



**David Boonin: *Dead Wrong: The Ethics of Posthumous Harm*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
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David Boonin's *Dead Wrong: The Ethics of Posthumous Harm* is a fantastic contribution to the consistently burgeoning, and increasingly important, philosophy of death literature. In this laser-focused book, Boonin aims to defend what he calls *The Posthumous Wrongs Thesis*, which is the claim that "It is possible for an act to make things worse for a person, or to make that person's life go less well for them, in a way that generates a moral reason against doing it even if the act takes place after the person is dead" (p. 2). If true, this would obviously have important implications for our duties to the deceased. It would also help vindicate a view many non-philosophers would regard as commonsensical, but which philosophers in the death literature agree is deeply puzzling (even if true) upon reflection.

Boonin begins the book by considering the case of the abstract expressionist artist Clyfford Still, who worked most of his life to ensure that the art he was creating would be contained in one museum indefinitely or, failing that, locked away from public consumption forever. It was perhaps his strongest desire, one he maintained for his entire career as an artist, and one that was finally granted approximately thirty years after his death. Was this good for Stills to have this desire satisfied posthumously? Would he have been harmed had his wishes been ignored and his roughly 2,400 pieces of art were split up and sold throughout the world? Boonin argues that the answer to both questions is "Yes." Furthermore, he argues that it is a short step from granting that the posthumous thwarting of desires can *harm* the deceased to allowing that it can *wrong* them.

With this last point in mind, Boonin spends the majority of the book defending what he calls *The Posthumous Harm Thesis*, which is the claim that "It is possible for an act to harm a person even if the act takes place after the person is dead" (p. 2). He defends *that* claim by way of the following *Posthumous Harm Argument (PHA)*.

(1) It is possible for A's act to inflict unfelt harm on B.

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- (2) If it is possible for A's act to inflict unfelt harm on B, then the Desire Satisfaction Principle is true.
 - (3) If the Desire Satisfaction Principle is true, then it is possible for A's act to harm B even if the act takes place after B is dead.
- Therefore,
- (4) It is possible for A's act to harm B even if the act takes place after B is dead (pp. 14-15).

Chapter Two: Unfelt Harm aims to defend the first premise of PHA by way of example. Boonin asks us to consider the case of *Bob and Carol*, who've agreed to be in a monogamous relationship, yet Carol secretly cheats on Bob without him ever becoming the wiser (or having his conscious experiences affected in any way) (§ 2.1). Boonin expects most readers to accept that Carol *harms* Bob with her actions, but for those who don't share that judgment, he spends the remainder of the chapter trying to motivate this judgment and ward off objections. He motivates the judgement by (1) appealing to the seemingly plausible axiom that "All else equal, it's better for Bob's life to go the way he wants it to go," (2) comparing Bob's life with another life (Rob's) that is identical in every respect except that Rob isn't cheated on, (3) offering a crib test, and, finally, (4) reviewing Nozick's *Experience Machine*. He then turns to thoroughly responding to the most relevant objections.

Chapter Three: From Unfelt Harm to Frustrated Desire aims to defend the second premise of PHA, at least in a modified form. Boonin does so first by way of considering alternative explanations for why Carol's act really harms Bob (e.g. other attitudes besides desires are generating value, objective goodness independent of desire determines value, Carol causes Bob to have false beliefs) and then rules out each explanation. The rest of the chapter considers and responds to objections to the second premise. The discussion here is rich and engaging and far too complex to adequately cover in a short review. Some of the most important objections concern what to say about merely instrumental desires, the problem of changing desires over time, and Parfit's objections about purely other-regarding desires. With respect to the first of these objections, Boonin allows for a modified desire satisfactionism that only concerns intrinsic desires, though he also makes an interesting case for allowing that the satisfaction of mere instrumental desires also enhances well-being (pp. 72-73). In an illuminating discussion about the changing desires problem, Boonin draws an important distinction between desires conditional on their future persistence and those that aren't (arguing that only satisfying the latter can improve one's life even after the person no longer has the desire) and between considerations of affecting someone's lifetime well-being and their well-being going forward (arguing that temporal bias might justify favoring giving preference to well-being going forward). Finally, with respect to the Parfit-style concerns, Boonin develops the *Relevant Desire Satisfaction Principle*, which holds that "if A's act makes a proposition P false, B wants P to be true, and P is relevant to B's life, then A's act harms B" and proceeds to fill in the details, insofar as is possible, about what it means to be "relevant to B's life" (p.

102). Boonin's careful articulation of, and analysis of each objection, as well as his defense of an amended desire satisfactionism in response to them makes the book worth reading for anyone interested in the well-being (and not just death) literature.

Chapter Four: From Frustrated Desire to Posthumous Harm aims to defend the third premise of PHA and, more broadly, the idea that people can be posthumously harmed. Like the previous chapter, much of the argument is negative. Boonin starts with the positive case, the crux of which is simply that "people can have desires about how things go after they're dead" and "since these desires are desires about how things go after they die, they are desires that can be frustrated by acts that take place after they die" (p. 113). The substance of chapter, however, lies in the negative arguments where Boonin carefully and charitably lays out each of the most important objections to the existence of posthumous harms and responds to each in detail. This is where real philosophical progress is made.

