metaphysical claims to undermine the objection at hand. For there are two ways that one can fail to occupy an acceptable level of well-being: one is to occupy a different level, the other is to occupy no level at all. And even if we want to say that the dead occupy no level at all, it would be absurd for us to take consolation in this fact if it is also a fact that occupying no level of well-being is no less undesirable than occupying some unacceptably low level of well-being. This point can be made perspicuous by comparing the (biologically) dead to someone who is kept alive forever in an irreversible state of unconsciousness. The eternally unconscious individual exists and, being the sort of thing that can be benefited and harmed, occupies a level of well-being. Thus, the objection at hand gives us no reason to deny that because this level is below what would (ordinarily) be minimally acceptable, he suffers an evil. (I am not saying that he

[21] See, for example, Palle Yourgrau, "The Dead," *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1987): 84–101.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

does suffer an evil; the point is that the objection under consideration does not provide a reason to think that he doesn't.) But if it is allowed that this individual suffers an evil in virtue of occupying an unacceptably low level of well-being, then it would be absurd to insist that those who pass out of existence and so cease to occupy any level of well-being do not suffer an evil. For if it would be fitting to be dissatisfied with one's prospects should one face an eternity of unconscious biological life, then surely it is also fitting to be dissatisfied with one's prospects when one faces biological death (as indicated by how absurd it would be to argue that the otherwise eternally unconscious individual ought to be killed so that through nonexistence he might escape the evil of occupying a substandard level of well-being).

Let us move on, then, to more serious objections. Recall that the argument under consideration moves from the assumption that the dead are permanently deprived of life's benefits to the intermediate conclusion that the dead never fare even fairly or reasonably well, and from this intermediate conclusion to the final conclusion that death is a genuine evil and, more specifically, that the dead fare so poorly that dissatisfaction is an appropriate response to the prospect of dying. But it appears that such reasoning is undermined by Lucretius's remarks about temporal asymmetry. For if we say that (1) the dead do not fare even reasonably well because they do not receive any of life's benefits, and (2) the dead suffer an evil because they do not fare even reasonably well, then we commit ourselves to the implausible position that those who do not yet exist suffer precisely the same evil, for they too fail to receive any of life's benefits and so do not fare even reasonably well. Even more telling, perhaps, is the fact that endorsing (1) and (2) would commit us to the absurd proposition that undergoing suspended animation for, say, a million years would be an evil simply because one would not enjoy life's benefits, and so would not fare even reasonably well, during those years.

The fundamental problem here is that there is a huge gap between the premise that death precludes the possibility of its subject ever again faring even reasonably well to the conclusion that the dead do not fare well enough to make dissatisfaction an inappropriate response to the knowledge that one must die. For how well one has to fare in order to fare well enough varies with the circumstances. If I am undergoing an extended period of suspended

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

animation, and my total life prospects will in no way be reduced by this suspension of life's benefits, then I am faring well enough during this period even though I am not receiving any of life's benefits. Similarly, even though I received none of life's benefits prior to existing, it would be inappropriate for me to be dissatisfied with how well I fared then. For, again, there was nothing unacceptable about failing to fare well, or even reasonably well, during this time. But given that one can, under certain circumstances, fare well enough without faring even reasonably well during an immense and perhaps even an infinite stretch of time, we cannot establish the conclusion that the dead do not fare well enough simply by pointing to the fact that, permanently denied life's benefits, the dead never fare even reasonably well.

Furthermore, there is a plausible Epicurean argument to the conclusion that it is possible to fare well enough after death. For notice that it is unreasonable to want to fare impossibly well during the course of one's lifetime. It would be silly, for example, to be dissatisfied by the fact that one will never experience greater joy than a human being can possibly experience. Our standards for assessing whether a human being's quality of life is adequate are shaped by whatever limits nature has placed on the quality of human life. But then why shouldn't our standards for assessing whether a human being's quantity of life is adequate be similarly shaped by whatever limit nature has placed on the human life span? It seems plausible to reject any apparent asymmetry between quality and quantity here in favor of the Epicurean view that it is excessive to want to do (qualitatively or quantitatively) better than a human being can possibly do. This view allows for the possibility that it is reasonable to want a good *human* life, and it even allows for the possibility that it is reasonable to want a long *human* life, but it precludes the possibility that it is reasonable to want a better or longer life than is humanly possible. Hence, it precludes the possibility that dissatisfaction is a fitting response to the limit that nature has placed on the human life span.

