The Evil of Death: What Can Metaphysics Contribute?[*]

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Will a clear view of what death *is* help us decide whether it is bad? Not necessarily. The discovery that death $= X$ might instead affect our appraisal of X, leaving our appraisal of death untouched.

Learning which quantum theory correctly describes human bodies would not affect anyone's attitude toward his or her loved ones. On the other hand, a child's discovery of the nature of meat (or an adult's discovery of the nature of soylent green) can have a great effect. In still other cases, it is hard to say how one would, or should, react to new information about the underlying nature of what we value—think of how mixed our reactions are to evidence of cultural determinism or atheism, or of how mixed our reactions would be to learning that we all live in the Matrix. (Maybe there is no objective fact about how we should react. Derek Parfit's (1984, section 95) fear of death diminished when he became convinced of certain theses about the metaphysics of personal identity. Perhaps there is no objective fact of the matter as to whether this was rational; perhaps it was rational for him but would not be for others.)

What can metaphysics contribute to the question of the evil of death? It cannot, on its own, settle the question, since there is no simple rule telling us how to adjust value in light of new information about underlying nature. Given a clear view of the nature of death, there will remain the question of its disvalue. However, metaphysics can help us attain this clear view. Moreover, a clear conception of what metaphysical positions do and don't say, and a clear conception of how metaphysics works in general, can remove impediments to a rational appraisal of the evil of death.

1. How Metaphysics Works

One of the tasks of metaphysics, as traditionally conceived, is to investigate Ultimate Reality, what "lies behind the appearances". When a certain apple is red, what is the underlying nature of this fact? Does a certain particular, the apple, instantiate a universal of redness; or does a certain bundle of universals (or tropes) contain the universal (trope) redness; or does the fact not involve a

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universal at all, as a nominalist would have it? Should we think of the apple, ultimately, as being an aggregate of temporal parts, the current among which is red? Or perhaps the ultimate description of reality should not mention the apple at all; perhaps all that ultimately exist are subatomic particles, some of which are "arranged applewise", as Peter van Inwagen (1990) would say.

How to think about this traditional task of metaphysics is itself a metaphysical question.[1] But it's hard to make any sense at all out of metaphysics unless one makes *something* like this distinction: a distinction between the way the world ordinarily (manifestly, apparently) is, and the way the world ultimately (fundamentally, really) is.

There is a vexed question about how to describe the first side of this distinction: the notion of the world *ordinarily* being a certain way. I want to count the existence of the apple, and its being red, as part of the way the world ordinarily is. But suppose the ultimate description of reality makes no reference to apples, and instead makes reference only to subatomic particles. What, then, is the status of the English sentence, 'there is a red apple'? Certain hard-liners would say that it is false. Their attitude is like Eddington's (1928) towards his table: since, as physics tells us, matter is mostly empty space, the ordinary English sentence 'the table is solid' is false. Liberals about Eddington's table say instead that the English sentence 'the table is solid' is true even though matter is mostly empty space. Common sense is mistaken about what it takes to be solid, but not about whether tables are solid. Similarly, liberals would say, the English sentence 'there is an apple that is red' is true even though *ultimately* there are no apples. Though my sympathies are with the liberals, I don't want to take a stand on who is correct. So let's understand the notion of the world "ordinarily" being a certain way neutrally; 'There is a red apple' is part of the ordinary description of the world whether or not it is true in English.[2]

There is another vexed question, about how to understand 'underlying'. In what sense do the fundamental facts underlie the ordinary facts? Some metaphysicians say that the ordinary facts hold *in virtue of* the fundamental facts, others speak of *supervenience*, and still others speak of *truthmaking*. I don't want to take a stand on any of this; but I do want to mention one thing that 'underlying' does *not* mean: it has nothing to do with "paraphrase" or conceptual analysis. An old tradition, tracing at least back to Russell (1905), holds that

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[1]See, for example, Schaffer (2009); Sider (2011); and especially Fine (2001).

