
It is not easy to write a book on death that is at once playful and a serious examination of various metaphysical questions surrounding death, but with *Well-being and Death* Ben Bradley has succeeded with aplomb. Bradley argues for five main theses. First, he argues indirectly for hedonism, by posing serious objections to its main competitors. From this, he argues for the view that death could be a harm to the person who dies were it to deprive her of the goods of life that she would have received were that death not to have occurred, and against the view that a dead person cannot have a well-being level. These two claims together support his view that a person’s death can be bad for her after she has died and his view that death is typically worse for persons the earlier that it occurs. Bradley concludes the book by arguing against the view that it is possible to “defeat” death “by doing certain things in life, like completing our life’s work” (p. xv). He does, however, believe that “there are things we can do to make our deaths less bad,” although he thinks that recognizing this should give us no reason to change our behavior, since “those are either things we have independent reason to do anyway… of things that it would be obviously crazy to do” (p. xvi).

Bradley’s *Well-being and Death* is careful, beautifully written, clearly argued, and, while his deprivation account of death’s badness is largely derivative from that developed by Fred Feldman, in many respects it is highly innovative. His arguments that dead persons can have well-being levels and that it is not possible to “defeat” death are especially worthy of very careful attention. So too are his arguments showing that the question whether posthumous harm is possible can be answered independently of the question whether death can be a harm to the person who dies—a “de-coupling” position that has also been recently argued for by Chris Belshaw.

Of course, no book is without its faults and Bradley’s objections to the Epicurean view that death is nothing to us, leave something to be desired. Bradley glosses the Epicurean argument for this claim as “(1) Anything that is bad for someone must be bad for that person at a particular time. (2) There is no time at which death is bad for the one who dies. (Death is not bad for someone before she dies, since it has not occurred yet; it is not bad for her once she dies, because from that point on she no longer exists.) Therefore, (3) death is not bad for the one who dies” (p. 73). Bradley holds that the real question that undergirds this argument is that of how something can be bad for a person (even extrinsically bad for her) at a time when she does not exist—the “no-subject” problem. This problem supports premise (2), and implicitly rests on the truth of presentism, “the view that only present objects exist” (p. 81). Accordingly, to undercut this Epicurean argument Bradley has developed a series of arguments to cast doubt on presentism. He begins by noting that the no-subject problem that undergirds this Epicurean argument “might stem from a general principle about relations: in order for a relation to relate things, it must relate them at a time, and in order for a relation to relate things at a time, both relata must exist at that time” (p. 80). Thus, the “badness-for” relation can only hold between a person and a state of affairs or an event at those times at which both the person and the state of affairs or event both exist. However, as Bradley observes, this principle is too strong, for there are many examples of relations that hold between things that exist and things that do not.

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For example, causal relationships often exist between events that do not temporally overlap, while the “is a great—great-grandson of relation often relates an existing person and a nonexistent person” (p. 81). Bradley holds that counterexamples such as these to the general principle about relations outlined above pose problems for presentists, who (he assumes) share its underlying view that for a relation to relate things at a certain time, both relata must exist at that time. Rather than endorsing presentism, then, Bradley holds that eternalism should be endorsed: the view that “past and future objects exist”, even if they do not exist now (p. 81). In addition to this problem for presentists Bradley offers two more: that if presentism were true then we would not be able to refer to past objects, or “to account for the literal truth of our history books” (p. 82).

Yet despite their initial plausibility none of these objections to presentism are sound. First, it is not true that a presentist is committed to holding the over-strong general principle that “in order for a relation to relate things, it must relate them at a time, and in order for a relation to relate things at a time, both relata must exist at that time”. To hold that a presentist is committed to this claim is to hold that presentists have a general problem with the ascription of relational properties (such as “is a great-great-great grandfather of”) to objects that do not exist. As such, then, to hold that the presentist is committed to this general principle about relations is to hold that he/she is committed to the claim that “If, at t, x has the property P, then x exists at t” (David-Hillel Ruben, “A Puzzle about Posthumous Predication”, The Philosophical Review, vol. 97, no 2 [1988], p. 213). But the presentist is not committed to this claim, for (as Ruben argues) it is perfectly possible for a presentist to hold that Cambridge changes can be predicated upon objects that no longer exist. Although such a predication might predicate upon the object in question a phony change, it still ascribes to it a perfectly genuine property. It is thus simply not true that a presentist could have trouble ascribing the sort of relational properties that Bradley outlines to objects that no longer exist. Bradley’s second objection to presentism can similarly be met. Presentists do not necessarily see any bar to referring to past objects, such as Napoleon or Lucretius, for presentism is compatible with both the description theory and the causal theory of reference determination. (See Mark Hinchliff, “The Puzzle of Change”, Nous, Vol. 30, Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives, 10 Metaphysics, 1996 (1996), p. 125.) Rather, it is the predication of properties to such past entities that appears puzzling for them. Finally, it is also not true that presentists necessary have difficulties with accounting “for the literal truth of our history books.” If it is held that a proposition, if true, is true at all times, then if x is P at t, it is eternally true that x is P at t, even at those times when x does not exist. But this is not necessarily a problem for presentists. Presentists can accept that “x is P at t” is true after the time at which x ceases to exist; they only have a problem with the claim that “x is P at t” when “t” is a time at which x no longer exists. Thus, claims about Socrates that are indexed to times at which Socrates existed (i.e. the usual sorts of claims found in history books) can be unproblematic for presentists. Of course, that presentism can be defended against Bradley’s objections shows neither that it should be accepted, nor that the Epicurean view that it can be used to undergird is correct. And it must be admitted that given the wealth of criticism that the Epicurean view has been subjected to in recent years it was a wise decision on Bradley’s part to focus on developing his own innovative positions rather than to add yet another voice to the chorus of anti-Epicurean criticism. But, even so, a more nuanced discussion of presentism in the