This second "asymmetry argument" reinforces the temporal asymmetry argument. For we now have a plausible explanation of why it is unfitting to be dissatisfied with the fact that, prior to existing, one did not fare even reasonably well—namely, this fact does not preclude one from doing as well as a human being can possibly do, and hence does not preclude one from doing well enough.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Furthermore, if this explanation is correct, there is no temporal asymmetry: it is also unfitting to be dissatisfied by the *mere* fact that, after one no longer exists, one will not enjoy any of life's benefits. For, again, this fact does not preclude one from doing as well as a human being can possibly do.

It appears, then, that substantial Epicurean obstacles stand in the way of the attempt to argue that it is fitting for us to be dissatisfied with our admittedly meager prospects for the time after we are dead. And yet, in spite of these obstacles, I am inclined towards reformulating the argument rather than abandoning the attempt. Perhaps I am biased by my own negative feelings about death. But the underlying intuition here is difficult to dismiss: It seems fitting for me, an individual who rightly values his own well-being, to be disturbed by the fact that, however good my immediate prospects might be, my long-term prospects are not good. After I die, I will receive none of life's benefits, ever again. And Epicurean reassurances notwithstanding, I find it difficult to believe that it is unreasonable for someone with a healthy measure of self-love to be dissatisfied with such meager prospects.

Although our discussion in this section has been somewhat inconclusive, it is worth noting that one positive result may be forthcoming. For we have stumbled upon another justification for regarding premature death as an evil. Even if it is unreasonable to want a better or longer life than is humanly possible, it can hardly be unreasonable for a human being to want a good human life. Thus, given that having a good human life requires receiving a certain quantity of life's benefits (or a certain quantity of the benefits of each stage of life), an early death would typically deprive its subject of benefits she reasonably wants. Accordingly, it would be appropriate to be dissatisfied with the prospect of such a death.[22]

Of course, one possible limitation to this argument from deprivation is that it may apply only to *very* early death. For it is not obvious whether a good human life must extend into old age or even into middle age. On the other hand, unlike the argument from deprivation based on E, this new argument would apply even to an early death in a world where early death was the norm. For

[22]I owe this point to Michael Ialacci.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

no matter how likely an early death, a good human life may require living longer.

6. Death and the Sadness of Saying Good-bye

But let us return to the central concern of the preceding section: the problem of how to distinguish our inevitable failure to receive more than a few score years of life's benefits from those humanly unavoidable deprivations that clearly are not genuine evils. A second approach to solving this problem is to argue that it is appropriate to be troubled by certain kinds of *losses* even if they are humanly unavoidable. By 'a loss' I mean 'a permanent deprivation of a benefit that one has already received'. Thus, since I have never, for example, flown like a bird, possessed Aladdin's lamp, or climbed Everest, I cannot possibly lose these benefits. But I am well acquainted with the usual benefits of human existence. Thus, I can and will lose these benefits. Death may not be the instrument of this loss (since a severe injury, for example, could cause me to lose life's benefits prior to my death), but the inevitability of this loss is a consequence of the inevitability of death.

