

## Research



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# The moral standing of the dead

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In choosing to do certain things, we appear to presuppose that we can act in the interests the dead, and that we have a duty to do so. For example, some of us go to great lengths to carry out their final wishes. Given that the dead no longer exist, however, it seems that nothing can be good or bad for them: they lack prudential interests. In that case, it is hard to see how we could owe them anything. They seem to lack moral standing altogether. In this essay, I will rebut this line of thought. I will claim that in some cases things that happen after people die are indeed good or bad for them. Their interests can still be advanced or hindered, so the dead have moral standing.

This article is part of the theme issue 'Evolutionary thanatology: impacts of the dead on the living in humans and other animals'.

## 1. The moral standing of the dead

Must the living act on behalf of the dead? Many of us seem to think so, given things we do after others die. For example, some of us believe that we must carry out the final wishes of friends who have died, and go to great lengths to do so. However, there is a strong case for concluding that the dead lack moral standing altogether, which is to deny that the way we treat them matters from the moral point of view. Roughly stated, the case is this. We would have duties to the dead only if they had prudential interests. Yet they do not: nothing can be good or bad for them. In that way the dead are like bags of sand, arm-chairs and boulders. So we owe them nothing. In this essay, I will attempt to rebut this argument. My main strategy will be to criticize the assumption that the interests of people are never affected by anything that happens after they die. Elaborating upon previous work [1], I will attempt to clarify why this assumption seems plausible yet is false. If I am successful, it will be clear why and in what sense the dead matter from the moral point of view: they may have interests that are advanced or hindered by those who are still alive, and what affects people's interests is always relevant from the standpoint of morality.

## 2. Die, dead, death and the dead

I begin with some remarks about the word 'death' and related terms that feature prominently in the discussion.

The term 'death' is ambiguous as between *dying* and *being dead*. In what follows I will disambiguate 'death' when necessary by using the terms 'dying' or 'being dead'. I stipulate that to *die* is to cease to be alive, and I assume that what ceases to be alive ceases to exist. But what is it for you to *be* dead? Is it the state you are placed into by virtue of dying? That suggests that you may be in some state while not existing. Here is a better proposal: to say you are dead is an abbreviated way of stating that you are dead *at some given time*, which, in turn, is simply to say that you died before then. When we omit to mention time of death, we refer implicitly to the present, so that 'you are dead' means you died before *now*. In a similar fashion, we can use 'the dead' as shorthand for 'those who died before now' [2].

Note, finally, that it is one thing to be harmed (or benefitted) by death and another to be harmed (or benefitted) by something occurring after we have

died. We can call the first sort of insult ‘mortal harm’ (or benefit) and the second ‘posthumous harm’ (or benefit).

Now, eventually, we want to look into whether posthumous harm is possible. Because of the relationship between posthumous and mortal harm we will also want to consider whether the latter is possible. But before we can address either question we will need to consider what it is for something to be good or bad for us. Let’s do that next.

### 3. Welfare comparativism

Here is one way in which something may be good for us: it might be intrinsically good for us, which is to say that it is good for us *in itself*, good for its own sake. Pleasure is valuable to us for its own sake, hence it fits the bill. Contrast something like money that is good for us due to things that accompany or are caused by it. The value of money hinges entirely on what it buys. There can also be things, such as pain, that are intrinsically bad for us (I will call these intrinsic evils).

Something can be good for us in a second way: it might be overall good for us, that is, good for us all things considered. As a first pass, we might say that something is overall good for us if and only if it makes our lives go better than they otherwise would have gone. But what is it for a life that goes one way to be better for us than a life that goes another way? Roughly, the answer is that the level of welfare or (what is the same thing) well-being attained by the one is greater than the level attained by the other. To make the idea clearer, then, we will need to say something about the notion of welfare.

