Death, Betrayal, and a Guardian Angel

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Abstract: A familiar Epicurean argument for the conclusion that death (i.e., being dead) isn't bad for those who die goes like this. The dead can't experience anything, including being dead and its effects. But something is bad for an individual only if that person can experience it or its effects. Therefore, death isn't bad for those who die. In this article, I consider several alleged counterexamples to this argument's second premise, along with some responses to them. The responses aren't entirely without merit, as we'll see. However, I contend that even if none of the cases cited are straightforward counterexamples to the Epicurean premise, they can be used to challenge it indirectly. I conclude that this familiar Epicurean argument is unsound.

Keywords: Death; Epicureanism; Experience requirement; Counterfactual intervener

1. In an oft quoted passage from his 'Letter to Menoeceus,' Epicurus writes, 'Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply the capacity for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience.'[1] Many have found in these remarks an argument for the conclusion that death (i.e., the state of being dead) isn't bad for those who die. The argument, as it's typically reconstructed, has two main premises. The first is that death is an experiential blank. The second is sometimes known as the experience requirement. It says that something is bad for an individual only if that person can experience it or its effects. Together these two

[1] The 'Letter to Menoeceus' is available online at www.epicurus.net/en/menoeceus.html

premises entail that death isn't bad for those who die. For if death is an experiential blank, as Epicurus and his followers insist, then the dead can't experience anything, including being dead and its effects. But if the dead can't experience being dead or its effects, it follows from the experience requirement that being dead isn't bad for them.[2] Call this the experience argument.[3]

What to make of the argument? Those who believe in some sort of afterlife will no doubt object to its first premise, the claim that death is an experiential blank. But let's set objections of that sort aside and assume with Epicurus that 'death is the privation of all sentience.' That leaves premise two, the experience requirement. In what follows, I consider several alleged counterexamples to that principle, along with some responses to them. The responses aren't entirely without merit, as we'll see. However, I contend that even if none of the cases cited are straightforward counterexamples to the experience requirement, they can be used to challenge that principle indirectly. The upshot of the discussion is that the experience argument is unsound.

2. In the course of discussing the experience argument, Thomas Nagel (1979, p. 4) describes the case of a man—call him Alfonzo—who remains blissfully unaware that he is being 'betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face.' These events seem bad for Alfonzo even though he never discovers them. The lesson, according to Nagel, is that something can be bad for a person even if the person never experiences it.

Nagel's point is well taken, but it doesn't refute the experience argument. As Nagel's critics have been keen to point out, his conclusion is consistent with the experience requirement

[2] A bit more precisely, the conclusion of the argument is that death is neither intrinsically nor instrumentally bad for the deceased. Thus, I take the experience requirement to imply that if a person can't experience something or its effects then that thing is neither intrinsically nor instrumentally bad for the person. The alleged counterexamples to that principle that I discuss below purport to be cases in which something is intrinsically bad for a person despite not having any impact on the person's experiences.

[3] Recent proponents of this general line of reasoning include Rosenbaum 1986, Suits 2001, and Taylor 2012, among others.

on which the argument is based.[4] To get a counterexample to that principle we would need a case in which something is bad for an individual even though the person *can't* experience the state or event in question or its effects. But Nagel's example, at least in its original form, doesn't fit the bill. While the betrayal and ridicule may be bad for Alfonzo, he presumably could have experienced these events and their effects, even though, as things actually happened, he didn't. It was presumably possible, for example, for him to somehow discover what was happening behind his back, and if he had made that discovery, he no doubt would have been upset by it. Nagel's example and the moral he draws from it are therefore consistent with the experience requirement.

It has been suggested, however, that while Nagel's original example may not quite turn the trick, a modified version of it does.[5] The modified example involves adding a 'counterfactual intervener' to the story, something or someone that doesn't actually intervene in the course of events but would have if certain conditions had obtained. Cases involving counterfactual interveners are fixtures in the contemporary literature on free will and moral responsibility, where they have been used to challenge the principle of alternative possibilities, the claim that a person is morally responsible for what he did only if he could have done otherwise.[6] And it seems that such cases can also be used to augment Nagel's objection to the experience argument.