The possibility of basing an argument from deprivation on the significance of loss has been dismissed by some on the ground that losses are not inherently worse than other sorts of deprivations. The following passage from an essay by Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer is representative:

> It might seem appealing to suggest that what makes death a bad thing for a person is that it is the deprivation of good things already had by the person. . . .
>
> The plausibility of this suggestion may come from a psychological truth which says that, in general, if a person has experienced a good thing and then been deprived of it, he tends to lament its absence (to "miss it") in a way in which a person who has never experienced the good *does not*. . . . But why would one regret the absence of something good to which one has grown accustomed? Presumably because one tends to be frustrated by the lack of such goods—their absence causes *unpleasant experiences*. . . . In general, it *is* true that, when one is accustomed to a good thing, its absence causes unpleasant experiences and is therefore especially regrettable.
>
> But clearly this principle is not applicable to death, since death deprives a person of goods *without* causing *any* experiences at all.[23]

[23]Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?"

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

I want to argue that this dismissal is too quick and that it is possible to construct a plausible argument from deprivation based on the significance of loss. Indeed, I suspect that there are multiple possibilities here,[24] but I want to focus on an argument that I believe to be especially worthy of attention, partly because it has been rather neglected, and partly because, if successful, it would show that some of our most negative feelings about death are perfectly reasonable. In outline, the argument I have in mind is simply this: Death is a genuine evil. For death takes from us the objects of our emotional attachments, and sadness is a fitting response to the prospect of losing the object of an emotional attachment regardless of how unavoidable that loss might be.

This argument is apt to seem attractive to those of us who, when reflecting on death, are liable to sad thoughts such as, "Never again shall I look into my beloved's eyes." For the sadness here is the sadness in a good-bye. It is the sadness of losing someone to whom one is emotionally attached.

Most human beings form strong emotional attachments. These attachments may be to persons, places, possessions, or even memories (to mention only a few of the possibilities). Regardless of their object, emotional attachments carry with them an aversion

---

in *The Metaphysics of Death,* ed. John Martin Fischer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 226–27.

[24]One possibility here is suggested by F. M. Kamm. She argues that losses are typically worse than mere privations of benefits at least partly because they involve a decline from a relatively good condition to a relatively bad one. Thus, on her view, death is troubling partly because it involves a sharp decline from being a recipient of life's benefits to not being a recipient of those benefits. See *Morality, Mortality,* vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40–42, 67–71.

Another possibility is suggested by considering just how high a standard is being set by Lucretius when he insists that it is unreasonable for the old to be troubled by the loss of life's benefits. I have never ruled the universe or flown like a bird. This makes it easy to accept the fact that I will never receive these benefits. But I am well acquainted with the usual benefits of human existence. This is partly why I want them. And regardless of how long I live, I cannot simply choose to stop wanting more of these benefits as if my desires flowed from a spigot that can be shut off at will. It is rather demanding, then, for Lucretius to insist that it is foolish and vicious of the elderly to continue wanting, for example, to be with their loved ones simply because they cannot possibly be with them too much longer. On the contrary, it may even be vicious to stop wanting to be with them. Imagine telling a loved one, "I have had my fill of life and am ready to die. Never seeing you again is not troubling to me."

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

to loss. So long as you are emotionally attached to someone or something, that person's or thing's presence is precious to you. Thus, while you may not mind periods of absence, especially short periods, you do not want to be deprived forever of the presence of that person or thing. And the stronger the attachment, the more unbearable the thought of permanent deprivation.

The problem with such a loss is not simply that you are deprived of any benefits that may result from the presence of the object of your attachment. Suppose that I have thoroughly enjoyed my visits to New York City, but I know I shall never return. Even if I know that I would benefit greatly from returning, this may be of little concern to me since, as a native Californian, I am not attached to New York City. But if Woody Allen were to leave New York City knowing that he would never return, he would be deeply depressed, perhaps even suicidal. New York is his city; he is strongly attached to it. Nor is the difference here only that I would derive less pleasure from returning to New York than Mr. Allen would. I might adore New York but, not being attached to it, I might not mind never going back to it. And it is possible to be strongly attached to a city even if one derives very little pleasure from its presence.