[2]My own view is that the dispute between hard-liners and liberals is irrelevant to our present concern, and indeed, to nearly all questions aside from those of metasemantics. See Sider (2013).

a principal task of philosophy is to clarify the structure of our thoughts and sentences by analyzing, in a more perspicuous form, what we mean by them. But a metaphysical account of the underlying nature of X is not intended as an account of what we mean by our talk about X, any more than a quantum theory of the underlying nature of apples, persons, and other physical objects is intended as a theory of what we mean by our talk of those objects.

So: fundamental metaphysics gives an account of the ultimate reality that underlies ordinary facts. These ordinary facts are the ones we're familiar with in everyday life, the facts that we commonly take ourselves to be truly reporting using ordinary sentences such as 'the table is solid' and 'the apple is red'. Liberals and hard-liners may disagree over whether these sentences really are true, but it's undeniable that there are *some* facts *in the vicinity*; these are what I'm calling the "ordinary facts"; and the task of fundamental metaphysics is to discover what underlies them.

Ignoring the distinction between ordinary and underlying facts can lead to distortions of the ethical significance of metaphysical views. To take an example, return again to the metaphysical position according to which all that exists, ultimately, is subatomic particles. It would be too quick to say that given this metaphysics death never occurs (since there exist no people to die) and is therefore not an evil. To say that the metaphysics implies that "death never occurs" would be to assimilate the bearing of this metaphysics on death to the bearing on death of an afterlife. Intuitively, the two are quite different. Discovering that there is an afterlife is the kind of discovery about death's nature that would lead us to reevaluate its evil; it would be like discovering the nature of meat or soylent green. Discovering that death is, ultimately, a change in the arrangement of particles rather than, ultimately, the disappearance from fundamental reality of the object that is the deceased, would also be a discovery about the nature of death, but it would seem to be more like discovering the quantum nature of our bodies, and need not lead us to reevaluate death's evil. Thus a bald statement of a metaphysical position—"no persons exist, only subatomic particles!"—without attention to its intended status, as a description of ultimate reality rather than ordinary facts, is apt to distort its significance.

Of course, even when metaphysical views are understood in this way, one might hold that they nevertheless have ethical significance. It's open to argue that the thesis that the world consists, ultimately, of subatomic particles implies moral nihilism, just as it's open to argue that certain physical theories imply moral nihilism. (Consider, for example, the version of quantum mechanics according to which the world consists ultimately of a single particle moving

through configuration space (Albert, 1996).) My point is just that if these ethical conclusions are to be drawn, they must be drawn with the distinction between ordinary facts and their underlying reality clearly in view.

2. The metaphysics of time

The metaphysics of time, in particular, has been thought to bear on the evil of death. The issues are easiest to approach by contrasting two polar opposite conceptions of time.[3]

According to the first, time is like space, on a variety of fronts. First, in terms of existence: past and future objects are equally real. Second, in terms of parts: objects have temporal in addition to spatial parts. Third, in terms of "perspective": just as the fundamental spatial facts are as described from an aspatial perspective—"x is five feet from y" rather than "x is here" or "y is far away"—so the fundamental temporal facts are as described from an atemporal perspective: "x occurred before y" rather than "y is occurring now" or "x occurred in the past".

According to the second, time is unlike space, and should rather be thought of as being analogous to modality (at least: analogous to the way most people think of modality; David Lewis (1986) is a notable exception). In terms of existence: merely past and future objects do not exist, just as merely possible objects do not exist. Just as there simply do not exist any golden mountains (although there could have), there simply do not exist any dinosaurs or human outposts on Mars, (although there did and perhaps will, respectively). In terms of parts: objects do not have temporal parts. Objects are not spread out over time, just as objects are not spread out across possible worlds. In terms of perspective: just as the fundamental facts are those that hold from the perspective of the actual world (Lewis of course denies this), so, the fundamental facts are those that hold from the perspective of the present time.

