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Philosophical Profiles

Ben Bradley

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IN BRIEF

Ben Bradley is the Allan and Anita Sutton Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University. Besides articles too numerous to list, and chapters in such volumes as *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue* and *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*, Ben has written the books *Well Being and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009) and *Well-Being* (Polity Press, 2015), and co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (Oxford University Press, 2012). As might be apparent, Ben is morbidly obsessed with death, although I doubt he would phrase it quite that way, and he seems remarkably cheerful, despite arguing that one's death does indeed harm one. His other major interest, which overlaps, is in the nature of value, where he defends the old-fashioned and unpopular view of hedonism, that the only intrinsic good is pleasure and the only intrinsically bad thing is pain. Ben is an admitted bullet-biter: he is used to incredulous stares (most notably for his view that dead people and possibly even never-existing potential people, have a well-being level) and is unfazed by them. He will defend his commitment to simple theories to suspiciously arcane lengths. I suspect that Ben's obsession with death and his fondness for baseball are related.

DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with Ben Bradley on 12 June 2018.

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Ben Bradley

a philosophical profile

SC: When did you realize you were going to be a philosopher?

BB: I guess like most people I had no idea what philosophy was until I got to college. And, I took a logic class as a freshman and did well in it, and thought, I had no other direction really. I was a music student at the time, but I didn't want to be a musician, or I didn't have any plan to become a musician, so I thought this seems good and I just took a bunch more classes and enjoyed them and thought I could do this for a long time. So that's kind of a boring story. But yeah, I enjoyed the logic, the puzzle solving, and it was easy and fun, but I enjoyed reading Ayer, Mill, Plato—I just really enjoyed reading these people and thinking about these kind of things for the first time, and really got hooked on it I guess.

That's kind of an interesting selection of names. Ayer—the thing about *Language Truth and Logic* is that it's sort of a blast furnace. "Let's get rid of everything!" It's sort of a Humean "burn everything" kind of approach. Is that what appealed to you?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, as a 19 year old I was pretty into that sort of burn-everything idea. And as a kid I was religious—at least I went to church every week. You know, as I became like 16, 17, I started to have doubts, you know, and a lot of things about the church bothered me.

What denomination?

Presbyterian. So you know, it wasn't horrible, but it was just—the hypocrisy, and also not seeing why I should think any of these things were true, were issues for me. And so reading Ayer, and just saying, "That's because this is all meaningless!" I'm not sure he's right about that, but at the time that was an appeal for me.

I'm going to read a quote from the introduction to this book of yours [*Well Being and Death*, Oxford University Press, 2009], and I'll ask you to expound upon it. So here's the quote: "I think simplicity is a very desirable feature of the theory. My aim is to take a handful of core insights and to formulate views that most accurately capture the ideas behind those insights, while completely eschewing any accretions or modifications that would give the appearance of *ad hoccery* in order to satisfy intuitions about particular cases." And you go on to say that "complicated views always go wrong somewhere" (xx). So, first of all, why is simplicity so important, and second maybe you can talk about the handful of core insights that you particularly value?

Sure. Well, it's hard to say why simplicity is important. So, you take a simple theory and you think it has a problem with this one case, and then you say, "Well let's just change the theory and make it a little more complicated and carve out an exception for this

case." And there's always an unintended consequence when you do that, and it's just a matter of finding out what it is. That's sort of the general attitude that I have. And so, you know, some of what we have to do is show what goes wrong when you carve out these exceptions, right? But I think it's also important just to forcefully state the case for the simple view, and part of it is also when you have the simple view, if the core insight is right, and you start carving out exceptions, then you're in a way saying that the core insight is *not* really right. If this was such a good idea, then how come it goes wrong in these cases? And so, just speaking very abstractly here, the thought is just, "Well, let's suppose it doesn't go wrong and let's just see what the big picture is when we develop these thoughts."

So you're a big bullet-biter?

I am a little bit. I mean, it's obviously not—you don't want to bite too many bullets, but I'm willing to do it. I prefer to do that than carve out exceptions and make things really complicated.

Okay, so what are the core insights that are your credo? You say on page 16 that there's the *deprivation account* of death, there's *hedonism* of course, which you go into more detail in this nice little book [*Well Being*, Polity, 2015]. Then there're more, kind of down in the nitty-gritty views, like the idea that there's a zero well-being level for dead people. And, also the view that is labeled now *subsequentism*, that death is bad for its victim after they're dead. Okay, so, let's start with the deprivation account. Obviously I think—you start with hedonism in this book, and you've got this whole book on it, but I think it's nice to start by talking about the deprivation account just because I think that's something that everybody can get the significance of immediately.

So that's really the core view that I'm defending in that book, is the deprivation account of the badness of death. And so the simple staging of the view is how bad death is for you, when it's bad, is determined by how much of a good life the death deprives you of. Or, death could be good for you if death deprives you of a bad existence. But, the core idea is just, to figure out the value or disvalue of death for you, you look at how well things would have gone for you had you not died. That's the basic deprivation account.

Okay, let me give the background or the enemy against whom the deprivation account was developed and that is of course Epicurus. So Epicurus, famously for philosophers (and perhaps lots of non-philosophers too) argues that death isn't bad for the one who dies. And the basic argument is, "My death won't be bad for me because I won't be around." I think a lot of people find that intuitive, that "why should I care? I won't be there." And, of course the background is he's a hedonist, but I don't think the argument really depends on that, and of course you defend hedonism, so clearly you don't think it leads to Epicurus's view. But the essential idea is, look, suffering I have to experience. And harm is suffering, and I can't experience it if I don't exist, so you know, chill. Don't worry about death. And of course his follower Lucretius later says we don't care about the time before we existed, we

don't lie awake at night thinking, "I wasn't around to see WWI" or something—"Man! That's terrible, my pre-birth non-existence eats away at me"—and Lucretius says that doesn't bother us, and we should have the same view towards our post-death non-existence, it just should mean nothing to us. Now, the deprivation account, how does that response to that?

So first I should say there's a way in which Epicurus is right, and that is that, when you're dead, on my view and on most materialist views, you don't exist anymore.

You might exist as a corpse, as (for example) Fred Feldman says.

But even if you continue to exist as a corpse, nothing bad is going to be happening to you at that time, and that actually, though it might seem uncontroversial, it's not uncontroversial because on some views, there can still be bad things that happen to you after you die. On desire-fulfillment views, for example, at least on certain views, it can turn out that bad things can be happening to you because all the things that you wanted to happen while you were alive are being frustrated after you die. Things are continuing to go badly for you, even while you're dead. And on some views that turns out to be true. And I agree with Epicurus that those views are false, that once you either go out of existence or become a corpse nothing intrinsically bad is happening to you anymore. Nothing bad *in itself* is happening to you anymore. The deprivation view says, that doesn't mean that death isn't bad *at all*. The way that death is bad is that it's bad extrinsically, or instrumentally. It's bad because it *prevents good* things from happening to you. So, death is bad for you in the same way that if you were put into a dreamless sleep that was permanent, you might think that was bad for you because look at all the stuff that you'd be missing out on if you were put into a permanent dreamless sleep. And death is bad for you in that same kind of way.