Following Brueckner and Fischer, it might be proposed that what would distinguish Mr. Allen's loss from my own is that he would find the absence of his beloved city terribly unpleasant, whereas I, not being attached to this city, would hardly notice its absence from my life. This would be a relevant difference between his loss and my own, but it is not the only or even the most significant difference. For the primary problem in losing the object of an emotional attachment is not the unpleasantness of the loss, but rather the loss itself. Because Mr. Allen is attached to New York, its presence is precious to him and for that reason he desperately wants to avoid permanently being deprived of this presence. (He might also want to avoid the unpleasantness of the deprivation, but this is apt to be secondary.) On the other hand, since I am not attached to New York City, any desire I have to return is moderate by comparison.

To use a different example, should I learn that soon I will see a dear friend for the last time, I would dread my loss even if I also learned (1) that a spell had been cast that would make me forget her and thereby prevent me from being aware of my loss, and (2) that I would, as a result of losing her, meet someone else who

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

would immediately take her place in my affections. For given my attachment to her, I want very much to avoid losing her forever even if this loss would be neither unpleasant for me nor even something of which I am aware. And because I am attached to *her,* the benefit of her presence is not replaceable by an equal or even greater benefit.

I suspect that many people find the thought of dying disturbing partly because it does involve the loss of persons or things to which they are emotionally attached. Indeed, perhaps some of the variety one finds in attitudes towards death is due to the fact that some of us have strong emotional attachments while others do not. There are some who, although still alive, have already lost the persons and things to which they were once strongly attached. The most common example, of course, is the elderly woman who has outlived all of her close relatives and friends. (Even one's hometown may change so much in the course of a long life that one's attachment to it gradually weakens.) Such persons, even if they are content with life, may not find the sadness in the thought of death that is found by those who have not yet lost the objects of their attachments. On the other extreme, perhaps the miserable sometimes cling desperately to their miserable lives at least partly because they are deeply attached to persons or things, or even to life itself.

In spite of its initial plausibility, defending the view that death is an evil by appeal to the sadness of losing the object of an emotional attachment is no easy task. Besides the general difficulty of precisely characterizing the alleged evil, such an appeal must overcome at least two serious objections. First, in the ordinary case of losing someone or something to which you are emotionally attached, the loss is an evil because, after the loss, you remain attached to what is lost. With time, that attachment typically weakens and eventually may disappear altogether. In that case, the loss is no longer a serious problem. But if detachment is the solution to a loss, then it is not clear why death itself isn't a solution to the problem it seems to create. For upon dying, the deceased is no longer attached to that which he loses through death. Rather, he and all of his attachments are no more.

A successful reply here will no doubt begin by insisting that death does not bring with it detachment in the way that time can in the case of ordinary losses. Death prevents detachment just as

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

much as it eliminates attachment. Hence, death does not provide the solution that time offers in the case of ordinary losses. The crucial issue, then, is whether it provides something just as good. I am inclined to say that it does *not,* on the grounds that because one dies attached, one's death clearly prevents one from fulfilling the desires that partly constitute one's attachments, including the desire not to lose that to which one is attached. I desperately do not want to lose my beloved forever. My death would ensure losing her forever. The fact that death eliminates the desire does not obviate the fact that death also prevents its fulfillment.

A second objection urges that it is no evil to be deprived by death of the objects of one's attachments because it is unreasonable to form such attachments. If Epicurus was correct in claiming that practical wisdom involves paring down the desires so that one wants only those things that one can obtain and that bring happiness without pain, then it is unwise to form strong emotional attachments precisely because of the impermanence of oneself and others.[25] Thus, the Epicurean might object that the desire for permanence inherent in attachments is a foolish or excessive desire, and so its nonfulfillment is not a genuine evil.[26]

Two lines of reply are possible here. One is to insist that the Epicurean project of overcoming attachment is futile. Humans unavoidably form emotional attachments. Hence, the desire not to be permanently deprived of the objects of one's attachments is unavoidable for human beings. Such a desire cannot, therefore, be described as excessive or unreasonable.

This is not to say that the nonfulfillment of an unavoidable de-

---

[25]Much of what we know about Epicurus's ethical system can be found in his *Letter to Menoeceus,* in *Letters, Principle Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 53–59.