Consider, for instance, the following variation on Nagel's example. Everything is the same as in the original version of the story, except this time let's imagine that a guardian angel was standing by ready to prevent Alfonzo from discovering the ridicule and betrayal, if anything should happen that might uncover them. Had something of that sort happened, the angel would

[4] See, e.g., Rosenbaum 1986, p. 221 and Silverstein 1980, pp. 414-415.
[5] Fischer 1997. See also Fischer 2006. Both papers are reprinted in Fischer 2009.
[6] Frankfurt (1969) was the first to use counterfactual intervener cases to challenge the principle. In recent decades, defenders of his argument have constructed a variety of more elaborate 'Frankfurt-style' cases designed to overcome difficulties with Frankfurt's original example. For a good overview of the dialectic surrounding the Frankfurt-style cases, see the essays collected in Widerker and McKenna 2003.

have intervened and prevented Alfonzo from making the painful discovery. As it happens, though, no such event occurred, and so intervention on the angel's part proved to be unnecessary.

Here too many people have the intuition that the betrayal and ridicule are bad for Alfonzo. Moreover, it could be argued that if these events were bad for Alfonzo *sans* the guardian angel, as they undoubtedly were, they would be no less bad for him given the angel's presence. After all, the angel didn't alter the actual course of events. He is a mere counterfactual intervener. All he did was keep a watchful eye on the situation. Given this, some find it implausible to suppose that the betrayal and ridicule are bad for Alfonzo in the original version of the example but not in this modified version. Notice, though, that the angel's presence makes it physically impossible for Alfonzo to experience the betrayal. Here, then, we seem to have a genuine counterexample to the experience requirement, a case in which something is bad for a person even though the person can't experience the state or event in question or its effects.[7]

Defenders of the experience requirement might respond to this objection by insisting that, appearances to the contrary, the betrayal and ridicule aren't bad for Alfonzo in this modified case. Those events don't cause him to have any unpleasant experiences, and, given the presence, power, and intentions of his guardian angel, there is no risk of Alfonzo having any bad experiences as a result of them. And that, it could be argued, is the key difference between this modified version of the story and the original version presented by Nagel. In the original version, there was at least some, presumably non-trivial, risk that Alfonzo would discover the betrayal and ridicule and be upset by them, and it could be argued that something is bad for a person if it

[7] Fischer (1997, pp. 345-346) advances this sort of argument. Fischer regards the betrayal in this case as intrinsically bad, as do I, which seems to require rejecting hedonism. Some worry that we shouldn't have to reject hedonism in order to respond to the Epicurean argument. See Bradley 2012, for example. While I agree that it might be desirable to have a response to the experience argument that even hedonists could accept, the question presently at issue is whether the sort of objection Fischer advances is correct. If it is, and if it requires rejecting hedonism, so much the worse for hedonism, I say.

creates a non-trivial risk of upsetting the person. But in the modified case, no such risk exists. How, then, is the fact that Alfonzo is 'betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face' supposed to be bad for him in that case?[8] This is an important question, which I'll address in due course. For now, though, I'll simply rely on the intuitive judgment that the betrayal and ridicule are indeed bad for Alfonzo, even though, given the presence of his guardian angel, he can't be experientially affected by them.

The modified version of Nagel's example seems to show that something can be bad for a person even if it's impossible, given the circumstances, for the person to experience it. I consider the implications of this for the experience argument shortly. But first it's worth noting that the same point can be illustrated using examples that don't involve a counterfactual intervener.[9]

Here's a case in point. Barney's wife is on an island vacation, and the island she is visiting is so remote and isolated that it would take several days for any news from it to reach London where Barney resides. At noon on Saturday Barney's wife is unfaithful to him, but he never learns of her infidelity, for, as it turns out, he was destined to have a fatal heart attack later that afternoon, long before news of his wife's indiscretions could possibly reach him.[10]

Here we seem to have another case in which something is bad for a person, despite the fact that it's impossible, given the circumstances, for the person to experience it. Because of his wife's remote location at the time of her infidelity, together with the fact that he was destined to have a fatal heart attack later that afternoon, it was physically impossible for Barney to learn of his wife's betrayal. However, it certainly seems that her betrayal is bad for him nonetheless.