How well off we are at a time or over a period of time is determined by the things we accrue during those times that are intrinsically good for us, such as pleasure, and the things we then accrue that are intrinsically bad for us, such as pain. Accruing intrinsic goods without accruing intrinsic evils boosts our welfare, while accruing the latter and not the former lowers it. Thus, other things being equal, someone experiencing a great deal of pleasure and very little pain over the course of an evening has a higher welfare level than she would have had if she had experienced a great deal of pain and very little pleasure during that time. If we wish, we can assign a positive number to a unit of pleasure and a negative number to a unit of pain. Perhaps we can do the same with other intrinsic goods and evils. We could then represent a welfare level as the sum of these numbers, and say that the higher the sum the greater the welfare level.

Human animals are not the only organisms capable of having a welfare level. Any creature will have a welfare level if it is equipped with apparatus that allows it to accrue pleasure or any other intrinsic good or evil. It seems likely, however, that animals will differ in their capacities to accrue goods such as pleasure (if for no other reason than that some tend to live longer than others), in which case it is reasonable to conclude that even in ideal conditions some sorts of animals may fare better than others.

Just as we can assess a subject’s welfare level over the course of an hour or two, so we might assess her welfare level over her entire life. Call this—the sum of the intrinsic goods and evils she accrues over the course of her life—her ‘lifetime welfare level’.

If we help ourselves to the notion of a lifetime welfare level, we can state more clearly what it is for something to be overall good or bad for us (or for some other sort of organism). Its overall value for us is determined by the way it affects our lifetime welfare level. That is:

an event is overall good (bad) for us if and only if, and to the extent that, our lifetime welfare level would be higher (lower) if that event occurred than it would be if that event had not occurred.

We might also say that:

an event is overall good (bad) for us *at some time* if and only if, and to the extent that, our welfare level *at that time* would be higher (lower) if that event occurred than it otherwise would be.

Call this account of something’s overall value ‘welfare comparativism’. Versions of this account have been defended by several theorists [3–5].

By way of illustration, consider that according to welfare comparativism having a toothache will be overall bad for us assuming that, due to the toothache, our lifetime welfare level will be lower than it otherwise would have been. A toothache might also be overall bad for us *over a period of time*, assuming that during this time our welfare level would otherwise be higher. By contrast, a visit to the dentist is likely to be overall good for us. This is true despite the fact that dentists usually hurt us. The discomfort involved does not make the visit bad for us given the far greater amount of suffering we otherwise would have incurred.

Let me digress briefly to address a question that an evolutionary biologist might raise about the notion of an overall good, namely this: does what is overall good for us coincide with what makes us more likely to survive or reproduce? It does not. To make this clear, we can begin by noting that our survival is not intrinsically good for us. Whether (and the extent to which) it is good for us depends on whether it enables us to accrue things that are otherwise good for us. What is more, survival need not be in our interests. This is shown by the fact that (as discussed below) *dying* at a particular time may be overall *good* for us. Putting aside the implications of retroactive harms and goods (discussed later), dying at a time will be overall good for us if, over the course of the remaining life we otherwise would have had, we would have fared badly. Similarly, something that improves our chances of reproducing may be against our interests; e.g. a medical procedure that reverses sterility might cause uncontrollable depression. We can even imagine a medical treatment that allows us to live well far longer than is normally possible but that leaves us sterile. Note, finally, that while many people (but not all) will enjoy a boost in their welfare as a result of having and rearing a child or two, there is no reason to think that each additional child will make for the same boost in welfare.

### 4. Harming the dead

Having reached a clearer idea about what it is for something to be good or bad for us, we can better assess the possibility of mortal and posthumous harm. It turns out that the former is definitely possible, while the latter is more controversial.