The labels of "four-dimensionalism" (or "the B-theory") and "presentism" (or "the A-theory") go along with these two pictures, although terminology is inconsistent.[4] Now, the components of these perspectives are, to some degree,

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[3]The first view is prominently associated with J. J. C. Smart (1963, chapter 7, 1972) and W. V. O. Quine (1950, 1960, section 36), and the latter with Arthur Prior (1967, 1968, 1970, 1976, 1996). For more on these issues see Sider (2001, 2011, chapter 11).

[4]For example, in my (2001) I used 'four-dimensionalism' to stand for the mere acceptance of temporal parts, rather than for the whole first conception; and 'the A-theory' is sometimes

independent. Thus one can hold, with the four-dimensionalist, that past and future objects exist and that the atemporal perspective is fundamental, while holding with the presentist that objects lack temporal parts; or one can hold with the presentist that the present perspective is the fundamental one and that objects lack temporal parts, while admitting the existence of past and future objects. Further, there are additional contrasts beyond those of existence, parts, and perspective.[5] Further, there are many hybrid views, for example those that treat the past differently from the future. But for present purposes, just the two polar conceptions will suffice.

Let me clarify these conceptions by looking carefully at their fundamental descriptions of temporal reality. The four-dimensionalist's description uses the conceptual resources of predicate logic. She takes the domain of her most unrestricted quantifiers to include objects drawn from the past, present, and future (just as we all take the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers to include spatially distant objects). Thus the four-dimensionalist accepts, in her fundamental theory, sentences like "There are dinosaurs" and "there are human outposts on Mars", as well as "there are computers". And she feels free to introduce a proper name, in her fundamental language, to stand for any member of that domain, regardless of its location in time. Thus she might introduce a name s for Socrates, in addition to a name b for Barack Obama (provided she did not hold the view mentioned earlier, that only subatomic particles are ultimately real). Further, she takes her domain of entities to include temporal parts. For instance, she will accept the existence of a certain temporal part s_h of Socrates when he is drinking hemlock, as well as the existence of a certain temporal part b_i of Obama while he is being inaugurated as president of the United States. Further, the sentences that she accepts are those that are true "from the atemporal perspective". For example:

(H) s_h drinks Hemlock

(I) b_i is inaugurated

Three points about (H) and (I): first, note the symmetry between them, even though Socrates is in the distant past and Obama is in the present. Each consists of a simple attribution of a property to an entity. Second, these sentences are intended to lack tense—to be tenseless descriptions of four-dimensional real-

used just for the view that the present perspective is fundamental.
    [5]See for instance Hawthorne (2006); Fine (2006).

ity.[6] Third, notice that even though drinking hemlock and being inaugurated are temporary properties of persisting entities (such as people), they can nevertheless be attributed simpliciter (rather than relative to a time) to the temporal parts s_h and b_i, since those temporal parts are instantaneous.[7] Continuing with our overview of the four-dimensionalist's fundamental description of the world: descriptions of temporal facts (such as the fact that Socrates is in the past) call for no new logical resources beyond those of predicate logic, nor do they require privileging the perspective of any one time. Rather, they require describing the locations of objects within the four-dimensional spacetime manifold. For example, the four-dimensionalist might introduce a two-place predicate, *is temporally before*, and say: s_h is before b_i. To indicate that both s_h and b_i are in the past, a four-dimensionalist might introduce a name, c, for her current temporal part, and say: s_h is before c and b_i is before c. And to express the fundamental fact that underlies the ordinary claim "there no longer exist dinosaurs", she might say: "No dinosaurs are simultaneous with c; all dinosaurs are located before c".

The presentist's fundamental description of reality is quite different. This is not to say that there is no overlap. The presentist does accept the logical apparatus of first-order logic, and will therefore quantify over, name, and ascribe features to, objects in a domain. But even when his quantifiers are wholly unrestricted, he will deny that the domain of those quantifiers includes any merely past or future objects. So although he will accept "There exist computers", he will *not* accept "There exist dinosaurs" or "There exist human outposts on Mars". Relatedly, he will not include, in his fundamental language, proper names of merely past or future entities (such as Socrates), since no such entities exist according to him.[8] (This is not to say that he objects to proper names like 'Socrates' *in descriptions of ordinary facts*; see below.) Further, he does not admit temporal parts. Further—and this is crucial—in order to express temporal claims (such as the fact that there once existed dinosaurs), he introduces tense operators. These are new logical expressions, in addition to those from predicate logic. Grammatically, they are like modal operators in that they form grammatical sentences when prefixed to grammatical sentences.

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[6]It may be that under a full syntactic analysis, all English sentences are tensed; in that case, the four-dimensionalist might prefer to replace the English sentences (H) and (I) with sentences of predicate logic: Hs_h, Ib_i.

[7]See Lewis (1986, pp. 202–4).

[8]And since he regards his fundamental language as obeying classical logic, according to which the sentence $\exists x\, x = a$ is a logical truth, for each proper name a.

One tense operator is P, read as "it was the case in the past that"; another is F, read "it will be the case in the future that". The presentist describes the past and future using these and other tense operators. For example, he would describe the ordinary fact that there once existed dinosaurs by saying, in his fundamental language:

(D) P (there exists a dinosaur)

Intuitively, this means that the embedded sentence, 'there exists a dinosaur', is true with respect to some time in the past. However, the presentist denies that this intuitive gloss is any kind of metaphysical reduction. Rather, the tense operators are metaphysically unanalyzeable; the fact expressed by (D) is rock-bottom, metaphysically speaking. (Compare: many of Lewis's opponents say that the fact that $\diamond$(there exists a golden mountain) is metaphysically rock-bottom; the modal operators $\diamond$ and $\square$ are metaphysically unanalyzeable.) Notice how the idea that "the present perspective is fundamental" emerges here: there is an asymmetry between how the presentist describes facts about the past and future, on the one hand, and facts about the present on the other. The past and future must be described using sentences prefixed with tense operators, such as (D) and "F(there exist human outposts on Mars)", whereas the present is described using sentences without tense operators, such as "Ted is typing". Each sentence describes reality from the point of view of the present; when a sentence is prefixed with a tense operator, it describes the past or future from the point of view of the present, so to speak.

3. Time and Death

One of the traditional puzzles about the evil of death is: how can death be bad for those who have died, given that they no longer exist? A natural reply, given by Thomas Nagel (1970) and many others, is that dying is bad because it *deprives* the deceased of the goods of life. But this reply is sometimes argued to fail on metaphysical grounds, or else to require further metaphysics if it is to succeed. For, it is said, the proposed answer leaves the central puzzle unresolved. Perhaps it has resolved one puzzle, namely that of how death can be bad when dead people have no "positive" states; its answer is that the evil of death isn't a positive state but rather a deprivation. But the central puzzle is, allegedly, that of how death can be bad when dead people have *no properties at all*. The dead do not exist, it is said, and so do not have any properties at all, not even the

property of being deprived of the goods of life. The proposed solution simply presupposes that the dead do have the property of being deprived of the goods of life, and hence is no solution at all, at least not without the introduction of some further metaphysics.

That further metaphysics could be provided in different ways. According to Harry S. Silverstein (1980, 2000), it is provided by four-dimensionalist metaphysics. For the four-dimensionalist, the dead exist atemporally, in the sense of being included in the domain of the unrestricted quantifier in the four-dimensionalist's fundamental language. The dead have the same ontological status as spatially distant planets, according to the four-dimensionalist, and so it is unproblematic to ascribe properties to them. According to Palle Yourgrau (1987, 2000), it is provided by a distinction between being and existence.[9] Yourgrau's view is, in essence, the result of beginning with the presentist position I sketched earlier, but then adding that even though there do not *exist* past and future entities, there *are* past and future entities. Even though the dead do not exist, they nevertheless *are*, and hence are capable of having properties.

Silverstein and Yourgrau have, I believe, metaphysically coherent views about death; but I don't think that either of these views *needs* to be adopted if one is to say that death is an evil for the dead. To bring this out, it will help to consider a precise version of the deprivation thesis. According to Fred Feldman (1991), a state of affairs in general (whether concerning death or something else) is bad for a person if and only if that person's entire life would have been better for her if the state of affairs had not occurred than if it had occurred. Death is no different: death is bad (when it is bad) because the deceased's entire life would have been better if she hadn't died. For example, Princess Diana's untimely death was bad for her because:

(F) Princess Diana's entire life would have been better for her, had she not died when she did, than it in fact was.

What I want to argue is that Feldman's account of the evil of death does not depend on four-dimensionalist or Yourgrauian metaphysics (though it is consistent with each). In particular, Feldman's account could be combined with (non-Yourgrauian) presentist metaphysics.

Presentism is a claim about the ultimate nature of time. Thus it provides an account of the ultimate reality that underlies ordinary claims about time. For

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[9]The distinction is in the tradition of Meinong and Parsons (1980), but differs importantly since Yourgrau rejects incomplete and impossible objects, and argues for his view on metaphysical, not semantic, grounds.

example, what underlies the ordinary claim that there once existed dinosaurs is the tensed claim: P(there exist dinosaurs). Now, when Feldman proposes that (F) is the ground of the evil of Diana's death, I do not take this as being intended in a metaphysical spirit, as assuming any particular stance on the ultimate nature of the underlying facts. I rather read his claim (F) as being neutral on fundamental metaphysics. (Similarly, I read him as being neutral on the underlying physics of (F).) Read in this spirit, Feldman's proposal is simply that (F), understood as a claim of *ordinary fact*, is what explains the evil of Diana's death. Assuming that presentism is compatible with (F) thus understood, presentism is compatible with Feldman's proposal.

But is presentism compatible with ordinary facts such as (F)? It has been alleged that presentism is incompatible with the truth of *any* sentence containing a proper name of a merely past (or future) entity, in which case presentism would preclude (F). The argument is simple: since proper names are "directly referential", as Kaplan (1989) and Kripke (1972) have argued, any proposition expressed by a sentence containing a proper names is a "singular" proposition, which contains the referent of the proper name as a constituent; thus sentences containing proper names for past entities do not express propositions, given presentism, and so cannot be true.[10]

This argument ignores the distinction between ordinary and underlying facts. The direct reference theory of proper names is best taken, by the metaphysician, in the same spirit as *all* claims of ordinary fact: as the appearances whose underlying reality is up for metaphysical investigation. Recall the metaphysician who thinks that all that ultimately exists are subatomic particles. Still, this metaphysician does not deny the ordinary fact that there are apples, tables, and chairs; she just holds that the ultimate reality that underlies this ordinary fact does not involve apples, tables, and chairs. Think, next, about what such a metaphysician would say to the direct reference theorist's claim 'The sentence "Alfie the apple is red" expresses a singular proposition containing Alfie as a constituent'. Her attitude toward this sentence will be parallel to her attitude toward the simpler sentence 'Alfie is red'. Each corresponds to an ordinary fact, and each of these ordinary facts is made true by an ultimate reality that does not involve any such object as Alfie.

Similarly, the presentist is not committed to denying ordinary facts about merely past entities, such as the fact that Socrates drank hemlock or the fact expressed by (F); nor is she committed to denying the ordinary fact (assuming,

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[10]For more on this and related issues, see Sider (1999).

with Kaplan and Kripke, that it is a fact) that (F) expresses a singular proposition about Diana. What she is committed to is the claim that these ordinary facts are made true by an ultimate reality that does not include Socrates or any other merely past objects.

This ultimate reality includes a multitude of tensed truths, truths expressed by sentences prefixed by tense operators, which describe—in this distinctive, tensed, way—in full detail the entire past. Let F be the fundamental fact—expressible by a long or perhaps even infinite conjunction of tensed sentences—that underlies (F). F is not a singular fact about Diana. (A sentence expressing F, in the presentist's fundamental language, would not contain a proper name for Diana, since this language contains no names for merely past individuals.) Now, one could try to argue that for this reason, F cannot ground the evil of Diana's death. But on the face of it, this would be like arguing that Diana's death can't be bad for her if all that exist ultimately are subatomic particles. It would be like drawing conclusions about the value of loved ones on the basis of a quantum theory of their bodies. On the face of it, although we are indeed entitled to assume that whatever grounds the evil of Diana's death must *in the ordinary sense* concern Diana herself, we are not entitled to assume that whatever grounds the evil of death must *fundamentally* concern the entity Diana herself.

To reiterate this point: there is a sense in which the underlying presentist metaphysics of (F) is "purely general" (at least with respect to Diana): the conjunctive sentence in the presentist's fundamental language that expresses F does not mention Diana by name. But this should not be equated—at least not without further argument—with (F) being purely general in the ordinary sense. Presentism is fully compatible with there being a big difference between singular ordinary facts, like the ordinary fact expressed by (F), and general ordinary facts, like the ordinary fact expressed by sentences like 'there existed some person, with such-and-such characteristics, whose entire life would have been better had she not died than it was in fact'. All that presentism implies is that there is a broad similarity between their underlying metaphysics; the underlying metaphysics of each is, fundamentally, purely general (except with respect to presently existing entities).

I have been arguing that we must keep in mind the distinction between ordinary facts and underlying reality, when we evaluate the ethical implications of metaphysical theses. We must also keep this distinction in mind when we decide which fundamental metaphysics to accept. Yourgrau argues against four-dimensionalism by saying:

I find it exceedingly difficult to give up my intuition that dead people simply do not exist… And I do not mean merely that the dead do not now exist; for objects in time, what does not exist now does not exist at all. (Yourgrau, 1987, pp. 87–88)

Now, this may be a persuasive argument; but it must be properly understood. Remember that sentences in the four-dimensionalist's fundamental language are understood as describing reality atemporally; thus the mapping between four-dimensionalist talk and tensed ordinary talk is not straightforward. In particular, although it is true that the four-dimensionalist accepts 'dead people exist' (and 'dinosaurs exist', and so on) in her fundamental language, these claims cannot be equated with similar-sounding *ordinary* claims. The ordinary claim that 'Socrates exists' (for example), is present-tensed, and equivalent to 'Socrates *still* exists'. And the underlying four-dimensionalist metaphysics of this sentence is that Socrates has temporal parts that are simultaneous with our current temporal parts, which is of course not true.[11] Now, Yourgrau is aware of this, as is evidenced by his use of '*simply* does not exist' and 'does not exist *at all*' to mark his disagreement with the four-dimensionalist; and it is open to him to claim that "intuition" informs him that fundamental reality does not contain existing dead people. All I ask is that the content of this alleged intuition be made clear, and that it not be conflated with the ordinary belief that dead people no longer exist.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that fundamental metaphysics is a search for the fundamental reality that underlies ordinary facts; I have argued that the relationship between theses of fundamental metaphysics and questions of value is not a straightforward or mechanical one; I have described two metaphysical views about the nature of time, presentism and four-dimensionalism; and I have argued that, properly understood, presentism is consistent with the idea that death is bad because it deprives the deceased of the goods of life.

Nothing I have said addresses the deep and difficult questions about the evil of death. Philosophers like Nagel and Feldman say that death is bad because of what it costs us, that facts of the form *a certain person's entire life would have been better, had she not died* ground the evil of death. All I have done is clarify what

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[11]Compare Silverstein (2000, pp. 124–27).

the metaphysician has to say about the "metaphysical structure" of such facts. The real questions are about the structure of our values, and they remain to be answered: do such facts explain why it is so bad to die?

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