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[8] See Suits 2007, p. 77 and 2012, p. 227-228 for a response along these lines.

[9] This is important given some people's aversion to unrealistic thought experiments like the one involving the guardian angel. Suits (2001, p. 76), for example, regards the counterfactual intervener version of Nagel's example as 'a quite fanciful—no, a desperate—attempt to bolster the example.' I lack Suit's scruples about the use of fanciful examples, and certainly don't see anything desperate about the case. But for those who share his worries, it's instructive to note that the same points made by those examples can be made using slightly more mundane cases.

[10] For similar examples, see Fischer 1997, p. 352 and 2014, p. 137, and McMahan 1988, p. 34.

Both the modified version of Nagel's example and the preceding story provide us with scenarios in which someone is shielded from experiencing certain events that nevertheless seem bad for the person. In the modified version of Nagel's example, Alfonzo's guardian angel prevents him from discovering that his friends have betrayed him and that people ridicule him behind his back. A confluence of unfortunate circumstances likewise prevents Barney from discovering his wife's infidelity. In both cases, though, it seems that the relevant events are bad for the individual, the impossibility of the person being experientially affected by them notwithstanding. Such cases might therefore seem to put the lie to the experience requirement and to the Epicurean argument based on it. But as I'll now argue, matters aren't quite that simple.

3. The modified Nagalian response undoubtedly makes an important contribution to the discussion of the experience argument. As it stands, however, the response is incomplete at best, for there is an initially plausible reading of the experience requirement on which the argument hinges to which the sorts of cases discussed thus far aren't straightforward counterexamples. That reading can, moreover, be used as the basis for a variation of the experience argument.

The modified Nagalian response understands the 'can' at issue in the experience requirement as indicating some sort of possibility—what John Fischer (1997, p. 347) calls 'narrow possibility.' Narrow possibility is, very roughly, the sort of possibility we invoke in everyday discourse when we say things like, 'it's not possible for us to get there on time in this traffic.' When we say things like this, we aren't saying that some event (an on-time arrival, e.g.) is strictly or metaphysically impossible. Our claim, rather, is that the event isn't possible in the narrower sense that its occurrence is precluded by our actual circumstances. Proponents of the modified Nagalian response like Fischer contend that it's this narrower sort of possibility that's

at issue in the experience requirement. They then argue, persuasively I think, that something can be bad for a person even if it isn't possible, in this narrow sense, for the person to experience it.

There is, however, a different way of reading the experience requirement that proponents of the (modified) Nagalian response have yet to consider, one that can be used as the basis for an initially compelling version of the experience argument. The reading I have in mind treats the 'can' at issue as indicating a basic ability or capacity to be experientially affected by certain types of events, an ability or capacity that can be present even if circumstances preclude or mask its manifestation. Understood in this way, the experience requirement says that something is bad for an individual only if that person is *capable* of experiencing it or its effects.[11] Call this the capability reading of the experience requirement.

The capability reading, together with the claim that the dead are permanently incapable of having any experiences, yields the conclusion that death isn't bad for them. For if the dead are incapable and can never again become capable of experiencing anything, then they will never be capable of experiencing being dead or its effects. And, if the dead will never be capable of experiencing death, it follows from the capability reading that death isn't bad for them.