To illustrate the possibility of mortal harm, let us ask whether it would have been overall bad for Socrates to die young. We can suppose that, on the whole, Socrates lived well until he died at age 70. If he had died at, say, age 10

then his lifetime welfare level would have been far lower than it otherwise would have been—far lower than it actually was. So dying young would have been overall bad for Socrates—bad in direct proportion to how well he lived between age 10 and age 70. It would have been bad for him because of what it would have deprived him of, namely 60 years of good life, and not simply because of the unpleasantness of dying itself. It is also possible for dying at some time to be overall good for a person. Setting aside the implications of retroactive harms and goods once again, it is overall good for someone to die at a time if her welfare level over the rest of her life would otherwise be negative, in that she accrues intrinsic evils and no intrinsic goods, or in that the intrinsic evils she accrues outweigh the intrinsic goods she accrues.

Although dying at a particular time, say age 10, would have been overall bad for Socrates, it does not follow that it would have been bad for him *at* any particular time. I would argue that it makes no sense to speak of how well off a person is *while he is non-existent*. (For further discussion, see [5,6]). If that is correct, Socrates could not have had a welfare level at a time after he died, so it makes no sense to say that his welfare level, *while he was dead*, was lower or higher than the welfare level he in fact enjoyed from age 10 to 70. Dying young would indeed have been bad for Socrates, but not at any particular time.

A further implication of welfare comparativism concerns the significance of the deaths of animals: if animals of one kind tend to have lower lifetime welfare levels than animals of another kind, then dying will tend to be less bad for the one than it is for the other. In effect, this is because animals of the first sort have less to lose than those of the second.

So welfare comparativism allows us to make sense of mortal harm. Now let us see if we can use it to make sense of posthumous harm.

We can begin with a concession to the posthumous harm skeptic. Suppose that the only constituents of welfare are pleasure and pain; that is, the only thing that is intrinsically good for us is pleasure, and the only thing that is intrinsically bad for us is pain. We can call this view ‘hedonism’. Together with welfare comparativism, hedonism entails that nothing that happens after we die affects our interests, for no such event causes us pleasure or pain, or precludes our having pleasure or pain that we otherwise would have. We can arrive at a similar result by assuming, as some theorists do (e.g. Mark Bernstein [7] (p. 19) and Walter Glannon [8] (p. 138)), that the only constituents of welfare are things that reduce to our intrinsic, non-relational properties. Pleasure and pain qualify, but so would any other features that depend solely on our intrinsic properties, such as our being partly constituted by carbon atoms. As nothing that occurs after we die modifies our intrinsic properties, it would follow that posthumous events are harmless to us.

Although these concessions are warranted, posthumous harm may still be possible. To see why, note that the welfare comparativist is not committed to hedonism. It is neutral with respect to what things are intrinsically good for us. This is fortunate, as there is good reason to think that the list of things that are intrinsically good for us is not limited to pleasure. Acknowledging the existence of goods other than pleasure may help us to see that posthumous harm is possible.

One standard reason for rejecting hedonism is that it seems imprudent to do various things that nevertheless maximize our pleasure—imprudent for reasons that are

incompatible with hedonism. The point can be made vivid using a thought experiment posed by Robert Nozick [9] (p. 42), in the following passage:

suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.

If given the option of plugging into this machine for the rest of our lives, most of us would refuse, even if we see that the machine would give us more pleasure than we could get any other way. If we plugged in, our lives, although pleasant, would be impoverished; they would lack some good other than pleasure, perhaps more than one sort of good.

Earlier we noted that posthumous harm skeptics might assume that the only constituents of welfare are things that reduce to our intrinsic properties. This assumption can be rebutted using a thought experiment involving a device that Nozick describes after he mentions his experience machine. The second, more fanciful device lets you change your features, including your intrinsic properties, at will. We would avoid this machine just as we would avoid the first (especially if it will give us the sort of misleading experiences provided by the original machine), which suggests that the constituents of welfare are not limited to our intrinsic properties.

Of course, it is one thing to see clearly that pleasure is not the sole intrinsic good and another to identify all others. In what follows I will attempt to describe one further good, then defend the possibility of posthumous harm.