Perhaps the most notable contributions are Boonin's responses to the "No Subject Objection" (§ 4.2) and the "Backwards Causation Objection" (§ 4.3). The "No Subject Objection" holds that the relevant difference between the *Carol and Bob* example and alleged posthumous harm examples is that there is no one to be harmed after death. Bob exists when he is cheated on, but dead people don't exist, and so it supposedly makes no sense to say they're harmed at a time they don't exist. Boonin canvasses three possible responses, but ultimately defends the claim that posthumous thwarting of desires harms people while they were alive and had the desire in question (pp. 120-121). This avoids the "No Subject Problem" because there is a "subject who accrues the harm" and the subject exists at the time they accrue the harm.

However, this response invites the "Backwards Causation Objection," which holds that it's impossible to perform actions that cause things to happen in the past. While rejecting the standard Feinberg/Pitcher account, Boonin draws a distinction between some action *causing* something to happen and it *making it the case* that something is true. Just as future actions can make present beliefs false, so too can future actions frustrate presently held desires. One may object to this response, arguing that desire frustrations must still be "constrained by the kinds of laws that govern cases that involve physical causation" (p. 127). In response, Boonin offers a companions-in-guilt argument, noting that Carol's actions supposedly harm Bob the instant he cheats on him even though "instantaneous physical causation across a large distance is just as impossible as backward physical causation" (p. 127). To me, this sounds like a potentially good argument *against* desire satisfactionism, rather than a good argument *for* a type of desire satisfactionism that also allows for posthumous harm. But the companions-in-guilt move seems impeccable. Boonin proceeds to demonstrate that his argument goes through on any combination of views concerning when propositions are true (tensed/tenseless) and the nature of time (future realism/non-realism). This is but one notable contribution of the book.

Chapter Five: From Posthumous Harms to Posthumous Wrongs aims to move from the truth of the *Posthumous Harm Thesis* to the truth of the *Posthumous Wrongs Thesis*. Boonin starts the chapter by considering and rebutting previously unconsidered objections to the *Posthumous Harm Thesis* (e.g. the Posthumous Benefits Objection) before moving on to objections against accepting the *Posthumous Wrongs Thesis* on the basis of the *Posthumous Harm Thesis*. He then transitions into discussing the implications of

the *Posthumous Wrongs Thesis* (with respect to, e.g., harvesting organs, posthumous publication, treatment of corpses), both because this is important in its own right and to ward off potential reductio arguments against his view. Naturally, Boonin shows that his view can both help guide action in these difficult to navigate moral cases, while avoiding generating clearly absurd verdicts.

As with the previous chapters, this chapter is filled with fascinating theoretical insights concerning issues that extend far into other debates. For instance, Boonin offers a principled heuristic, rooted in desire satisfactionism, to guide trade-offs between felt and unfelt harms (p. 177). Some of the greatest contributions of the book may be found in the, somewhat peripheral, theoretical arguments in each chapter. As another example, going back to chapter two, Boonin demonstrates that the recent x-phi experiments that purport to cast doubt on the reliability of standard Experience Machine judgments in fact fail to do so. In a nutshell, since the survey questions stipulated that one's memory would be wiped upon leaving the Experience Machine, they stack the deck in favor of staying (p. 33). Identifying this fatal methodological flaw in those studies matters for the well-being literature in general, not just the death literature.

Important theoretical work is accomplished in every chapter and real philosophical progress is made on issues that are central to a range of different debates. This book should then be of great interest to anyone interested in the ethics and well-being literatures in addition to the target audience of philosophers who work on death. On the flip-side, the central argument of the text is likely to be dialectically effective against a narrow group of philosophers. Unless one starts out with the intuitive judgments Boonin outlines at the beginning of the text, they will not be moved to accept the *Posthumous Wrongs Thesis* by the (typically *clearly* sound) arguments Boonin gives to show how this thesis can avoid the worst problems attributed to it. The central argument is, at the end of the day, an argument primarily for existing desire satisfactionists or those with pre-theoretical judgments in line with desire satisfactionism.

To be sure, Boonin does nearly everything possible, within the length of the book, to motivate each premise of the argument and to ward off objections. Yet, it is just a feature of the world that people have different starting points. Boonin's crystal-clear argument (and arguments in defense of his argument and arguments against objections) go about as far as is possible in defending a kind of desire satisfactionism that allows for posthumous harm with one set of reasonable starting points. This set of arguments, however, simply cannot be dialectically effective against philosophers with a different set of reasonable starting points. This is, of course, a shortcoming of humans doing philosophy, not a shortcoming of the book. It is actually virtue of the book that Boonin's arguments bring us to, or at least very close to, philosophical bedrock.

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