"And I agree with Epicurus that those views are false, that once you either go out of existence or become a corpse nothing intrinsically bad is happening to you anymore. Nothing bad in itself is happening to you anymore. The deprivation view says, that doesn't mean that death isn't bad at all. The way that death is bad is that it's bad extrinsically, or instrumentally. It's bad because it prevents good things from happening to you."

What's interesting is you're arguing on the one hand against Epicurus, because Epicurus says that death doesn't harm you. And you say "*Au contraire!* It *does* harm you, just extrinsically." But of course you're also arguing with other deprivation account theorists, and a couple of well-known ones are Thomas Nagel and Fred Feldman. For example, Thomas Nagel says that there are bad things that can happen to you that don't involve suffering, that include something like the *Truman Show* experience, right? Apparently it's the 20th anniversary of that movie, which makes me feel very old. But, of course in that movie he thinks his wife loves him, when in fact she loathes him and she's an actor paid to play the part. And supposing he dies without ever finding out, he has still been harmed by this. So you can be harmed without knowing it, is what he argues for. Would you agree with that?

Well, so I do agree that you can be harmed without knowing it, just not in the way that Nagel thinks. So I don't think something intrinsically bad can be happening to you without you being aware of it because I think the only *intrinsically* bad things that happen to you are pains. Unless you can be in pain without being aware of it, which is controversial— you would wonder if it would be bad then. So I don't think anything can be bad in itself for you without you being aware of it. But, something could be extrinsically bad for you without you being aware of it. And death is like that. If death

comes suddenly, if you die in your sleep, you may never see it coming. You may never know you are going to die, but it would still be depriving you of all these good things, and so it would be bad for you regardless. So I think Nagel, and other people follow him in this mistake, may have just been misunderstanding what he needed to do to respond to Epicurus. So, one way you might respond to Epicurus would be to try to find some way in which something bad in itself is happening to you even though you don't exist or aren't aware of it at the time, right? So he does this, and John (Martin) Fischer has a similar sort of strategy I think, trying to show that the experience requirement is false, that things can be going bad for you independently of your experiences. And they take that to be required to undermine Epicurus. And I just think that's a mistake. I don't think you have to reject hedonism in order to respond to Epicurus, so I think that these examples, like Nagel's examples, that allegedly involve harms to people who aren't aware of it, they're interesting examples and they might be counter-examples to hedonism as a theory about well-being, and they're worth thinking about on those terms. But they're not so important in determining what makes death bad for you, I don't think.

So you want to say the wrong approach is to say that death is *intrinsically* bad because of some non-hedonistic kind of harm. The right approach is to say that it's *extrinsically* bad that you're missing out on good stuff. So it's not that you're getting bad stuff without knowing it, it's that you're not good getting good stuff without knowing it.

Exactly. Right.

Give your example of the baseball tickets.

Yeah, so the example is just that, I give my friends some baseball tickets, I put them in his mailbox, somebody else comes and takes them, my friend never found out about the tickets, so instead of enjoying the baseball game the next day, my friend is at home being bored, not doing anything interesting. So, consider that the act of taking away the tickets. This is an act that makes my friend worse off. I would want to say that if there's such a thing as harm, that it harms my friend. But my friend never finds out about it. Never aware that this deprivation occurred. I think that does nothing to show that harm didn't take place.

“I give my friends some baseball tickets, I put them in his mailbox, somebody else comes and takes them, my friend never found out about the tickets, so instead of enjoying the baseball game the next day, my friend is at home being bored, not doing anything interesting. So, consider that the act of taking away the tickets. This is an act that makes my friend worse off. I would want to say that if there's such a thing as harm, that it harms my friend. But my friend never finds out about it.”

Okay. So, what's important in that example is that you can have harm without ever finding out about it. Nagel's example of people slandering you behind your back, your loved one being unfaithful, that kind of thing, harming you—I think what an Epicurean can say is, "Insofar as that's intuitively appealing, and insofar as it makes sense to us, it's because we always envisage the person finding out about it, right?" That later on they are harmed when [the betrayals] are revealed, which indeed is why in introductory classes when people talk about utilitarianism they say lying to your gran on her deathbed is okay because it would be cruel to reveal to her that, I threw away all your sweaters or whatever, after you gave them to me and I always hated your cat. It would just be bad and it's better that they never know. So, now

what you're arguing is that, no, your friend is harmed even if they never find out, because there's this better life that they could have had.

Exactly.

But again, an Epicurean can say, okay, even if I agree with that, there's something different about death because of course I can always point to the person sitting at home bored and say, "There they are existing in a sub-optimal state," whereas when someone's dead, I'm not going to feel sorry for them because they're not missing out, because they don't exist.

Right, so one thing you can say is then it turns out to make a big difference whether the person continues to exist as a corpse, right? Because if we've got their corpse here, we can say, "That's the person who's being deprived by being dead," right? We can still point to them. And that doesn't seem like it should be important, intuitively, it seems like whether they were cremated or not has no bearing on whether their death previously was bad for them. And similarly, if we come back to the dreamless sleep example: suppose we have this person in a permanent dreamless sleep, they're existing and they're even alive, so suppose you weren't happy saying that a person continues to exist after they die as a corpse. Well, we have this living person, who's in a permanent dreamless sleep, and they still exist, but putting them into that state was still bad for them and I want to say in just the same way that killing them would have been. And so the fact that the person doesn't exist would distinguish between these cases in a way that seems irrelevant to me.

"If we come back to the dreamless sleep example: suppose we have this person in a permanent dreamless sleep, they're existing and they're even alive, so suppose you weren't happy saying that a person continues to exist after they die as a corpse. Well, we have this living person, who's in a permanent dreamless sleep, and they still exist, but putting them into that state was still bad for them and I want to say in just the same way that killing them would have been."

I think with the dreamless sleep example, you'd want to know, do you destroy their capacities—or, in other words, do you take their cortex and put it in a blender, but their brainstem continues to keep their body alive? Or, are they just, you know, Snow White, or every Disney princess at some point in the story, placed into a slumber that could last forever?

Right so you might think it makes a difference whether you could poke them and wake them up. You might think they're not in as bad of shape as somebody who—

Doesn't exist.

Right. Yeah, I think I want to resist that. So if we're saying, if the person is put into this dreamless sleep, and it's determined that they cannot wake up—so you know, we've encased them in something that keeps them alive, that prevents anybody from waking them up—I think there's just nothing good happening for them and they might as well be dead in that case. It might be that you'd still rather be in that situation than be dead, because you think, well maybe there's a chance.

Another Jim Carrey movie. We'll get later to your argument about how dead people have a well-being level of zero, rather than no well-being level at all. I think a lot more people would be willing to say that the person in the dreamless sleep has a well-being level of zero than the dead person. So it seems like there is an intuitive

difference, even though you want to make the case that there isn't a real difference. Or the Epicurean certainly shouldn't see a difference.

Yeah, the Epicurean's going to have a hard time seeing a difference there, I think. Any hedonist is going to have a hard time seeing a difference between not existing, and existing but having no sensations. I think insofar as I can channel Epicurus, I'm going to think that Epicurus is going to deny that that's a valuable existence.

Right. I'm drawn to the Epicurean view and I think that Epicurus has a bunch of very good questions for the deprivation account that you respond to and that Feldman responds to too, because he's got a deprivation account. But of course the main downside to the Epicurean view is, you know in *The Shining* when Jack Nicholson is coming up the stairs towards Shelley Duvall holding the baseball and says "I'm not gonna hurt ya, I'm just gonna beat your brains in!" or something like that. Well, Epicurus says something like, "I'm not going to harm you, I'm just going to kill you," which does seem wrong. But, of course I think that the best puzzle *posed by* **the Epicurean—that you spend a lot of time discussing—is when the Epicurean asks, "Suppose death harms me—when?" The timing problem. When am I harmed by death? And of course Epicurus can say, is it before I die? I'm not dead! I shouldn't care. Is it after I die? I don't exist! I shouldn't care. So, either way, I shouldn't care.**

Right, yeah, so I think this is a great problem too. So the response that I favor is the zero-well-being response that you mentioned earlier. So, the way I interpret Epicurus's question, is "At what time am I worse off for being dead than I would have been, had I *not* been dead?" I think that's the way of stating the question that makes it clear what an answer involves. So this is what's led some people to say, well actually it does harm you before you die. It harmed you at the time that you had various projects, or were interested in various things that your death will later deprive you of. So your death retroactively harms you at those previous times when you had these desires or plans or projects that end up getting frustrated by your death. As a hedonist I can't be happy with that response, I also don't find it very intuitive to say that somebody was retroactively harmed in that way.

"The way I interpret Epicurus's question, is "At what time am I worse off for being dead than I would have been, had I not been dead?" I think that's the way of stating the question that makes it clear what an answer involves."

Yeah, you see a giant boulder about to squish you, and you think, "Man! I'm suffering back there in the past right now! I feel sorry for that guy, because he's about to lose out, when I get squished right now!"

Right, that seems wrong. So, what I want to say what I take to be the most straightforward thing about the case, which is, yes, at these later times after you die, you are worse off than you would have been, had you been alive. In particular, the times when you would have been enjoying yourself, at the time when you would have been having a good life. Those are the times that you are worse off for having died.

Yeah, and I do know people who get sad on the birthdays of their deceased loved ones. And by your view, that kind of makes sense, because they would've been having a good birthday and getting presents. "This is a particularly bad time for my gran who died two years ago."

Right, it's not like they're suffering now, but yeah, this is a time when their death really makes a difference to how things went for them. It makes a difference at the times that they would've been enjoying themselves at their grandkids' graduations or whatever. Those are the times where they really are worse off. But obviously the thing that a lot of people are unhappy with with this response is that, in order for you to be worse off at a time after you died, you have to have a well-being level at that time. There has to be some comparison that we're making between how well-off you would have been at that time and how well off you actually are at that time while you're dead, and let's say don't exist. So, what I want to say is that you continue to have a well-being level of zero at a time when you don't exist. And so this is the thing that people find weird. So, it violates what people have called the no-well-being-without-being thesis. You can't have a well-being if you don't have being. But what I want to say is that there is somebody—we can still identify an individual who has that well-being level at that time, it's just not somebody who exists at that time. It's the person who existed in the past. So, arguably this might commit me to eternalism, which is the view that non-present things exist. So, right now Socrates doesn't exist, but timelessly Socrates exists, because Socrates exists at this time in the past. And so about a dead person, what we say is even though this person doesn't exist now, they do exist in this timeless sense. And by existing in this timeless sense, we can attribute things to them at this time. We can say that they have a zero-well-being level at this time. That's the basic idea.

“What I want to say is that you continue to have a well-being level of zero at a time when you don't exist. And so this is the thing that people find weird. So, it violates what people have called the no-well-being-without-being thesis. You can't have a well-being if you don't have being. But what I want to say is that there is somebody—we can still identify an individual who has that well-being level at that time, it's just not somebody who exists at that time.”

Right, which is an illustration of how one can be led to metaphysical views about all kinds of things by starting with a problem somewhere else in philosophy. Like, suddenly we're talking about the ontology of time and presentism vs eternalism. So, yes, as you say, eternalism is a view that time is like space: just because things are over there and I can't see them doesn't mean they don't exist. And just because the dinosaurs are back a few million years ago doesn't mean they don't exist. And this starts from worrying about a puzzle about death, which is interesting in itself. Now, let's say a little bit about some of the implications of your view. So, for example, as you say, the implications of your version of the deprivation account, you highlight two controversial effects. One of which perhaps isn't as controversial except in some of its implications, and that is that the earlier a death is, the worse it is, because of course you're deprived of more. Now the controversial implication is that a spontaneously aborting fetus is worse off than a teenager who dies tragically in a car crash, because the teenager at least got to live some of the life and therefore is deprived of less. And that strikes some people as unacceptable. Yeah, so let's talk about that one first. Then we'll talk about the second one, which is that the badness of death is independent of the life lived.

Right. Sure, so the very early deaths are controversial. What should we say about very early deaths—that's embryos or fetuses, are those the worse deaths, are those the most harmful deaths? And the deprivation account entails that they are as long as it's the same individual, as long as the embryo is the individual being deprived of this future. So if an individual doesn't come into existence until later on, at post-embryo state, then an embryo isn't deprived of anything. Because whatever this future individual would be getting, it's not something that the embryo would be getting. But let's just say that it's

the same individual. Then yes, if you're a deprivation theorist, you have to say that it's very, very bad for an embryo to die. Now so first thing to say is, let's try to mitigate that a little bit. So the first thought is, you could say that death is very bad for an embryo, but still think that it doesn't matter that much. All you have to do is deny that all harms of an equal magnitude are equally important morally speaking. And one reason that you might think that a great harm to an embryo is not that important is because an embryo is not a person. So if an embryo is not a person, then you might think that even if it's greatly harmed by being prevented from coming into existence and becoming a person, that harm to that embryo is not very important. You might think it doesn't have rights. You might think you don't have rights until you're sufficiently sophisticated individual, so harming you isn't going to violate any of your rights. And so this is why you might think that even if you're a deprivation theorist and you're committed to saying that death is very bad for embryos, that nevertheless abortion may be morally permissible, nevertheless we shouldn't devote great resources to preventing abortions. So that's one kind of strategy, which I think is a plausible strategy.

“If you're a deprivation theorist, you have to say that it's very, very bad for an embryo to die. Now so first thing to say is, let's try to mitigate that a little bit. So the first thought is, you could say that death is very bad for an embryo, but still think that it doesn't matter that much. All you have to do is deny that all harms of an equal magnitude are equally important morally speaking.”

So the Epicurean is going to say, "Wait a minute, people get mad at me for saying death is not a harm. But now you're saying that it is a harm, it's just not a harm that matters. Why is that view better than my view?"

Well in most cases it matters. If the death of an adult human harms them, then that harm does matter.

But isn't that a kind of chauvinism now, because it's exactly the same kind of harm. Am I going to say it matters because we like you more? Even though it's exactly the same, it's the same experience of the same kind of being, it's just that, oh we decided your harm doesn't matter, because we labeled you a non-person.

Well, in some ways they are the same kind of being, but in some ways it's not the same kind of being. Because it's not a person.

But what they're being deprived of is experiences of a person, so that non-person is deprived of person experiences.

Yeah, you're right. So on this way of going, you have to say that being deprived of valuable person-experience doesn't necessarily matter unless the being that's being deprived of them has achieved personhood already. So yeah, you'd have to deny on this route that what you're deprived of always matters the same amount. So that's true, I mean you have to accept that. I guess one wants to know how you get around that problem. I mean, everybody has got issues in this area when individuals come into existence, you're going to have to say something different about an individual at this stage and at this other stage, almost no matter what view you have.

Here's the way I understand the deprivation account, mainly from reading originally Fred Feldman's book, *Confrontations with the Reaper* [Oxford, 1994], which is a very nice introduction, like your book. One of the Epicurean puzzles that both of you

appear to have come up with a plausible response to is, the Epicurean says, "How can you say it's worse, because you're comparing the experiences of a live person and the experiences of a dead person, and saying that one is worse, but one of them doesn't exist!" And Feldman's response is, "No, it's not a life to death comparison, it's a life to life comparison. And you're comparing short life, because of early death, to long life, because death comes much later, and clearly the second one's better and in fact we can see that this [the difference in life-lengths] is the amount that you're deprived of, so in fact, this life is bad precisely to this extent, because this is what you missed out on." Now, what non-philosophy students are going to say is. "But wait a minute, this [the longer life, where early death didn't occur] never happened, this is fantasy. So, you can make any shit up you want, so why are you allowed to do that you philosophers?" At which point we start talking about possible worlds. And what we say is, "Well, there's the nearest possible world at which this [the specific cause of the early death] doesn't happen, and on that possible world, you know, I live this long." But once you start doing that you can say "Well there's a very near possible world in which this different sperm meets this egg and there's a whole different person, and this whole different person has a good life that they don't have ever on our world." And if we can say that a being on our world suffers because they don't have this [long life], why can't we say that somebody who never comes into existence in our world—the sperm and egg pairing that never happens here but that does happen on this near possible world—why can't we say that that is a person with a well-being level of zero. And then there are all these people that never came into existence that are harmed on our actual earth?

I think this is a great question, and there are different things you can say, and I'm not sure what the best thing is to say, but one thought is, call this the really extreme view, and I defend this view very briefly in another paper: not only do the dead have well-being levels of zero, but all these merely possible people who never actually exist, have actual well-being levels of zero. Zeros for everybody—that's the extreme view. So on this way of thinking about things, you'd say yeah, this merely possible person who didn't get brought into existence has an actual well-being level of zero, and would've had this great level of well-being had they been brought into existence, and they're much worse off. So it's bad for them that they didn't get brought into existence. But since they don't exist, they don't have any rights, they're not actually people. So you treat them just like you treat the embryo. That's one way of going, is just to say yeah, there are all these harms and thankfully ninety-nine percent of them we can ignore because they're all happening to individuals who don't have any rights, any personhood, or any moral status at all, because they don't actually exist. That's an extreme view of going about it.

"Call this the really extreme view, and I defend this view very briefly in another paper: not only do the dead have well-being levels of zero, but all these merely possible people who never actually exist, have actual well-being levels of zero. Zeros for everybody—that's the extreme view."

That's biting a large bullet. It is a little ironic that you end up defending hedonism as Epicurus and modern Epicureans like the utilitarians do, and then you're drawn to this view finally, Well but morality has to be about rights, so that we can discount harms and say that some harms—and you know harm and wrong are not the same thing. You know, something can be morally wrong and involve harm, and something can be morally wrong without involving harm, and something can involve harm and not be morally wrong, whereas doesn't it seem like one of the appeals of hedonism

and views that assume it is that that will tell us things about what is right and wrong, whereas now you're saying, "Okay this being gets deprived of this kind of life and it's not wrong, or it's not something we should care about, and then this being gets deprived of exactly the same thing and suddenly it's important."

So this is an area where I have to struggle to kind of keep apart what I actually think and what I need to argue for the sake of making this point. And so, I am skeptical about rights. But I do think that even if we don't think that there are any rights, really—suppose we want to go the utilitarian route, and say there aren't any rights—you still might want to say that there's such a thing as moral status, there are individuals that we have to care about, and they're the ones that can enjoy themselves. And there are other individuals that can't enjoy themselves or experience pain, they're not sentient, and so we don't have to worry about them, and maybe they have a kind of well-being but it's not going to be the kind of well-being—like the kind of well-being of a computer or a car or something, where they can't enjoy themselves. So you still have to make some kind of distinction in this neighborhood, between the individuals that matter and the individuals that don't, even if you're a full-blown hedonistic utilitarian.

You know who can't enjoy themselves?

Who's that?

Dead people.

That is true. Yes, right.

So, your argument that abortion causes more harm than killing a teenager, that's the view that the deprivation account that you defend is committed to, but you want to argue that it's not necessarily therefore wrong and in fact you would very much not want to say that abortion is more wrong than killing a teenager?

Right. Although I should say, lately I've been trying to work on a different kind of view. So, I'll just throw it out there for you and see if that works. It's not completely original but here's a general thought that motivates this way of thinking. So what is it about embryos that might make us think that they're not harmed by being killed? And one thought is that we're not really sure whether they're really subjects of harm yet. We're not really sure whether they're the sort of thing that can be harmed or benefitted, in the same way that an adult person can be harmed or benefitted. And there are other cases where we have a similar sort of ambivalence, or—where we're not sure what to say. Like, my plant. So, would my plant be harmed if I ripped it up out of the roots and threw it out the window? Well, you might think, yeah kind of, I mean in the way that plants can be harmed, it'd be harmed, you know it'd die if you did that. But, would it really be harmed in the same way that a person is harmed? You might not be so sure. Or think about ecosystems—can an ecosystem really be harmed? Or my computer, if I pour water on my computer? You might say that I harmed the computer, but is that really harm? So I think that there are a lot of these borderline cases where we think "I'm not really sure what to say about whether this individual was harmed." At least in a way

❝ What is it about embryos that might make us think that they're not harmed by being killed? And one thought is that we're not really sure whether they're really subjects of harm yet. We're not really sure whether they're the sort of thing that can be harmed or benefitted, in the same way that an adult person can be harmed or benefitted. ❞

that matters morally. Was there moral harm done here? Especially with a computer. You think, well, harming a computer harms me because I want to use the computer, but the computer itself isn't the sort of thing that can be harmed. So the thought is, there's something that comes in degrees here, or at least there's some vagueness. And the thing that is subject to this vagueness, is being a subject of well-being. Being a subject of benefit or harm, there's a scale, where you've got adult humans over here, who clearly can be subjects of harm, clearly have well-being. And then over here you've got computers, that it seems pretty clearly can't, in their current state. Or, let's say simple plants. You might think those definitely can't be. And then maybe over here you've got worms, and so on, until—but there's going to be a spectrum. So, the thought is that as human beings develop, they develop from something that is definitely not a subject of well-being, into something that definitely is a subject of well-being and it's a gradual development. So there are different things you might want to say here, and people have said similar things about personhood. People somehow gradually develop into being a person. I don't want to talk about personhood because I think that's a loaded term and I think that talking about subjects of well-being is what's really important when talking about harm. Because non-persons can be harmed. So one thought is that you might try to develop a view according to which the extent to which you're harmed is determined not just by what you're deprived of, but also by the extent to which you are at the time a subject of harm, or subject of well-being. And so the thought would be, when we're figuring out how much an embryo is harmed, one factor is how much is it deprived of, which is a lot. And another factor is to what extent are they a subject of well-being, which you might think is a very small degree. So one way to go would be to multiply these things. Maybe we have this individual who is a well-being-subject to degree .01 and so you multiply the extent of the well-being, or the extent of the deprivation, by the degree to which it's a well-being-subject. And then you get a lower amount of harm that's suffered by the individual.

“One thought is that you might try to develop a view according to which the extent to which you're harmed is determined not just by what you're deprived of, but also by the extent to which you are at the time a subject of harm, or subject of well-being. And so the thought would be, when we're figuring out how much an embryo is harmed, one factor is how much is it deprived of, which is a lot. And another factor is to what extent are they a subject of well-being, which you might think is a very small degree.”

Okay, but then again my point is that dead people have no capability of suffering. Either that would destroy your deprivation account, because you would say okay, they're being harmed but because they're totally incapable of feeling harm at this point, it's discounted to zero. Or you would have to say no the relevant individual is the individual that survives on this other possible world, and because that being has the capacity of feeling harm, then we can use the adult human being factor to multiply.

Yeah, so actually my thought is that you look at the past first. So, this individual dies: to what extent is their death a harm? The thought is you look at to what extent were they a well-being subject. And if they were a full well-being subject, then you don't discount the badness of their death at all. But if they never were, or if they only ever reached a minimal degree of being a well-being subject, then their death would get discounted. I'm just kind of exploring that, I don't know how I feel about it yet. But that's a way that's at least motivated by a core insight about this vagueness of attributing 'well-being subject' to individuals.

Of course, I can imagine there's some anti-abortion activists who're saying, "Why are you trying to hard? Just accept that abortion is horrific!"

You could.

Now Jeff McMahan thinks he's got a different way of explaining why the teenager's death is bad and the fetus's death is not bad. Why don't you like his way? Perhaps you could say what it is first.

Yeah, that's not easy to do, but I'll do my best. So McMahan's view is called the time-relative interests account of the badness of death. And, McMahan's thought is to figure out how bad someone's death is, one thing that's relevant is how much good stuff they're deprived of. But the other thing that's relevant is what would've been the psychological connection, the degree of psychological connectedness, between the individual at the time that they died, and the individual as they would've been had they not died, at these later times when they would've been enjoying the good stuff. So, if someone dies in the prime of life, and they're deprived of lots of good stuff that they would've gotten later in life, had they survived, they would've been strongly psychologically connected to themselves as they were at the time that they died. I have lots of memories of what it was like to be twenty years old, I have lots of the same desires and beliefs and so on. I'm strongly connected to myself as a twenty year old, not as much as I am to myself as a thirty year old, but still pretty strongly. So if I had died at twenty, all the good stuff that I'm getting now, let's say—it would've been bad for me, dying at age twenty, to be deprived of that, because, not only would it have been good for me, but at those times it would've really been me. I would've been strongly psychologically connected to my past self at that time, whereas I can't remember anything from when I was two years old. So, if I had died at age two, although I would've been deprived of all this good stuff later in life, the badness of being deprived of all that is discounted by the fact that my two-year-old self and my forty-six-year-old self are not psychologically connected at all, really. There's no overlap—there's no memories, there's no desires. So the thought is this is why, even though the two-year-old is deprived of a lot more, it's less bad for them to die, according to McMahan. And that goes even more for an embryo, an embryo has no psychological connections at all with the future stuff that they would've gotten, and so the badness of the death of an embryo is very strongly discounted on McMahan's view. So, that's the view. And I talk about some reasons not to like it in the book. One reason I don't go into in the book, but that's relevant to the discussion we were just having, is that I think it gets the wrong results in certain cases, especially if we're thinking about two-year-olds. So I think the death of the two-year-old is really bad, and if there's some public health initiative that could prevent the deaths of two-year-olds, that would be really important. We should devote a lot of resources to saving the lives of two-year-olds. But, on McMahan's view, the deaths of two-year-olds, it seems to me, get discounted way too much, because of the fact that the two-year-old has no anticipation of what it's going to be like to be forty six, the forty-six-year-old has no memory of what it's like to be two, there's hardly any connection between the two-year-old individual and the forty-six-year old. So I think McMahan's view too strongly discounts the badness of death for a two-year-old. There's other problems, I think, that are more complicated and that involve us in a lot of back-and-forth between McMahan

“I think the death of the two-year-old is really bad, and if there's some public health initiative that could prevent the deaths of two-year-olds, that would be really important. We should devote a lot of resources to saving the lives of two-year-olds. But, on McMahan's view, the deaths of two-year-olds, it seems to me, get discounted way too much.”

and his objectors, about what actually the view is. But that's one reason that I've been interested in this other sort of what Joe Millum calls a gradualist view about the badness of death: that death is not very bad for an embryo, but then it gets worse and worse as the individual gets older, rather than, as on the deprivation account, death is very bad at the first moment of existence, and then it gets slowly less and less bad. On a gradualist view death gets slowly worse and worse as the individual develops. And so the view that I was sketching earlier is supposed to be a competitor to McMahan's view if you like this gradualist idea that death gets slowly worse as you develop.

“It's a luxury to be someone for whom death is so much worse than continuing to live.”

Yeah, another thought about deprivation accounts, and yours in particular, is that the badness of death seems to be relative to the technological sophistication of the time you live. So for example, we have longer life spans now, and let's suppose they fix aging to such an extent that we can continue to exist for hundreds of years. It's like in the *Lord of the Rings*, when an elf dies, they're losing a whole lot more than a hobbit does. So, the death of someone, assuming we survive the current presidency, and things get better, and technology continues to advance, some future person is going to be harmed a lot more by an early death than we would.

Yeah, I think that's true. That's exactly the sort of thing I think about, the scenes in the Lord of the Rings when the elves die. It seems worse, to me. Maybe it's because I'm corrupted by my views, but I think, wow, it's so much more tragic when an elf dies—the elves are making more of a sacrifice when they do that. Now, I do feel that at the same time, there are certain implications that I'm less happy to live with. So for example, it turns out that the deaths of rich people are going to be worse for them than the deaths of poor people. Poor people don't live as long.

Or get as much good stuff in the life that they live.

Yeah, right, that too. So they're deprived of more both in terms of length and in terms of quality. So, what do you say about that? I think that this is just another facet of the injustice, is the way that I prefer to think about it, is that it's a luxury to be someone for whom death is so much worse than continuing to live.

You're lucky your death is so bad!

Exactly.

Yeah, okay, so the responses to the timing puzzle have nice names. You're a subsequentist, and not a priorist, or a concurrentist, or an eternalist. Now, we've heard a little about why you're not a priorist, because they tend to be desire-satisfaction people. And you think that my death now shouldn't be a harm to the version of me that had the desires. My death now shouldn't be a harm to me aged twenty because that's when I set my sights on living until 2020 or something. What's wrong with concurrentism or eternalism?

Let's start with eternalism. So, eternalism is Fred Feldman's view. I can't remember if he gave it that name or not, but really the thought behind eternalism is just to reject

the question. So, Epicurus asked the question, at what time are you worse off than you would have been for having died? And the eternalist—the way I'm understanding them—there doesn't need to be any such time.

It's like asking the time at which two is larger than one.

Yeah, so that's right. That's the way Feldman wants you to think about that question, is just, reject the question. There isn't a time at which death is bad for you, except in this eternal sense in which this long good life is better than the short good life. That's the eternalist view, and I guess I think that it's answering the wrong question. So, my thought is let's take the question seriously. It does seem to be a legitimate question to ask, at what time am I worse off for this having happened. In other cases, if we can say, I'm not worse off at this time, and I'm not worse off at that time—so if I'm a smoker, and somebody says smoking is bad for you, and I say, "When's it going to be bad for me?" And it turns out that I'm never going to get cancer or any of these things, then you could point to every moment in my life, at which it might have been bad for me, and say, hey it's not bad for me then. I think I'd be justified in saying, actually it turned out not to be bad for me to smoke. And I think that the worry is that that's a perfectly legitimate response, it seems if you can say the same thing about death as that smoker can say, then it seems plausible to say that death isn't bad.

"I think we have to keep these questions separate: "Is death bad?", and "How should we feel about it?" I think that it may be that for prudential reasons, we shouldn't feel bad about death because feeling bad is bad, especially if you're a hedonist. Feeling bad about things is never going to be good for you, but the interesting question is whether it's appropriate."

Yeah, my objection to eternalism is, here's how I think we should understand Epicurus, and that is, he's telling us why we shouldn't care about death. [And the eternalist doesn't respond by giving us a reason to care about death], because if it's always bad for me, then I should never care. It makes no more sense to care as it gets closer, as I'm about to die, I shouldn't start saying, "Oh shit!" because you know, it was just as bad when I was a kid, and it was miles away. So I should never care about it. But that also seems true on your version of the deprivation account, because if it's bad after I die, hey, that's nothing to me.

Right, yeah, so the thought is: grant that death is bad for you, when should you feel bad about it?

Right, when should I feel bad about death? And Epicurus says never, and it seems like even on your view that's true.

Yeah, well it might be true. So I think we have to keep these questions separate: "Is death bad?", and "How should we feel about it?" I think that it may be that for prudential reasons, we shouldn't feel bad about death because feeling bad is bad, especially if you're a hedonist. Feeling bad about things is never going to be good for you, but the interesting question is whether it's appropriate. It wouldn't be appropriate to feel bad about the fact that you're going to be deprived of this future good stuff. I think it can be appropriate to feel bad about being deprived of that future good stuff, and obviously you have to feel bad about it before the time that you're being deprived of it. But I think it's perfectly appropriate to feel bad about things in anticipation of their happening. We feel bad in anticipation of other bad things happening, intrinsically bad things happening for example. If you know you're going to the dentist tomorrow, you might be feeling

bad in anticipation and given that it's going to hurt, there's some justification for you feeling that way.

But we never feel bad about extrinsic deprivations, do we?

Well, I think we do. So, your parents tell you you can't go to the party tomorrow.

Yes, but what you're thinking about is the knowing: I'm going to be there sitting at home, knowing that they're having fun, and I'm going to feel shitty. It's not that I'm going to be totally oblivious and they're going to be having fun. It's not like I'm going to be sitting there watching an okay movie, and not having the awesome time I would be having—we don't really dread that.

Yeah, I mean I'm glad you said 'dread' because it might be that the way in which you should feel bad is not dread but something else. So, I think Kai Draper argues for this: you shouldn't dread death, but it's appropriate to be disappointed or sad that you're going to die. You can be sad, but you're not going to dread it because dread is not an appropriate attitude to have towards a mere deprivation of a good thing. I think there may be something to that, maybe we shouldn't dread death. Maybe it should just be disappointment or something like that.

"You shouldn't dread death, but it's appropriate to be disappointed or sad that you're going to die. You can be sad, but you're not going to dread it because dread is not an appropriate attitude to have towards a mere deprivation of a good thing."

"Aw, nuts! I'm gonna be dead."

Right. And maybe it could be severe disappointment, but severe disappointment and dread are still different attitudes I think.

What about concurrentism?

Yeah, one of my students defends concurrentism. Aaron Wolf has a paper, he thinks concurrentism is true. So, what to say about concurrentism. My thought about concurrentism always is it's not going to quite get right the magnitude of the badness of death. I haven't thought about concurrentism in a while.

It just seems like the time at which death is bad vanishes to infinity. It's at the moment of death, and what is that? It's not the dying, right, you don't experience it as you're dying slowly. That's not when you experience the badness of death. It's at the moment that life ends, or just before? And it seems too small and too fleeting to take seriously.

Yeah, maybe that. I mean there's a lot of badness to cram into that moment. So part of it is wanting to treat different bad things the same. So, in other cases we don't endorse concurrentism—to go back to the baseball ticket case. We don't say that at the moment that the tickets were grabbed out of the mailbox that at that moment things were really bad for my friend. That just seems like the wrong time. The time that things are bad, if there's any time, it's the later time when he would have been at the game. I don't know if this is an argument. Isn't subsequentism the right thing to say in these other cases?

But what I think Epicurus is saying is, "Okay, if that's when the harm is, I don't care!"

Right. "I didn't notice it. It didn't bother me." It might depend on the details with the concurrentist view, but if somebody really had a view that your well-being level went way down at that time, that's going to seem very implausible given that you were totally oblivious to it. Massive swings in your well-being that you're unaware of are fishy to me and to people that think experience is an important part of well-being.

Yeah, and actually that is the other problem I have with deprivation accounts, is they seem to tell us, "Man, you're a lot worse off than you could possibly imagine," because once we start caring about possible mes enjoying things that actual me doesn't, well, possible mes are having a wild time on some fairly nearby possible world where I'm just the happiest guy in the world. And I'm deprived of that, so there's a big old harm that I didn't even know I was having. And that just seems to me…whiny.

Yeah, right. But I mean, of course you also have to say that there are all these nearby yous that are having a horrible time, so you can probably put them in a 1:1 correspondence.

But you could say that about death—"Don't worry about your death, because in this other life they keep you alive and torture you!"

Right, so this is where counterfactuals turn out to be important. So, if there's no fact of the matter about what would have happened, or what would have even been likely to have happened had you not died when you did, if there's just all these things that might have happened, and we can't say anything about their likelihood or anything, then, I think the deprivation account falls apart. Every death is going to be equally good or bad as any other. So, it's important that there be some facts of the matter about either what would've happened had you not died, or what would've been the likelihood of various things happening had you not died, on a more complicated view. And, given those facts, the existence of various alternatives yous that are really having a great time or a horrible time are going to be irrelevant except insofar as they would've been you or would've been likely to have been you had your death not occurred.

"If there's no fact of the matter about what would have happened, or what would have even been likely to have happened had you not died when you did, if there's just all these things that might have happened, and we can't say anything about their likelihood or anything, then, I think the deprivation account falls apart."

But if you think about it, you can get a far-away me actually being me if it's far away because of a divergence very early in my life. So for example, if something had happened in utero, then I would've become the emperor of the world. It's still connected to me, because then I can say, Boy, I was really harmed by that in utero thing, because, because that happened in utero, I was sent down this path that leads me to this life, instead of being the path that would have led to me being emperor of the world or whatever.

Right, I think that's the right thing to say.

So the worst thing that happened to you happened to you at the very earliest moment, even if you don't die.

Given the story that you just told that's true.

Because that's going to lead to the widest possible divergence. Once a few facts are settled about me—once I was out in the world, there was very little chance of me becoming emperor of the world.

Well I think the earlier on you go and talk about what would happen if this little change was made to this embryo, the less plausible it's going to be to assert any counterfactual about what would have happened had that change been made or not been made. So, is it true or not that if this little change had been made to the embryo that this individual would become emperor of the world? Well, I've seen plausible sounding arguments from Alan Hájek that all counterfactuals are false, but these seem especially likely to be false. The best you could say is that if this had happened, then maybe you would've become the emperor, what's the likelihood that you would've become the emperor? Very small, given how many other things would've had to have happened in the meantime for that to happen. So, I think that it's unlikely that we're going to be able to point at some in utero event and say that was really good for you or that was really bad for you. The best we're going to be able to say is it might have been, and there's a chance that that in utero event was really bad for you, but I don't think we can say anything more than that. So I think that takes some of the sting out of the thought.

Can we say that, or can we say we just don't know?

You could say that too, yeah. I mean that's a possibility.

We just don't know how much we're harmed by it.

Yeah, if there are facts about what would've happened to me now if some tiny event had been different to the embryo that became me, then it seems right to me to say I could be much worse off, I could be much better off, and maybe I was greatly harmed or maybe I was greatly benefitted by something that happened in utero.

Well doesn't it then sound more sensible to be Epicurean, because it's like, if you start worrying about that, you'll never get anywhere. It will consume your life.

Yeah, I think you shouldn't worry about that. But there's another question whether that's just for practical reasons. There's nothing you can do about what happened to you in utero, so better not to worry about that. Even though maybe it would be appropriate—so stipulating that if this thing had happened you would've been emperor of the world, it'd be appropriate, it'd be fitting to really regret that thing not happening. Still, for prudential reasons, better to forget about it. Probably true.

Obviously we could talk about death for forever, because death is great. But, I want to ask you to say a bit about hedonism and why you think it wins out over desire-fulfillment, perfectionism, and pluralism. Just, you know, super fast.

So I think intuitively everybody can see the plausibility in thinking pleasure is good for you and pain is bad for you, and we all act as though this is true. So the question is whether this is a base level fact, a fundamental fact about well-being, or are these things good because of some other reason, like is pleasure good because you want it, or is pain bad because you don't want it, for example. So that's one issue, and the other issue is whether these are the only things. Should we say that pleasure and pain are the only good and bad things, or should we also say that knowledge is good, and virtue is good, and other sorts of things are good.

And justice and rights, which you've been talking about a little.

Yeah, but they're not good for you, I don't think it's good for you to have rights. So I think it's important [that] when we're talking about theories of well-being, we're only talking about what's good for you. And we might think there are things that are good, like justice, but think that justice isn't intrinsically good for individuals. It's just good for the world, when there's justice, but it's not good inherently for any of the individuals. So that's why, when people have objective list theories of well-being, justice is not usually on the list. It's knowledge, virtue, achievement, those sorts of things get on there. Things that are happening to the individual. So, I have a couple arguments that are kind of technical arguments, in the book, and one of them has to do with the paradox of desire fulfillment, but it actually applies to many views. And the paradox is: suppose you have somebody who desires that their life go badly, and just stipulate that that's their only desire. We run into a paradox. Because suppose the desire is satisfied, then that means that the object of desire is true, namely that their life went badly. But, then their life goes well on the view because their desire was satisfied. So, if it goes well, then it doesn't go well, and if it doesn't go well, then it does go well. So this is a paradox. There are things you can say to try and get around this paradox if you're a desire fulfilment theorist. But the paradox is going to arise on other kinds of views, too. So, if you think that true belief is good for you, then suppose you truly believe that your life is going badly, and that's your only belief. Then, if your life is going badly, then it's not going badly, and so on. So, and since true belief is essential to knowledge, then the view that knowledge is a constituent of well-being is going to be affected by this paradox too. Hedonism doesn't have this paradox, so I think that's a nice thing about hedonism. You don't have to solve this paradox.

“Suppose you have somebody who desires that their life go badly, and just stipulate that that's their only desire. We run into a paradox. Because suppose the desire is satisfied, then that means that the object of desire is true, namely that their life went badly. But, then their life goes well on the view because their desire was satisfied. So, if it goes well, then it doesn't go well, and if it doesn't go well, then it does go well. So this is a paradox.”

Of course there is a famous paradox associated with hedonism, but it's a different kind of paradox. Perhaps mention that.

Right, so the paradox of hedonism is, pursuing pleasure doesn't seem to be the best way of getting pleasure. I think that's what people usually refer to as the paradox of hedonism. So the best way to be happy is to think about things other than happiness. Pursue knowledge and friendship and so on, that's the best way to be happy. But if you think about being happy, then you're not going to be happy. It's a different kind of paradox, it's kind of a practical paradox. I don't really find it that troubling, to be honest.

That's when you start talking about self-effacing theories.

Right. I don't think it's a problem for a theory to be self-effacing in that way.

You mention pluralism as well, really, because it's covered by objective list-theory. So the other supposedly knock-down criticism of hedonism is the experience machine. Robert Nozick is famous for this example. So perhaps give that one. Especially in this age of red pills.

I think the best way of stating the argument from the experience machine is to say, if you had two lives that contained exactly the same experiences, but in one life the person was actually doing various things, they're actually playing the piano, and going on hikes and various things like that, and having friendships, and in the other life, the person had experiences of doing all these things, but they are actually hooked up to a machine that is making them have those experiences—that the life where the person was actually doing those things would be better for the individual, than the life on the experience machine. Not necessarily that the life in the experience machine would be a terrible life, but it just wouldn't be as good as the life where the person is actually doing these things. And I think a lot of people find that plausible, and then you might try to motivate that by saying, well would you plug into the experience machine if you knew that these were the options and most people would say no, they wouldn't want to plug into the machine, they'd rather do these things. But, I've surveyed my classes and usually some percentage of the class says, "No, hook me into the machine, I'm ready to be hooked up."

Probably an increasing percentage as time goes on.

Right. But this is important, because the hedonist has to deny that how the experiences they're having are related to the world is relevant to their value. All that matters to them is their intrinsic character. Are they enjoyable? And so, the hedonist has to say that all that other stuff doesn't matter, and the experience machine argument is supposed to show that you probably think it does matter, because you probably think that this life is better than the life on the machine, even if they're identical in their experiences. And I do think that this is a problem for hedonism, and my way of addressing it is to say that once you start thinking that stuff outside of you is affecting how your life goes, you run into these problems. And one of the problems is the paradox that is mentioned, that all these views that try to say how stuff is going on outside of your experiences makes a difference, are going to run into this paradox. But the other one has to do with timing. So, the question is, at what times are things going well for you? If you're a hedonist, you say the times that things are going well for you are the times when you're having these pleasant experiences. The times that things are going bad for you are the times that you're having the painful experiences. That's it. Simple story. If you're a desire-fulfilment theorist for example, what are you going to say? If you think that stuff outside of your experience affects how well your life goes by say being true, so you want something to be true, and it's true or it's not true. That's outside of your experience. When are things going well for you? Is it the time you have the desire? Is it the time that this thing outside of you is happening? Both those answers seem wrong. And they seem to get wrong results. So, if I now want to do something in ten years, then presumably

"If you're a desire-fulfilment theorist for example, what are you going to say? If you think that stuff outside of your experience affects how well your life goes by say being true, so you want something to be true, and it's true or it's not true. That's outside of your experience. When are things going well for you? Is it the time you have the desire? Is it the time that this thing outside of you is happening? Both those answers seem wrong. And they seem to get wrong results."

unbeknownst to me right now, things are going well or badly for me. That can't be right. Or, if I want something to be the case in ten years—suppose I die in the meantime. And if we say that the time at which things are going well or badly for me is the time at which the thing that I want to happen happens, and I'm dead, then I've got to say that my well-being level is going up and down even while I'm dead.

And also there's the problem about—and of course this comes up in Parfitian discussions of personal identity--what if my desires change? So suppose I desired to meet the Queen when I was young and impressionable, and then I became an ardent anti-monarchist, and then I met the Queen, and I hated it, well, in some sense, little me is having the best day ever at the time that I'm hating it. Which desires count? Am I even the same person, but that's a different issue.

No, that is an issue. So one way to think about it on the desire-fulfillment view is, you look at all the desires that you have throughout your life and you see to what extent were they satisfied or frustrated, and you just kind of add up all the satisfactions and frustrations. And in that case, little you, there'd be some desires that were satisfied, and big you has some desires that were frustrated, and so they all kind of wash out.

But the obvious advice is, desire to wake up in the morning. Desire to have a small sip of water. And don't desire anything else. Because then you're always satisfied and you're never frustrated. And that just seems—

Just desire that the mathematical truths be true, and desire it very strongly all the time. Then you'll be doing really well. If you're a desire fulfillment theorist you've got to bite that bullet, you have to say, if you can get yourself to have those desires, then things will be going really great for you.

Now I have one more question before I let you go: What would you say are the claims of yours that other philosophers give you the famous David Lewis incredulous stare over most?

It's probably not hedonism anymore, because there's a few other hedonists out there. I'd say the degree of incredulity is probably the highest with the zero well-being for dead people claim. So, some people will say, "Yeah that seems right, yeah that's good." And other people will just look at you like, "What are you…? You cannot be serious." That's probably the biggest incredulous stare that I get.

It's good to have that, because otherwise you're not standing for something, you're just saying obvious stuff.

That's right, people will remember you if you say that wacky thing.

You've got to find the golden mean though, because you don't want to go too far. Okay, here's a question I ask everybody: what do you think is the value of philosophy in the contemporary world?

Good question. What I've noticed in the last few years is that there are scenarios where people are relying on philosophical views without necessarily either being aware that they're doing so or without being aware that there are alternatives. And one of the areas relates to death and that is in public health. So, in the public health arena, people who are worried about the global burden of disease trying to figure out which diseases are most important to treat, and where to allocate resources and so on. All these questions that we've been talking about, whether death is worse or better as you get older, answers to these things are being presupposed in that literature, because they're trying to figure out how bad are these various deaths. And we should try to prevent the ones that are worst. And so this is an area where it's really important for philosophers to talk to these people and try to see what the options are, and what you're committed to if you say this or that, and actually there's a book coming out that I have a paper in—lots of other people you've heard of have papers in—called, it's gone through different titles, it's called something like *Saving People from the Harm of Death,* where philosophers and social scientists are dealing with these kinds of issues. So that's just one example of a kind of case where it's important what philosophers are doing, for things that are being done, and has important implications.

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My first undergraduate professor had an aphorism that I think is a good one, I don't know where he got it from. Like all aphorisms, it's good and it's bad, but he said philosophy is not about answering questions, it's about questioning answers. And I do think that's an important philosophical skill, to at least recognize your embedded assumptions, and it does seem that too often people think that certain things are just the way of the world, like capitalism is just true, you know, that's facts, and then you have these other theories that are clearly just theories, whereas when we can just go back to the truth. And libertarianism seems alarmingly popular, at least some kind of bastard version of it that would make Nozick turn in his grave. Because he could still be alive, so he's still being harmed. And you see online people saying, "I use LOGIC to dispel these feminists." And it's like, I don't think that word means what you think it means.

I think that in all these areas it's as important as ever.

So you're not a Wittgensteinian who tries to dissuade his most brilliant pupils from Philosophy and tries to persuade them to become car mechanics.

I think it's great if people want to become car mechanics but that doesn't preclude you from also having some philosophical training. It's important for everybody to have some degree of philosophical training, to be able to get along in the world.

So philosophy and the art of motorcycle maintenance.

Right.