## 5. Achievementism

Suppose that achievements count among the things that are intrinsically good for us, and failures among the evils [10]. We can call this view ‘achievementism’. By appealing to achievementism, we can make good sense of posthumous harm. At that point, we will be in a position to conclude that the dead are subject to being wronged. Or so I shall now argue.

Achievementism seems plausible given the value people place on their accomplishments, and it can be further supported on the grounds that it accounts for our reservations concerning the experience machine. One reservation we would have about the machine is that those who plug in accomplish nothing, yet achievements are an important element of a good life.

If succeeding at some of the things that we set out to achieve is intrinsically good for us, then events that occur after we are dead will bear on our welfare when they affect whether we succeed. Suppose, for example, that I set out to do research that will lead to a cure for Alzheimer’s disease, and, although I die before it is complete, my work gives other theorists vital clues, and a cure is discovered that, but for my efforts, would not have existed. So I achieved what I wanted: I did research that leads to a cure. Yet my success depended on events following my death. If my research records had been burned just after I died, I would have failed. That fire would have been bad for me, in that, because of it, I would not have achieved what I did; the additional

work of the other researchers benefitted me in that, because of it, I succeeded.

Our formulation of achievementism is rough, so clarification is in order. In effect, the proposal has two elements. One is the idea that some desires may be fulfilled due to posthumous events. The other is the idea that fulfilling a certain sort of desire, namely the desire to achieve some goal that we set for ourselves, is intrinsically good for us. Let us consider each in turn. We can begin by noting some facts about desires.

When we want something, what we desire may be stated in the form of a proposition. This is obvious in the case of my desire that *I have some coffee*, but it is also true in the case of my desire for *fresh air*, which may be restated, without loss of meaning, as the desire that *I have fresh air*. Let us say that, when we want something, *what* we desire is the *object* of our desire. Thus the object of my desire for fresh air is that *I have fresh air*, or *I have fresh air*. For convenience, we can use the capital letter 'P' to stand for a proposition. Thus each desire has some proposition P as its object; to desire is to desire that some proposition P hold.

Let us add that propositions are either true or false, and what *makes* a proposition true is an event or state of affairs that can be labelled its 'truth-maker'. For example, the proposition *I am typing* is made true by my typing right now. In some cases, as when I presently assert *I am typing*, the truth-maker occurs at the same time as the assertion of the proposition. But the two are not always simultaneous. In some cases, as in *I went kayaking last week*, truth-makers antedate asserted propositions. In others, the assertions come before the truth-makers. For example, the sun will rise tomorrow is made true now by the sun's rising tomorrow. If the sun does *not* rise tomorrow, then *the sun will not rise tomorrow* is true now. One proposition or the other concerning the sun's rising is true now even though neither truth-maker has occurred yet. Note that no mysterious sort of reverse causation is involved in a proposition's being made true by states of affairs holding at times before or after the proposition is asserted. Note also that subtle differences in the propositions we assert can affect what makes them true. For example, *the sun is rising* is made true by something occurring now, namely the sun's rising. It is very different from the proposition that *the sun will rise tomorrow*.

With these facts about desires and propositions in place, we can state a plausible view concerning desire fulfillment: the fulfillment of a desire consists in two things coming together at the same time: our having the desire and its object's being true. That is, if the object of a particular desire is the proposition P, one fulfils that desire at time *t* if and only if, at *t*, one has the desire for P and P is true.

To be sure, other accounts are possible [1]. One that is likely to come to mind is the view that I fulfil the desire for P at time *t* if and only if, at *t*, I have the desire for P and P's truth-maker occurs. (This may be the view of Silverstein [11], who asserts that if I want eventually to be married, my desire is not fulfilled until the marriage takes place.) However, this alternative has implausible consequences. For example, it implies that at no time can we fulfil a desire if its object's truth-maker has already occurred. If, after a lottery is over, you unwittingly give me the winning ticket, and I form the desire to have won, at no time can I fulfil my desire, as its truth-maker has already occurred.

If P's truth-maker occurs only after we desire P, we might say that its fulfillment involves a *retroactive* element. This

happens, for example, when a desire is fulfilled by virtue of posthumous events. Suppose that I now want the sun to rise tomorrow. If the sun will indeed rise tomorrow, my desire is fulfilled *now*—I get what I want *now*. (Contrast the case in which I want to be watching the sun rise but it is midnight.) This is true regardless of whether I live to see it rise. Most of us do have desires about what will happen after we are dead; if these cannot be fulfilled, retroactively, by virtue of posthumous events, then they cannot be fulfilled at all, which makes it puzzling why we would ever form them.

Recall the second element of our proposal concerning achievements: the idea that the fulfillment of the desire to achieve a goal is intrinsically good for us. Let us see if we can sharpen this view. Let us use the term 'achievement desire' to refer to a desire to achieve something—that is, a desire whose object is a proposition setting forth an accomplishment. In the previous example, I wanted to do research that would have a certain result; the object of my desire was that *I will do research that leads to a cure for Alzheimer's*. We can refine achievementism by saying that it is intrinsically good for us when two things come together: we have an achievement desire, and its object is true. That is, according to achievementism:

it is intrinsically good for us at time *t* that, at *t*, we have an achievement desire and the object of that desire, P, is true; it is intrinsically bad for us at *t* that, at *t*, we have an achievement desire and its object, P, is false.

Drawing on this account, we can explain the sense in which events that occur after we are dead might harm or benefit us: such events can make the objects of achievement desires true while we have those desires, which is intrinsically good for us, or false, which is bad for us [12]. Because the fulfillment of these desires involves future events, we might say that we are harmed or benefitted *retroactively*. However, the account does not imply that posthumous events 'change' our welfare level after we are dead. Nor does it imply that we incur harm or benefit while dead. If, by virtue of a posthumous event, we have a fulfilled desire that contributes to our welfare, then we accrued that boost before the posthumous event occurred. We accrue it while we are getting what we want. According to Joyce Jenkins [13], my account of posthumous harm, defended elsewhere [14], seems committed to the claims that posthumous events may 'change' our welfare level for the worse, and that we incur the reversal posthumously. However, my view is actually inconsistent with these claims.

We can also explain why it might be in our interests for others to do certain things after we have died, and why others might want to do such things on our behalf: their actions can benefit us retroactively. If I set out to have a novel published, and do everything necessary to achieve my goal except send in the manuscript, my untimely death need not prevent me from achieving the task I have set myself, for you could send in the manuscript for me. Recall, however, that what counts as a desire's object's truth-maker hinges on the precise formulation of that desire's object. My desire to have a novel published can be fulfilled, in part, due to the actions others take after I die. My desire to *be a published novelist now* cannot be.

Fulfilling their desires will not always benefit the dead, for often our intervention will not help them achieve goals they once set for themselves. For example, suppose you



desire that, upon your death, I will have your body cremated. Your cremation is no achievement of yours, hence my intervention would not benefit you. Nor would I harm you if, instead of cremating it, I buried your body or donated it to science. (Those who reject this view presumably think that it is intrinsically good for us to fulfil not just achievement desires but other desires as well.)

Earlier I noted that what makes us more likely to survive or reproduce need not coincide with what is overall good for us. We can add that no posthumous events that benefit us will make our survival or reproduction more likely. However, in some cases the *belief* that posthumous events may harm or benefit us can have survival value whether that belief is true or not. It will have such value when it prompts us to leave behind a certain sort of legacy and to secure our legacy, as best we can, from any threats it might face after we die. The salient sort of legacy is one that would probably help our offspring to survive and to have children of their own. We can be prompted to leave such a legacy if we believe that it is in our interests to do so. (Of course, the desire to leave this sort of legacy might also be prompted by other things, such as our love for our children, or the belief that helping others is morally required.)