There is reason to suppose that this version of the experience argument is what at least some of Epicurus's followers had in mind all along. This becomes clear when we examine the sorts of considerations they typically invoke to motivate the experience requirement on which the argument hinges. Consider, for instance, an example proffered by Stephen Rosenbaum (1986, p. 219). Rosenbaum invites us to consider the case of a deaf man who attends an egregiously bad

[11] The principle should be qualified so that the person need not be capable at the time the bad event occurs of being experientially affected by that event at that time. Otherwise, the principle would be vulnerable to obvious counterexamples. If Alfonzo's friends betray him while he's in a comma, this might still be a misfortune for him, according to this reading of the experience requirement, even though he isn't capable at the time of being experientially affected at that time by the their betrayal. It's enough to satisfy the requirement that there be some relevant time at which Alfonzo is capable of being experientially affected by his friends' bad behavior.

performance of a Mozart symphony. We may assume that what makes the performance so terrible is its sound. Rosenbaum contends that, barring any extraordinary assumptions, the terrible performance isn't bad for the deaf man and that the most plausible explanation of this fact is that the deaf man isn't *capable* of experiencing the awful cacophony.[12]

It's also worth noting that the capability reading of the experience requirement finds support in Epicurus himself. Recall the passage from the Letter to Menoeceus with which we began: 'Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply *the capacity* for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience' (emphasis added). Notice that Epicurus's claim in this passage isn't that we have to experience something or its effects in order for it to be a misfortune for us, but rather that we must be capable of experiencing it.

So we have some reason to think that the experience requirement is to be understood as the claim that something is bad for a person only if the person is capable of experiencing it or its effects. On this reading, if a person is incapable of experiencing something, as in Rosenbaum's example of the deaf concert attendee, then that thing isn't bad for the person. Notice, though, that when the experience requirement is understood in this way, neither the modified version of Nagel's example nor the case of the hapless Barney are obvious counterexamples to it.

Consider, first, the counterfactual intervener version of Nagel's betrayal case. The presence of the guardian angel makes it impossible for Alfonzo to find out about the betrayal. However, the angel's presence does nothing to alter Alfonzo's capacity for experiencing betrayals or their effects. Alfonzo is no less capable of experiencing betrayal and all the pain and

[12] It's doubtful that the best explanation of why the performance isn't bad for the deaf man is the fact that the man is incapable of experiencing it. This explanation fails to explain why the performance wouldn't be bad for a person whose hearing is fine but whose ears were covered by a guardian angel to prevent him from hearing the awful cacophony. Nor would it explain why the performance wouldn't be bad for someone who decided to go to a movie instead of the symphony. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

heartache it can cause than he would be *sans* his guardian angel. This is because having the capacity to do or experience something is plausibly a matter of having certain intrinsic properties. Because the circumstances that make it impossible for Alfonzo to experience the betrayal (viz., the presence, power, and intentions of his guardian angel) don't alter his intrinsic features, they don't alter his capacity to experience the relevant events either. So, while it was impossible, given the circumstances, for Alfonzo to experience his friends' betrayal, he nevertheless remained capable of experiencing it. The claim that the betrayal was a misfortune for Alfonzo is therefore consistent with the capability reading of the experience requirement.

Similar remarks apply to the story about Barney. His wife's remote location makes it impossible for him to discover in time that she has been unfaithful to him. However, it does nothing to alter Barney's capacity to experience betrayal or its effects. Prior to his untimely demise, Barney was no less capable of experiencing a betrayal and all the pain and heartache it can cause than he would have been had he caught his wife in the act. So, while it was impossible in the circumstances for Barney to discover his wife's adulterous behavior, he was nevertheless capable of experiencing betrayal and its effects. The claim that the wife's betrayal was bad for Barney is therefore consistent with the capability reading of the experience requirement.

Here's a slightly different way of putting the point, one that appeals to the similarities between capacities and dispositional properties such as fragility. The capacity for having certain experiences, like the disposition of, say, a fragile glass to shatter when dropped, can be masked by conditions that prevent its manifestation. The guardian angel, for example, masks Alfonzo's capacity to experience the betrayal and secret ridicule in much the same way that careful packaging can mask a glass's disposition to shatter when dropped. But just as the packaging may prevent the glass from shattering without making it any less fragile, so too the guardian angel

prevents Alfonzo from experiencing the ridicule and betrayal without rendering him any less capable of being experientially affected by events of that type. The angel, like the packaging, masks without eliminating the relevant capacity. Alfonzo remains capable of experiencing betrayals, even though his actual circumstances don't allow for the manifestation of that capacity. Here again the same point could be made, mutatis mutandis, about Barney.[13]