[26]Certain Buddhists might raise similar concerns. For it is a tenet of Buddhism that suffering is the product of attachment, of the grasping sort of desire that makes us cling to whatever we have (including ourselves). To rid ourselves of this sort of desire, we need to overcome the illusion that there is anything to cling to, that is, we must recognize that radical impermanence is one of the marks of all being. Even the persistence of the self is regarded as an illusion, and hence clinging to the self is a product of ignorance. Accordingly, we can free ourselves from our attachments if we can fully realize that everything is radically impermanent. And having freed ourselves from our attachments, we will be freed from our fear and loathing of death. (As many Buddhists would readily affirm, this is easier said than done.)

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

sire is always an evil. One might have an unavoidable desire for something bad. But in the case of most attachments, we desire something it would be good to have. It would be good for me if I did not lose the objects of my emotional attachments. Therefore, if my desire for this good is unavoidable, then its nonfulfillment is a genuine evil.

But is this desire truly unavoidable? Many human beings (including, apparently, Epicurus) have claimed to have achieved a life of detachment. Thus, the burden of proof must fall on those who deny the possibility of this achievement. Accordingly, I am more inclined to rely upon a second possible line of reply, which is to argue that the cure offered by the Epicurean is apt to be worse than the disease. Emotional attachments are, in spite of their costs, a rich source of meaning in the lives of most human beings. Hence, by pursuing a life of detachment, one may well condemn oneself to an impoverished existence. But then it can hardly be unreasonable to form attachments even though this does involve wanting things that one cannot possibly have.

Even this reply is little more than a suggestion, and so I must concede that I have failed to firmly establish the position that it is fitting to be saddened by the fact that death deprives us of the objects of our emotional attachments. More work needs to be done to reveal the nature and value of emotional attachments in order to settle this matter conclusively.

7. Towards a Complete Account of the Disvalue of Death

To conclude, it appears that at least one argument from deprivation (namely, the argument based on E) can successfully establish that, typically, an early death is a genuine evil. But it is less clear whether an argument from deprivation can reach the conclusion that it is a genuine evil not to live longer than a human being possibly can. For the deprivation here is inevitable in the strong sense of being humanly unavoidable. Thus, such an argument must meet the challenge of distinguishing this deprivation from those many humanly unavoidable deprivations that are not genuine evils. I have briefly explored two promising approaches to meeting this challenge and, taking the second of these, I have reached the conclusion that death at any age is apt to be a serious evil in virtue of depriving its subject of the objects of her emotional attachments.

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

However, lingering Epicurean doubts leave open the possibility of retreating to less troubling ground.

Even if both of the arguments from deprivation presented here succeed, it is worth emphasizing that I do not think that they can provide a complete account of what is bad about death. There may be evils in death that do not involve deprivations at all. And even if that is not the case, there are many plausible arguments from deprivation that I have not considered here. I have not, for example, explored F. M. Kamm's suggestion that there is an evil to be found in the fact that death involves a decline from a relatively good condition to a relatively bad one. Nor have I investigated the possibility that someone who is prevented by death from completing her projects has (at least typically) thereby suffered an evil. Thus, this essay offers only a partial account of the disvalue of death (and a few suggestions on how to move towards a complete account).

Regardless of whether this partial account proves to be successful, I will regard this essay as a success if it nudges the contemporary philosophical discussion of arguments from deprivation in a more fruitful direction. I can reasonably hope that it will. For, at the very least, this essay demonstrates the importance of addressing the neglected question of how to distinguish deprivations that merit distress from deprivations that, although comparatively very bad, are not the least bit troubling. This question should be of interest to anyone who wants to know whether the fact that death deprives us of life's benefits is any more suitable as a basis for dissatisfaction with the human condition than our inevitable failure to happen upon Aladdin's lamp.

Kansas State University

This content downloaded from 198.11.29.155 on Fri, 03 Jul 2015 23:30:52 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions