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Adaptation

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ADAPTATION

(Forthcoming in James Taylor, ed., *Death: Metaphysics and Ethics*)

The harm which death does to its victim, if any, we might call *mortal harm*. If death ends our existence, as I will here assume, we are likely to incur mortal harm, even if we are lucky enough to perish while asleep, for annihilation is bad for us insofar as it deprives us of good life. But perhaps we can avoid mortal harm by suitably modifying our interests. If so, death might threaten us before we take these precautions, but it would never threaten us again.

The view that we can avoid mortal harm after modifying our interests is prompted by considerations such as the following. Suppose our desires are malleable, and that our interests are determined, at least in part, by our desires, so that, in some cases, the fulfillment of a desire benefits us (as does an event that is responsible for fulfilling the desire), while failing to fulfill a desire harms us. Then we might be able to shape our interests by changing our desires, and avoid harm to which we otherwise would be susceptible. If, for example, your heart is set on winning the Boston marathon, it seems bad for you to fail; however, if you give up that desire, or avoid it from the start, then not winning is of no concern. Let us say that someone has *adapted to* an event or state of affairs just when, by suitably configuring her desires (where 'desire' is construed broadly), she precludes its harming her. Adaptation might preclude many sorts of misfortune. Failing to win a race is not troublesome to those who are indifferent about winning. Similarly, it seems, for those who cultivate indifference to friendship, riches and beauty, it is no misfortune to lack friends, wealth, and looks. Perhaps we can even see to it that dying will be harmless to us: by becoming disinterested about living on, and the things it makes possible.

Some ways of dealing with a threatened evil will be self-defeating, in the sense that the response is no better for us, or even worse, than the evil it prevents. For example, I could eliminate a painful ingrown toenail by cutting off my foot, and I could eliminate the danger that my prized antique automobile will one day be stolen by crushing it. If I worry about the theft because I want to enjoy my car as long as possible, it is senseless to respond by doing something that guarantees that I will have even less time enjoying my car. A way of adapting to death might be self-defeating in precisely the same way. Perhaps, however, we can adapt to the death we will undergo one day, and do so in a way that is not self-defeating. I will call this claim the *adaptation thesis*. It seems we all face the possibility of mortal harm, so it is important to know whether adaptation offers us a sensible escape. Elsewhere (1985, 1996) I have contended that it does not. In this essay I reinforce that conclusion.

I begin with a few remarks about the historical context of the issue I am discussing.

Antiquity and Adaptation

A great many figures in the ancient world theorized about misfortune and sought out ways to avoid it. Many of them, Socrates prominently among them, suggested that we will, or can, live well forever. Such theorists undoubtedly thought that ceasing to exist would be a grave misfortune, but they also considered it to be a misfortune we need never face. Hence they did not have to confront the question as to whether there is a way to render ourselves invulnerable to annihilation and to the consequent loss of any sort of immortality that might otherwise be available. For Socrates, adaptation should play a role, albeit a very limited one, in the good life: we should end desires (or attachments) for things that are not in our interests as immortals. Keeping these will only make us cling, harmfully, to our present existence and the worldly

concerns to which we have become accustomed. Swapping worldly desires for those appropriate for immortals does not function to change our interests, creating in us an interest in the activities of immortals which we did not have before. According to Socrates, we have these interests all along, and we should adjust our desires simply because it is irrational not to desire what is good for us.

Ancient theorists who did not postulate any form of immortality, such as Gautama the Buddha, Epicurus the hedonist, and Epictetus the Stoic, confronted the prospect of annihilation more directly and explicitly. All three of these figures recommended adaptation as a means of living well, and in particular as a means of reducing our exposure to misfortune, but they were not always clear about whether and how it helps us in our confrontation with death.

Like other Stoics, Epictetus thought that, after suitable preparations, we can escape misfortune altogether. He appeared to think that adaptation is part of those preparations. In several passages of the *Enchiridion* Epictetus advised that we not desire anything we might be unable to attain through our own efforts. Here is a characteristic example:

> If you attempt to avoid disease or death or poverty, you will be unhappy. Take away, then, aversion from all things which are not in our power, and transfer it to the things contrary to nature which are in our power. . . . For if you desire anything which is not in our power, you must be unfortunate. (*Enchiridion* II, 1991, p. 13)

Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear how adaptation helps us to avoid misfortune. On one straightforward reading, Epictetus assumed that the thwarting of a desire is bad for us, either in itself, or because it "disturbs" us, making us suffer; either way, the misfortune may be avoided by eliminating the salient desire. However, this reading is at odds with the position, which seems fundamental to Stoicism, that virtue is the only thing that is intrinsically good for us, while vice is the sole intrinsic evil. Or rather, this position about virtue is at odds with the claim that suffering, or thwarted desire, is *intrinsically* bad for us. It is consistent with the view that thwarted desire and suffering may be *extrinsically* bad for us—bad for us insofar as they interfere with virtue—but never intrinsically bad for us. However, this latter view undermines the claim that we can become wholly impervious to misfortune. More precisely, our vulnerability is threatened by the possibility that suffering interferes with virtue. Assuming that remaining virtuous is entirely in our control, and that we can modify our desires in any way we choose, we can avoid thwarted desires by caring only about virtue. But we do not have the power to ensure that we will not experience pain (short of suicide), since pain is sometimes the product of unavoidable illnesses and accidental injuries. If pain interferes with virtue, and those things that interfere with our virtuousness are bad for us, even if extrinsically bad, then we are at risk for misfortune. If virtuous people are altogether impervious to misfortune, it is not because they never suffer, but rather because suffering is in no way bad for them.

Like Epictetus, Epicurus also recommended that we desire little, but the latter suggested that we eliminate all desires except those that help us to avoid suffering, as the following passage makes clear:

> All such desires as lead to no pain when they remain ungratified are unnecessary, and the longing is easily got rid of, when the thing desired is difficult to procure or when the desires seem likely to produce harm. (*Principal Doctrines* 26, in Saunders 1966, p. 55)

Given his position that the only thing that is intrinsically bad for us is to suffer, it seems reasonable to reconstruct his view concerning desires as follows. While the thwarting of a desire is never *intrinsically* bad for us, it could be extrinsically bad, in that it might cause us distress. For example, if we want flowers not to wilt, their decline will cause us some degree of distress,

as will our anticipation of their decline. On the other hand, that flowers wilt is not intrinsically bad for us, and it will not bother us if we lack the relevant desire. So we should avoid such desires.

Long before either of these figures lived, Gautama offered similar counsel as part of his "Four Noble Truths." There we are advised to pare down our desires, on the grounds that unfulfilled desires are the chief cause of suffering:

> This. . .is the noble truth of the cause of pain: . . .the craving for passion, the craving for existence, the craving for non-existence.
>
> This. . .is the noble truth of the cessation of pain: the cessation without a remainder of that craving, abandonment, forsaking, release, non-attachment. ("The First Sermon," in Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, p. 274)

Theorists who advocate adaptation as an aid to living well will not necessarily advise us to apply it to death in particular. It is one thing to say that death never harms those who die, and another to say that those who die *need* never be harmed by death. The latter implies that, after suitable preparations, we will not incur mortal harm. The former implies that all such steps are pointless, as the evil against which they are directed never occurs. Hence if we assume that death is always innocuous, as Epicurus did, it makes no sense to advocate adapting to it. (Isn't death extrinsically bad for us, if only because it thwarts some of our desires? Epicurus would demur, on the grounds that death cannot have painful effects, and on the grounds that when death thwarts a desire, it also precludes our experiencing any accompanying pain.) In view of this fact, we should not understand his recommendation that we not desire immortality as an attempt to help us to arm ourselves against mortal harm. On one charitable reading Epicurus thought that unlike death itself, which is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically bad for us, the desire for immortality and the desire not to die are extrinsically bad, since, combined with the belief in our mortality, they cause us distress when we anticipate our demise. Hence he suggested, as a prophylactic, that we avoid these desires. Perhaps something similar can be said of Epictetus. He appeared to think that death is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically bad for us, despite the fact that it ends the existence of virtuous and vicious persons alike, but also that it is in some sense bad for us to desire immortality. The reason he gave is that those who desire immortality will be "disturbed," and needlessly so, as they can jettison the salient desire (*Enchiridion* II and V, 1991, pp. 13 and 14.) However, as I noted above, this advice is hard to reconcile with the assumption that suffering is a matter of indifference.

As for Gautama, we should emphasize that, unlike Epicurus, he did not think that we are harmlessly annihilated at death. For that matter, he did not think that we are harmfully annihilated, or that we are annihilated at all. Nor did he consider us to be immortal. Gautama believed that the concept of death is not applicable to us. Those who use the term 'death' presuppose that the world contains individual objects that persist over time, that some of these, such as human beings, are living beings, and that death is the end of the persistence of living beings. Gautama rejected this presupposition (see the discussion of the chariot and the story of Yamaka in Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, pp. 283-284 and 286-288). There are no persisting objects, and hence no selves who either begin or cease to exist. So we should avoid saying that we will die. But we should also avoid saying that we will *not* perish; to say that we or other objects will not cease to exist is misleading, as it suggests that we will exist forever.

Prudential Interests

In arguing against the adaptation thesis I will draw upon certain assumptions about our prudential interests—about what is good for us and what is bad for us; i.e., what benefits us and what harms us. In this section I sketch some of these.

I assume that something is *intrinsically* good (bad) for us if and only if it *is* good (bad) for us and its goodness (badness) is not derivative from or due to the goodness (badness) of anything beyond itself. Anything else that is good or bad for us is *extrinsically* so. An ingrown toenail is bad for us, but not in itself: it is extrinsically bad for us. The pain it causes us is in itself, or intrinsically, bad for us.

Of those things that are extrinsically good for us, some are good only in a limited way, perhaps good in a limited context or timeframe, while others are overall good for us, meaning that they are good for us *all things considered*. I advocate a relatively standard view concerning when something is overall good for us. The view, called *comparativism*, says that an event or state of affairs is overall good (bad) for me just when it makes my life better (worse) than it would have been had that event not occurred. For example, being poked in the eye with a sharp stick is overall bad for me since it makes my life worse than it would otherwise have been, while forming a friendship is overall good for me, as it makes my life better.

According to comparativism, we work out how overall good an event is by comparing how well off we are in the actual world, in which the event occurs, to how well off we are in the nearest world in which the event does not occur. How well off we are in a possible world at a time, i.e., our welfare level in a world at a time, is determined by the intrinsic goods and evils we attain there then. Or it is so determined, on the assumption that we are capable of attaining any intrinsic goods or evils in that world at that time (for a defense of this qualification see Luper 2007, 2009). No doubt precision in such matters is elusive, but let us assume for simplicity that intrinsic goods can be assigned positive numerical values, that different types of intrinsic goods are commensurable, so that one unit of one such good is comparable to one unit of another, and that, similarly, intrinsic evils can be assigned negative numerical values, commensurately with other evils, and that such values correspond meaningfully to their positive counterparts, so that one unit of an intrinsic evil exactly offsets one unit of an intrinsic good. Then our welfare level at a particular time in a world is the sum of the intrinsic goods and evils we attain at that time in that world, and our lifetime welfare level in a world is the sum of the intrinsic goods and evils we attain over our lives in that world. If an event E makes our lifetime welfare level in the actual world higher than it is in the closest possible world in which E fails to occur, then E is overall good for us. We can even define E's overall value for us: it equals our lifetime welfare level in the actual world minus our lifetime welfare level in the closest world in which E fails to occur. For example, suppose that our lifetime welfare level in the actual world equals 100, and our lifetime welfare level in the closest world in which E fails to occur is 90. Subtracting this second value (90) from the first (100) tells us what E's overall value is for us: E has a positive value of 10. Accordingly, we might state comparativism this way:

> *Comparativism*: an event or state of affairs E is overall good (bad) for a subject S just in case E's overall value for S is positive (negative); the more positive (negative) its value, the better (worse) E is for S.

Exactly what sorts of things are intrinsically good for us is controversial. Comparativism analyzes overall goodness partially in terms of intrinsic goodness, but it is compatible with any account of the latter. Suppose, for example, that we adopt a simple form of hedonism, such as the following, as our account of intrinsic goodness:

> *Positive hedonism*: for any subject S, the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for S at time T is S's experiencing pleasure at T, and the one and only thing that is intrinsically bad for S at T is S's experiencing pain at T. The greater the quantity or intensity of the pleasure S experiences at T, the greater the intrinsic good for S at T; the greater the quantity or intensity of the pain S experiences at T, the greater the intrinsic bad for S at T.

On this view, our welfare level in a world is determined solely by the pleasure and pain we accrue in that world. Combined with positive hedonism, comparativism says that an event harms us only if, because of it, our welfare, hedonistically assessed, is lower than it would otherwise have been.

So much for my assumptions about our prudential interests. Next I will lay out an argument against the adaptation thesis.

The Case Against the Adaptation Thesis

If comparativism is correct, then being harmed may involve our enduring intrinsic evils. However, it might instead involve our being *precluded from gaining* intrinsic goods we otherwise would have had. So we cannot make ourselves invulnerable to harm merely by avoiding intrinsic evils. We must also protect ourselves from things that would take away intrinsic goods we otherwise would have. Hence the only way to ensure that death will not harm us is to so situate ourselves that the life it takes from us would *not be good for us*. To do that, we must see to it that our remaining life is bad for us, or that it is neither good nor bad for us (at least, this is true on plausible assumptions about intrinsic goods; for a possible worry, see Luper 2011). Yet doing this to ourselves is self-defeating. It amounts to denying ourselves the possibility of good life in order to rule out the possibility of a bad death. Worse: it amounts to depriving ourselves of any further good life in order to rule out the possibility that death will deprive us of good life. Absurdly, we would be doing to ourselves what we want death not to do.

To make the case against the adaptation thesis more concrete, let us pair comparativism with an account of welfare. We can draw upon the positive hedonist account once again. Combined with hedonism, comparativism says that it is bad for us to be precluded from gaining more pleasure, and hence it is bad to be precluded from gaining more life that is on the whole pleasant. It is not intrinsically bad for us—it is not necessarily painful not to have pleasure—but it is bad for us nevertheless. Hence proponents of positive hedonism could see to it that they will not have a bad death, but only by ensuring that further life, assessed hedonistically, would not be good for them.

Doing this is within their power. They could gravely injure themselves, for example, so as to make any further life intolerably painful. They could find some way to make themselves anhedonic, or incapable of pleasure. Hedonists could also use adaptation itself to avoid a bad death. Obviously hedonists cannot render pleasure irrelevant to their welfare by giving up the desire for pleasure; if hedonism is true, pleasure is good for us whether we want it or not. However, our desires affect our welfare indirectly, by influencing how much pleasure or pain we have, and there are ways of configuring our desires to ensure that, afterwards, life would be devoid of pleasure, or on the whole painful. The former might involve giving up any desires whose fulfillment might be pleasant, including the desire for pleasure. The latter might involve desires for unpleasant, unrewarding pursuits, such as digging and refilling holes, or self-mortification.

Obviously, these ascetic strategies are self-defeating. They are against the interests of hedonists. It is no good for hedonists to deprive themselves of pleasure for the sake of precluding the possibility that death will deprive them of pleasure; either way, they are deprived of pleasure, which is the last thing hedonists want. So it is clear that hedonist comparativists must reject the adaptation thesis.

Here is a recap of the comparativist argument against the adaptation thesis:

1. Comparativism is true.
2. If comparativism is true, adaptation can succeed (making death harmless to us) only by ensuring that further life would not be good for us; that is, it can succeed only by ensuring that, over the course of any life that remains to us, we would not have more intrinsic goods than evils: either we would lack any further intrinsic goods altogether, or the intrinsic goods we have would be matched or exceeded by intrinsic evils.
3. Adaptation is self-defeating if it succeeds by ensuring that our remaining life would not be good for us.
4. So adaptation is either unsuccessful or self-defeating.

As we just saw, anyone who accepts comparativism and the positive hedonist account of welfare must accept this argument. However, the shortcomings of the hedonist view are well known. If we replace it with a better account of welfare, perhaps we can position ourselves to resist the comparativist argument. It seems clear that the would-be critic must reject premise 1 or 2, since 3 is unassailable. In the next several sections I will discuss three ways in which we might reject 2 without rejecting 1. Then I will consider a way to criticize 1.

The Preferentialist Response

Can we accept comparativism yet reject 2 if we replace hedonism with a more plausible account of well-being? To answer this question, we will need to consider some alternative views of welfare. In this section I will discuss a version of preferentialism—a version of the view that fulfilling our desires is good for us—and its implications about welfare and the adaptation thesis. Later I will consider whether we can reject 2 using some other account of welfare.

The form of preferentialism I have in mind says roughly that it is intrinsically good for us to get what we want, and intrinsically bad for us to get what we do not want. But what is it to get what we want? Notice that when we want something, the object of our desire can be expressed in the form of a proposition. If, for example, I desire that my crinums will grow, the object of my desire is the proposition, my crinums will grow. In general, it seems, when we desire P, we get what we want if P holds, and we get what we do not want if P does not hold. That is, we get what we want when two things come together: our desiring something P, and the truth of P. According to the following account, it is intrinsically good for us that these two things come together:

> *Simple preferentialism*: for any subject S, it is intrinsically good for S at time T that, at T, S desires P, and P is true; and it is intrinsically bad for S at T that, at T, S desires P yet P is false. The stronger S's desire for P is, the better (worse) it is for S that P is true (false).

As stated, simple preferentialism leaves open the possibility that things other than fulfilled desires are intrinsically good for us. Contrast it with the following view:

> *Exclusive simple preferentialism*: for any subject S, the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for S at time T is that, at T, S desires P, and P is true; the one and only

thing that is intrinsically bad for S at T is that, at T, S desires P yet P is false. The stronger S's desire for P is, the better (worse) it is for S that P is true (false).

This version is "exclusive" since it says that the *only* thing that is intrinsically good for us at some time is getting what we want at that time. Thus, for instance, it is incompatible with the view that pleasure is intrinsically good for us, although it implies that fulfilling the desire for pleasure is good for us.

There is one other feature of (exclusive or nonexclusive) simple preferentialism that needs clarification. Consider that things which happen at one time can make a proposition true at some other time. What would make it true that my students will graduate is the relevant award some years from now. The event (if any) that makes a proposition true is its *truth maker*. According to simple preferentialism, if I desire that my students will graduate, it is good for me right now that two things come together: I desire that my students will graduate and they *will* graduate. I gain this good now, even though the truth maker of the object of my desire will not occur until years pass. Just as propositions might have truth makers, they might also have falseness makers. Let us say that subject S's desire for P is *thwarted* at time T if and only if, at T, S desires P, and P's falseness maker occurs. Assuming that my students will not graduate, simple preferentialism implies that it is bad for me *now* that I desire that my students will graduate and they will not, even though my desire will not be thwarted until years go by.

(Some readers will reject simple preferentialism on the grounds that it presupposes a false view about getting what we want. It assumes *conformism*, the view that our desire for P is fulfilled (unfulfilled) at time T if and only if at T we desire P and P is true (false). Readers who reject conformism might prefer *effectivism*: our desire for P is fulfilled (unfulfilled) at T if and only if at T we desire P and P's truth maker holds (P's falseness maker holds). Elsewhere I have argued for conformism over effectivism, but the issue can be left open here (Luper 2010). Readers who prefer effectivism might wish to replace simple preferentialism with the following account:

Effectivist preferentialism: for any subject S, it is intrinsically good for S at T that, at T, S desires P, and P's truth maker holds; it is intrinsically bad for S at T that, at T, S desires P, and P's falseness maker occurs.)

Let us return to our question: can we accept comparativism yet reject premise 2 of the comparativist argument? To resist 2, we will need a way to adapt to death without making our lives worse. Does exclusive preferentialism make this possible?

Of course, any reason for rejecting exclusive preferentialism is a reason to reject any strategy based on exclusive preferentialism. And there are plenty of worries about this account of intrinsic goodness. But let us set these aside for now, and simply assume that exclusive preferentialism is correct. Even then, it does not enable us to resist 2. Given the combination of comparativism and exclusive preferentialism, death harms people when it precludes the fulfillment of desires they actually have, and when it precludes their forming and fulfilling desires they would otherwise have had (and fulfilled). To adapt to death, preferentialists will need some strategy for preventing death from having this effect on them. In theory, the simplest strategy is to give up their desires, and resolve not to replace them. But that is obviously self-defeating, since people who have no desires whatever cannot have a good life, according to exclusive preferentialism.

While there are less drastic ways to adapt to death, all fail for related reasons. Here is a less extreme way to adapt: instead of giving up all of our desires, we might give up just those desires whose fulfillment death jeopardizes. On this strategy, we would limit ourselves to an

array of desires which death would not thwart, a set that is, so to speak, death-proofed, or thanatized. By combining this policy with exclusive preferentialism, we appear to ensure that death is no threat. At the same time, we leave ourselves free to have some desires; by fulfilling those that remain, it seems possible for us to have a good life.

What would such death-proof desires be like? A few possibilities come to mind. The first is the desire to die, but two other possibilities are more interesting.

Imagine a desire whose object P is such that nothing I do, and nothing about my life, has any bearing on whether P is true or false. Since P's truth value is independent of me and my life, call the desire for P an *independent* desire. Such desires are easy to imagine; examples include the desire that the Moon should have water on it, the desire that time travel should be possible, and so forth. When my desire for P is independent, my demise will have no bearing on whether or not P is true. So it seems that if exclusive preferentialism is correct, then, by limiting myself to independent desires, I can ensure that dying will not harm me.

The same seems true if I limit myself to desires that are conditional on my being alive. Take, for example, the desire to be well fed if alive. I might wish to be well fed even if I do not want to live on, and will not be disappointed to discover that in the near future I will be dead. Not being well fed at a time does not appear to be bad for me if it is also the case that I will not be alive then. And other desires that are conditional on my being alive are relevantly similar: their fulfillment is not precluded by my demise.

So those who restrict themselves to these kinds of desires seem impervious to mortal harm. However, exclusive preferentialism (together with comparativism) implies that they are not. Benefit or harm is not solely a matter of whether the objects of our desires are made true or false. It also depends on whether we *have* the desires. So death can still harm those who limit themselves to independent or conditional desires—namely by causing them not to have, hence not to fulfill, any desires. Given preferentialism, having a desire whose object holds would be good for us, but that is possible only while we are alive; according to comparativism, death is bad for us insofar as it deprives us of such goods.

Hence as exclusive preferentialists we cannot successfully adapt by limiting ourselves to independent and conditional desires. However, adapting *would* be possible if we accepted a modification of preferentialism. In many cases it is not intrinsically good for us to fulfill our desires; the modification I have in mind would take this fact into account. In particular, it is implausible to say that the fulfillment of desires that are independent or conditional on our being alive is intrinsically good for us. As Parfit (1984) pointed out, fulfilling my desire that a total stranger (whom I encounter once and never again) should be happy benefits that stranger, but it probably will not benefit me at all, and if it does, it will do so only obliquely: it will not be intrinsically good for me. Surely the same is true of my desire that the Earth continue to orbit the sun, my desire that the moon have water on it, and similarly for any independent desire. I would say that the same is also true of desires that are conditional on our being alive. (But I doubt that the point generalizes to all conditional desires. Desires may be conditional on many things. For example, my desire to promote some cause might be conditional on my not later deciding that the cause is corrupt. Fulfilling desires that are conditional on some sorts of things might well be intrinsically good for us [Luper 2012].)

Suppose we accept a modification of simple preferentialism according to which it is not intrinsically good for us to fulfill desires that are independent of or conditional on our being alive. In that case we can successfully adapt by limiting ourselves to such desires. Perhaps surprisingly, however, we *still* cannot accept the adaptation thesis. The reason is this: to resist

premise 2, we must do more than adapt to death. We must adapt without undermining the value of our remaining life. Yet limiting ourselves to independent and conditional desires is self-defeating, assuming that the fulfillment of these desires is not intrinsically good for us. If fulfilling some desires is the only thing that is intrinsically good for us, but fulfilling no desires that are independent or conditional on our being alive is intrinsically good for us, then, by limiting ourselves to these, we deny ourselves the possibility of a good life.

It is now clear that exclusive preferentialism does not give us the resources we need to resist premise 2 of the comparativist argument. By paring away vulnerable desires, preferentialists can prevent death from thwarting their desires, but death will still remove any desires that remain, and prevent the development of any others. And whatever these latter desires are, fulfilling them would make their remaining life good for them, or it would not. If it would, then death will still harm them by depriving them of this good life. If not, then adaptation is self-defeating, as it ensures that their remaining life is not good.

Negativist Response

Consider another position concerning the good, namely *negativism*, the view that nothing is intrinsically good for us. On one assumption negativism rules out the possibility of mortal harm from the start. The impossibility of mortal harm would undermine the adaptation thesis (which says that adaptation can eliminate the threat of mortal harm) since nothing can eliminate a threat that does not exist. But if the assumption I have in mind is false, negativism positions us to offer a second response to the comparativist argument against the adaptation thesis.

The pivotal assumption is that death cannot boost the amount of intrinsic evil in our lives. Presumably mortal harm entails our being deprived of intrinsic goods or our being provided with intrinsic evils; the former we might call a *deprivation* harm; the latter we might call a *provision* harm. So the assumption under discussion implies that mortal harm does not exist unless it is a kind of deprivation harm. But if negativism is true, there is no such thing as deprivation harm: nothing can harm us by depriving us of intrinsic goods if nothing is intrinsically good. Hence the assumption that death is never responsible for intrinsic evils, combined with negativism, implies that death never harms those who die, and we can reject the adaptation thesis.

However, if the assumption is false, negativism is compatible with the existence of mortal harm. Death might be bad for us insofar as it is responsible for our incurring intrinsic evils which we otherwise would not have endured. And then our question arises once again: does adaptation supply a sensible way to avert the threat of mortal harm, or will adaptation be self-defeating, as premise 2 says? In order to answer this question, let us look more closely at negativism.

Negativists can pair the claim that nothing is intrinsically good for us with different views about what is intrinsically *bad* for us. One possibility is that pain is the sole intrinsic evil; another is that unfulfilled desire is the only intrinsic evil. We might call the former pairing *negative hedonism*, and the latter *negative preferentialism*. (Some passages in Epicurus' writings suggest that he accepted negative hedonism.)

Some accounts of the good entail that nothing is intrinsically good for us and that death is never responsible for intrinsic evils. For example, both of these claims follow from negative hedonism. By contrast, negative preferentialism is compatible with the possibility that death is responsible for some intrinsic evils: according to negative preferentialism, it is intrinsically bad for us to have unfulfilled desires; our present desires might themselves go unfulfilled if we perish in the near future (given conformism), so death can boost the intrinsic evil in our lives.

Negative preferentialism might get adaptationism back in business, since, in theory, we can prevent death from thwarting our desires by eliminating the ones that are vulnerable. Death will also preclude our forming and fulfilling desires, and thus deprive us of future fulfillment, but this is not bad for us, according to negative preferentialism, since having and fulfilling desires is not good for us.

So given negative preferentialism, mortal harm is possible, yet may be averted via adaptation. Nor will adapting to death be self-defeating, for it results in a life that is not as bad as it would otherwise be. Hence if negative preferentialism were correct, it would position us to reject premise 2 of the comparativist argument.

However, neither negative preferentialism nor any other form of negativism is plausible. Given negativism, the only good is extrinsic; it consists in our having less intrinsic evil. Unlike death, living on is never the means to our having less intrinsic evil. Hence the possibility of our living well is ruled out from the start. The best life we can have will not be good at all. It is merely free of evil. Life is either bad for us or it is something about which we should be wholly indifferent. A more lugubrious view than negativism is difficult to imagine. Negativism is counterintuitive for other reasons as well, such as the following: suppose that, by pushing a button, you will endure a little more intrinsic evil such as pain than you otherwise would have, but you will also enjoy a great deal more joy, accomplish amazing things, and so forth. Negativism implies that it is best not to push the button. It implies that nothing justifies allowing ourselves more intrinsic evil than we otherwise would endure, no matter how much joy we could attain and no matter how great the accomplishments we could achieve.

I conclude that appealing to negativism does not position us to reject premise 2 of the comparativist argument after all.

Anti-deprivationist Response

I have considered two ways of rejecting premise 2 of the comparativist argument. Each was consistent with comparativism, yet neither panned out. Perhaps proponents of adaptationism can do better if they reject comparativism itself. In this section I briefly consider one alternative to comparativism.

Consider the following position:

> *Pure provisionism*: for any subject S, something is overall bad for S just when it makes the amount of intrinsic evil in S's life greater than it otherwise would have been.

It would be natural to accept this view if we also accepted negativism; if there just aren't any intrinsic goods, there could only be provision harms. We have already argued that negativism is false, so if it is our only grounds for accepting pure provisionism, we should reject both. However, isn't it possible to accept pure provisionism even if we reject negativism? Pure provisionism does not say that there are no intrinsic goods, although it does entail that, if they exist, being deprived of them is not bad for us. Is it coherent to claim that there are things that would be intrinsically good for us but it is not bad to be deprived of them?

I presume that a life with more intrinsic goods is, other things being equal, better than one with less, and a life with less is worse than one with more. So pure provisionism forces us to say that what precludes our acquiring good things makes life worse than it otherwise would be, yet despite this the things that preclude our acquiring good things are not bad for us. It follows that what makes life worse than it otherwise would be need not be bad for us. Given that it has consequences like this, I doubt that pure provisionism is coherent. But for the time being let us suppose that it is. Then we will also reject the comparativist argument against the adaptation

thesis. Comparativism implies that, if other things are equal, being deprived of a good is bad for us, which is something that pure provisionism denies.

While pure provisionism derails the comparativist argument, it may not support the adaptation thesis. The adaptation thesis presupposes that death sometimes harms those who die. Like negativism, however, pure provisionism rules out the possibility of mortal harm, given the assumption that death is never responsible for intrinsic evils.

But let us assume that, contrary to this assumption, death may boost the amount of intrinsic evil we endure (see Luper 2007, 2009), and that, as pure provisionism implies, death harms us if it does this. Is the adaptation thesis viable *now*? Suppose that the only intrinsic evil death can bring about is thwarted desire. This is an evil we can avoid by thanatizing. However, we saw that thanatizing forces us to eliminate all desires whose fulfillment might be considered intrinsically good, which raises the concern that adapting via thanatization will be self-defeating. Since we rejected negativism, this concern is not moot. Given exclusive preferentialism, it is a fatal objection to the adaptation thesis.

Perhaps we can rescue the adaptation thesis by embracing some account of the good other than exclusive preferentialism. We might say, for example, that thwarted desire is the only intrinsic evil, but various things, such as pleasure, are intrinsically good. Then we can make ourselves impervious to mortal harm by thanatizing without worsening life—without reducing the amount of intrinsic good it would otherwise include.

This scenario may seem conceivable but I doubt that we can take it seriously. If thwarted desire is intrinsically bad for us, thanatizing forces us not to desire the goods which might contribute to the overall value of our lives. Hence, on the scenario we are imagining, adaptation is not self-defeating only if our indifference to these goods somehow fails to interfere with our acquiring them. Adaptation will succeed only if we inadvertently attain a good life which we do not want.

In any case, this defense of the adaptation thesis is built upon pure provisionism, which is an extraordinarily wobbly foundation. I have already pointed out that pure provisionism forces us to swallow the unpalatable claim that what precludes our acquiring good things is not bad for us yet it makes life worse than it otherwise would be. Nor is this the only thing we must choke down. Suppose we say that being deprived of a good is not bad for us. To be consistent, we must also make the dubious claim that being deprived of an evil is not good for us. Now, we *can* say both of these things; we have only to replace pure provisionism with the following, stronger, view:

> *Bifurcated comparativism*: for any subject S, something is overall bad for S just when it makes the amount of intrinsic evil in S's life greater than it otherwise would have been, and something is overall good for S just when it makes the amount of intrinsic good in S's life greater than it otherwise would have been.

But it is hard to see why anyone would choose this route, for three reasons. First, being stronger, bifurcated comparativism shares the flaws of pure provisionism. Second, it is wildly implausible to say that it is bad for us to increase our intrinsic evils, yet not good to avoid them, and just as implausible to say that it is good for us to increase our intrinsic goods, yet not bad to be deprived of them. Consider just two consequences of bifurcated comparativism: being made unconscious to avoid the pain we otherwise would incur during surgery does not benefit us (because it does not boost our intrinsic goods); being made comatose, and thus being deprived of a stretch of life that would have been good for us, is not bad for us (since it does not boost our intrinsic evils). I

doubt that anyone will accept these consequences. It is for excellent reason that we prefer to be unconscious during surgery, but not while we pass the milestones of life.

Responding to Death

Much of what we do is directed towards creating a better future for ourselves. We plan our careers hoping for success, we look for friends and a partner, hoping to form strong, enduring relationships, and we rear our children in such a way that they will become independent adults capable of expanding our family ties. None of us welcomes the forlorn conclusion that lying at the end of our days is a tragedy: our demise. Unfortunately, adaptation is not a reasonable way to secure ourselves against mortal harm. If there are goods other than fulfilled desires, death might deprive us of them, thereby harming us, and adaptation is powerless to preclude such harm. And even if exclusive preferentialism were true, it would not be sensible to attempt to avoid mortal harm through adaptation. For if we retain any desires whose fulfillment would benefit us, we remain vulnerable to death; if we retain no such desires, we deprive ourselves of the possibility of good life.

Is desire modification of no use to us at all, then? I do not think so. If some form of preferentialism is true, as I believe it is, then in some ways we are able to shape our own interests. It makes good sense to take advantage of our malleability to ease our encounter with mortality, even though we cannot guarantee that we will altogether escape mortal harm. We might say that death is biologically premature if it comes unusually early. Presently, the average lifespan in the United States is a bit less than 80 years, so death is biologically premature when it ends the life of a typical U.S. citizen who is 65 years old, or 40 years old. In any case, none of us can reasonably expect to live much longer than 90 years, and it is best to adjust our expectations accordingly. In planning out our lives as wholes, a judicious application of adaptation can benefit us. Most of us make our existence distinctive and worthwhile through succeeding with a life plan whose threads unify our lives over time and bind them with the lives of others. These plans must come to an end, but designing them realistically will help ensure that they do not end in failure, left uncompleted. Since it is a misfortune to fail at projects that we make part of our life plan, it is best to choose endeavors that we can accomplish within a normal lifespan. In so doing, we limit our exposure to misfortune. It is also true that we will not benefit from pursuing a project if we do not take it on, but we cannot expect to accomplish anything at a time if we cannot expect to be alive at that time.

There is something else to consider as we approach the end. It would be nice if advances in medical technology enabled people to live well for significantly longer than a mere 80 or 90 years. Our children may benefit from such advances. But for the rest of us no such advances are yet in sight. If we live well past the point at which death would be premature, we will face rapidly increasing suffering, a sharp decrease in physical mobility, and possibly the onset of dementia. At some point we will not live well. Rather than allowing that to happen, it might be prudent to hasten death.

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