In each of the examples we've considered thus far, the individual retains the capacity to experience the relevant misfortune, even though in some of the cases this capacity is masked. These examples therefore don't provide us with cases in which something is bad for a person despite the fact that the person isn't capable of experiencing that thing or its effects, and so aren't straightforward counterexamples to the capability reading of the experience requirement. That reading, moreover, is said to find intuitive support in reflection on cases like the one involving the deaf concert attendee, and, as we've seen, can be used to formulate an initially compelling version of the experience argument for the conclusion that death is never bad for those who die.

4. Where does this leave us? It might be tempting to conclude that the examples we've been considering don't provide the materials for a compelling challenge to the experience argument. But, as I'll now argue, this temptation should be resisted. Although none of the examples are straightforward counterexamples to the capability reading of the experience requirement on which the argument turns, they can be used to cast doubt on that principle in other ways.

Return to Rosenbaum's case of the deaf man who attends the dreadful performance of a Mozart symphony. Given our assumption that the performance is terrible solely because of its

[13] Fara (2008) offers a parallel response to counterfactual intervener cases used in the free will literature. He argues that the counterfactual intervener in those cases also acts as a mask. The agent, he contends, retains the ability to do otherwise; it's just that this ability is masked by the presence of the counterfactual intervener, who is poised to intervene and prevent the agent from exercising that ability.

sound, we might think that, other things being equal, the performance isn't bad for the deaf man, and that this is so precisely because he isn't capable of having the relevant auditory experiences. Cases like this can therefore seem to support the capability reading of the experience requirement. On closer inspection, however, it isn't at all clear that they support the principle.

As Fischer (1997, p. 349) observes, cases like this concern events that, by their very nature, could only be bad for a person in virtue of their sensory effects. It's thus quite plausible that, in a case like this, the event in question would indeed be bad for someone only if the person were capable of having the relevant sensory experiences. If the badness of that event for an individual is solely a matter of its causing the person to have certain unpleasant sensory experiences, then since a person has those experiences only if he is capable of having them, it makes perfect sense that the event would be bad for an individual only if that individual were capable of having the relevant experiences. But, as Fischer goes on to point out, these sorts of cases may involve only a proper subset of personal misfortunes. There may be other cases in which an event is bad for someone not because (or not only because) of its tendency to cause the person to have bad experiences, but because of its impact on other aspects of the person's life.

Consider, for instance, the betrayal cases we've been discussing. That Alfonzo's friends betray him is bad for him. However, the badness for Alfonzo of that state of affairs isn't exhausted by the fact that its discovery is liable to upset him, for it still seems bad for him even if, owing to the presence of his guardian angel, there is no chance of his having any unpleasant experiences as a result of it. Similar remarks can be made about Barney. That his wife was unfaithful to him certainly seems bad for him. However, the badness for Barney of his wife's betrayal has nothing to do with the possibility that he might discover what she did and be upset by it, for it was impossible, given the circumstances, for him to make that discovery. In neither

case, then, can the badness of the betrayal for the victim be grounded in its tendency to cause the victim pain. But if the badness of the betrayal for the victim isn't grounded even in part in its tendency to upset the victim, it's implausible to suppose that the victim would nevertheless have to be capable of experiencing the betrayal or its effects in order for it to be bad for him.

Before elaborating on this point, we need to take a closer look at why being betrayed might be bad for someone if not the fact that it upsets or is liable to upset the person. I raised this issue earlier when introducing the modified version of Nagel's betrayal case, and it's time now to give the issue more careful attention. So far I've been relying on the intuitive judgment that being betrayed and ridiculed can be bad for someone even if the person is prevented from having any unpleasant experiences as a result. However, we need to determine whether this intuition can be given an adequate theoretical basis. Without a plausible explanation of why such events might be bad for a person even if it's impossible in the circumstances for the person to be experientially affected by them, the examples we've been discussing will remain suggestive at best.

So, what's so bad about being betrayed or ridiculed behind your back, especially if it's impossible for you to have any unpleasant experiences as a result? No doubt a number of answers are possible. Here I'll briefly mention three, all of which have some plausibility.

The first is due to Stephen Hetherington (2001) and focuses on the impact betrayals can have on beliefs the truth of which is important to you. According to Hetherington, being betrayed is bad for you because it makes you less cognitively successful in areas in which you presumably want to be successful. It creates a discrepancy between how you perceive the world and the way the world really is, which is bad for you insofar as you care about accurately perceiving certainly aspects of realty. You presumably believe, for example, that your friends are loyal to you, and you care very much about whether this belief of yours is true. But if your friends betray you, they

render that personally important belief of yours false. And this, Hetherington plausibly contends, is bad for you, even if you can't experience any of the bad consequences of the betrayal, because it makes you 'that much less cognitively successful as a person than you would wish to be. You are—by now being mistaken about something that matters to you—that much "out of step" with the world, notably with some parts of the world that matter to you' (2001, pp. 351-352).

Fischer (2014, pp. 143-146) sketches a second account of why being betrayed and secretly ridiculed is bad for an individual. Central to it is the idea that we have interests in not being betrayed and in not having our reputations besmirched. Fischer contends that our being ridiculed and betrayed constitutes a setback to these interests, and thus is bad for us, regardless of whether we're aware of the setback. To illustrate the point, Fischer considers a case in which your students gather regularly to say all sorts of nasty things about you, and in which 'there is a suitably placed counterfactual intervener whose presence renders it impossible for you to find out about these gatherings.' Fischer believes 'that you are harmed by the verbal attacks, even though you do not and cannot experience anything unpleasant as a result of them.' Moreover, the harm needn't consist in discordance between your beliefs and reality, since you may have no beliefs about whether your students think highly of you. Fischer suggests that the harm consists instead in the wrongful setback to your interest in having a good reputation (2014, p. 144).[14]

A third account, which can perhaps be viewed as building on Fischer's suggestion that we have an interest in not being betrayed by those we care about, an interest which can't be reduced to our interest in not being emotionally upset, focuses on the impact that betrayals, whether experienced or not, have on our relationships. When our friends betray us, they damage the relationship we have with them. This is because some measure of loyalty is essential to genuine friendship. To the extent that a person betrays us, that person isn't being a good friend,

[14] Lamont (1998, p. 205) makes a similar point in terms of preference-fulfillment rather than interests.

and someone who constantly betrays us is at best only pretending to be our friend. Our friendships, moreover, are typically very important to us. It matters to us, in particular, that our friendships are genuine and thus that our friends display some measure of loyalty to us. When our friends betray us, this is bad for us, I suggest, in part because it damages a relationship that's important to us. Here again the harm needn't consist solely in a discrepancy between our beliefs and reality. We might have serious doubts about a friend's loyalty on occasion, in which case the betrayal, if it occurs, won't be a misfortune for us in virtue of falsifying any personally important beliefs. Rather, the misfortune will consist in the damage done to an important relationship.

These three accounts of why being betrayed might be bad for you independently of whether you can be experientially affected by the betrayal lend substance to Nagel's observation that 'the discovery of betrayal makes us unhappy because it is bad to betrayed—not that betrayal is bad because its discovery makes us unhappy' (1979, p. 5). When we discover that we've been betrayed, this is upsetting in part because we realize that relationships we care about have been damaged, that they don't have the character we hoped they had and want them to have, and that beliefs about those relationships, beliefs we very much want to be true, are false. ('How could she have destroyed what we had?' Barney might have lamented, had he learned of his wife's infidelity. 'I feel like such a dupe, such a fool!') But if we didn't regard the damage to these relationships or our mistaken beliefs about them as in any way bad for us, it's unlikely that discovering a betrayal would be as upsetting as it is. And, if the damage to these relationships or our mistaken beliefs about them weren't bad for us, it certainly wouldn't be appropriate for us to be so upset by the discovery that things weren't as we had supposed them to be.

These accounts also confirm that the sorts of cases we've been discussing are indeed counterexamples to the possibility reading of the experience requirement, according to which

something is bad for a person only if it's possible in the circumstances for the person to experience it or its effects. Take Alfonzo again. It's bad for him that his friends betray him in part because their betrayal damages relationships he cares about and renders him mistaken about something that matters to him. This is so, it seems, despite the fact that it was impossible, given the presence of his guardian angel, for Alfonzo to experience the betrayal or its effects.

Now, if an event can be bad for a person even if it's impossible in the circumstances for the person to experience it or its effects, why must the person still be capable of experiencing the event in order for it to be bad for him, as the capability reading insists? Having the capacity to experience a certain state or event *x* may be necessary for having the narrow possibility of experiencing *x*. If a person isn't capable and will never become capable of experiencing *x*, then it isn't possible, in the narrow sense identified by Fischer, for the person to experience *x*. So, if having the narrow possibility of experiencing *x* were required for *x* to be a misfortune for you, it would make perfect sense why having the capacity to experience *x* would also be required, given that having the capacity to experience something is necessary for having the narrow possibility of experiencing it. But, as we've seen, having the narrow possibility of experiencing an event isn't necessary for that event to be a misfortune for you. A state or event can be bad for you even if it was impossible in the circumstances for you to experience it. Why, then, should it matter whether you remain capable of experiencing the event? Arguably, it doesn't.

If the fact that *p* isn't part of what makes some event bad for you, it's implausible to suppose that *p* is nevertheless required for that event to be bad for you. For this reason, it's not enough for defenders of the capability reading to point out that, in the betrayal cases we've been discussing, the featured individual retains the capacity to experience betrayal and its effects. They must also show that that capacity is an essential part of what makes the betrayal bad for the

person. But the capacity to experience a betrayal or its effects isn't an essential part of what makes betrayal bad for a person. What makes the betrayal bad for the person in these cases isn't a matter of its tendency to upset the person, and so would seem to have nothing to do with whether the person retains the capacity to be upset by it. Instead, the badness of the betrayal is a function of its effects on other aspects of the person's life (e.g., his beliefs and relationships). It's therefore implausible to suppose that having the capacity to experience a betrayal or its effects is required for the betrayal to be bad for the victim, for, as reflection on these cases indicates, that capacity isn't an essential part of what makes a betrayal bad for the victim.[15]

I conclude that, initial appearances to the contrary, the capability reading doesn't express a plausible requirement for an event to be bad for an individual and, accordingly, that any argument relying on that principle, the experience argument included, is unsound.[16]

5. Some critics of the Epicurean experience argument have sought to challenge the experience requirement on which that argument hinges by presenting us with cases in which an event is bad for a certain individual even though there's an important sense in which the individual can't experience the relevant event or its effects. I've argued that these examples can indeed be used to

[15] This objection to the capability reading is structurally similar to an objection of Fischer's (1994) to the idea that being morally responsible for what you've done requires having alternative possibilities. Following Frankfurt (1969), several authors have adduced cases in which the agent is said to be morally responsible for what he did even though, owing to the presence of a counterfactual intervener, he couldn't have done anything different. Fischer acknowledges that there may be residual alternative possibilities in these cases. However, he goes on to argue that these alternatives are mere flickers of freedom and so can't help ground the agent's responsibility. It's not in virtue of the fact that the agent had these alternatives, Fischer argues, that the agent is responsible for what he did. But, as Fischer then points out, if the residual alternatives don't help ground the agent's responsibility, it's implausible to suppose that they are required for it. Fischer concludes that alternative possibilities aren't required for responsibility.

[16] The response to the experience argument defended here suggests that a state or event can be (intrinsically) bad for a person even if it has no impact on the person's experiences. (See note 7 above.) However, the response is consistent with the view that our own death is bad for us (if it is) only because of the impact it has on our experiences (e.g., because it deprives us of valuable experiences). For discussion of related issues, see the exchange between Bradley 2012 and Fischer 2012.

challenge the experience requirement, though not in the straightforward ways originally envisioned by their proponents. I'd like to conclude by addressing one final issue.

Epicureans might concede that reflection on the various betrayal cases reveals the experience requirement to be implausible. However, they might go on to argue that this fact can't be used to vindicate the further conclusion that death is bad for those who die, owing to crucial differences between those cases and the case of death. For instance, it's sometimes pointed out that all the examples we've considered involve a subject who continues to exist, whereas the dead have ceased to exist and thus, one might think, can no longer suffer any misfortunes.[17] Others have argued that the reasons why an undiscoverable betrayal is bad for the victim in these cases can't be used to show that, or to explain why, death is bad for those who die. Death, for instance, doesn't falsify any of our personally important beliefs in the way that being betrayed often does.[18] The upshot: none of our examples establish that death is bad for those who die.

There are two things to say about this argument. First, it's worth pointing out that while death certainly doesn't falsify any of our personally important beliefs and thus can't be bad for us in precisely the same ways that an undiscovered betrayal can be, the examples we've considered may nevertheless point us to ways in which death might be bad for us. As we've seen, it's plausible that there is more than one aspect of a betrayal that can make it bad for the victim.[19] I suggested that one thing that makes it bad to be betrayed is that the betrayal damages a relationship that's important to us. Now, while death doesn't damage our relationships in precisely the same way, it arguably does have a negative impact on them—it puts an end to them, permanently. Indeed, one thing many people find troubling about the prospect of death is

[17] See, e.g., Nussbaum 1994, pp. 205-206 and 2013, pp. 28-29; 31-32.
[18] See, e.g., Hetherington 2001.
[19] Compare with Fischer 2014, pp. 143-144.

that it permanently separates them from everyone they care about, and it could be argued that this is at least part of what can make death bad for us.[20]

Of course, the 'loss' of our relationships we suffer upon dying won't sadden us once we're dead, given the assumption that the dead can't have any experiences. But that's neither here nor there. Doubtless it would provide little solace to a loving husband standing by his wife's deathbed were he to learn that, upon his wife's demise, he'll magically be spared any of the emotional suffering he would normally experience as a result of her passing. It's presumably the loss of his wife, and not the attendant emotional suffering, that he regards as his primary misfortune. Explaining to him that he'll be spared the normal emotional suffering therefore won't be enough to convince him that he's not about to suffer a personal misfortune.[21]

Suppose, though, that we can't extrapolate from the various betrayal examples to the case of death. Even so, this fact doesn't vindicate the experience argument and so doesn't undermine the main claims of this essay. To see this, let's distinguish two aims a critic of the Epicurean view about death might seek to achieve. It's one thing to show that a particular argument for that view is unsound. It's another to show that the view itself is false and that death is, in fact, bad for those who die. Achieving the first aim could conceivably help achieve the second. But we needn't achieve the second to achieve the first, for the very simple reason that an argument can be unsound even if its conclusion is true. As I see it, the sort of response to the experience argument defended here isn't designed to show that, or to explain why, death is bad. Its principal aim, rather, is to show that the experience argument is unsound. If it accomplishes that task, it's no strike against it if it fails to accomplish the further aim of showing that, and explaining why,

[20] Draper (1999) defends a similar position. He contends that one reason death might be an evil is that it involves the loss of things to which we are emotionally attached, including our friends and family.

[21] Draper (1999, p. 410) discusses a similar case in which you know that this is the last time you'll see a dear friend, though you also know that you'll immediately forget her and meet someone else who takes her place in your affections.

death might be bad for those who die. So, while there may be good arguments for the conclusion that death is 'nothing to us,' I don't think the experience argument is among them.[22, 23]

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[22] A different, and arguably stronger, argument for the Epicurean conclusion is known as the timing argument. For a brief overview of the argument, along with important references, see Bradley 2012, pp. 510-511.

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