Let us review. The case for the possibility of posthumous harm rests on two main claims: (a) some desires may be fulfilled retroactively, and (b) fulfilling (thwarting) some desires retroactively is intrinsically good (bad) for us. The two claims are related in this way: if we accept (b) we must accept (a), but while it is possible to accept (a) and reject (b), I suspect the main source of suspicion concerning the possibility of posthumous harm is the denial of (a). If that suspicion is correct, then accepting (a) clears the way to accepting (b), together with the conclusion that what happens after we die may affect our interests.

With this reasoning in place, we can reach a verdict about the moral standing of the dead. People may be wronged by things we do after they have died because such actions may harm them, and, other things being equal, it is wrong to harm someone.

## 6. Harmlessly wronging the dead

I have defended the claim that the dead have moral standing on the grounds that they have prudential interests. However, nothing said so far implies that the dead have moral standing *only* if they have prudential interests. Hence readers who remain skeptical about the interests of the dead might be tempted to argue that the dead have standing *even though* they are beyond harm. That the dead are subject to improper treatment might even explain why they seem vulnerable to harm: perhaps cases in which the dead appear to be harmed are really cases in which they are wronged. In what follows I will briefly discuss this line of thought.

Now, wronging an individual might involve damage to her person (for example, it might involve the ending of her existence or, less drastically, the destruction of one of her capacities, such as her capacity to make moral judgments). It might involve coercing or manipulating her. It might involve a setback to her interests. And it might involve a combination of these. However, damaging, coercing or manipulating the dead is impossible, as they no longer exist. In fact, it seems that if it is possible to wrong the

dead at all, it must consist in some kind of setback to their interests.

But if wronging the dead must implicate their interests, and we deny that the dead have interests, it is reasonable to conclude straightaway that they cannot be wronged. The argument seems straightforward. We begin with the concession we are considering:

1. The dead lack prudential interests.

We can then assume that only if they had interests would the dead have moral standing:

2. To have moral standing, the dead must have interests—it must be the case that things that happen after people die may be good or bad for them.

From these premises it follows that the dead are owed nothing:

3. The dead lack moral standing.

If we accept 1 we must either accept 3 or give up 2. Yet the second option will be tough sledding, as things to which the concept of well-being is clearly inapplicable, such as chairs and stones, clearly lack standing; in cases where it is *unclear* if the concept of well-being applies, such as trees or *species* of animals (as opposed to animals themselves), it is not clear whether it is appropriate to speak of standing; and subjects to whom the concept of well-being *no longer* applies seem to have lost standing.

Suppose we press ahead anyway, and attempt to defend the idea that the dead are subject to being wronged but not to being harmed. Having denied that wronging the dead amounts to some sort of setback or threat to their interests, presumably we will need to supply an alternative account. But in what else might wronging the dead consist?

We might consider the idea that we are obligated to fulfil some desires that dead persons once had, despite the fact that the dead are no longer subject to harm or benefit, and that wronging them simply consists in failing to fulfil these desires. They have standing, we might add, in virtue of the fact that (unlike stones) they *were* once able to want things.

However, a further difficulty now arises. We saw earlier that one of the main reasons for doubting the possibility of posthumous harm is the contention that events occurring after a subject's death cannot help fulfil that subject's desires. If that claim is true then we are powerless to fulfil any desires of the dead, and cannot possibly be duty-bound to do so.

Is there anything we might do for the dead? Only one other option has any promise: it may be possible to *bring about states of affairs* that they desired. For example, even if, after I die, you are powerless to *fulfil my desire* to do research that will lead to a cure for Alzheimer's disease, you can still help *make it the case* that I did research that will lead to a cure. So maybe we are doing something for the dead when we bring about things that they wanted to happen. Perhaps we are obligated to do some such things, and wrong the dead when we fail.

Of course, we might bring about a state of affairs that someone wanted without doing it for her, as we might have had independent reasons for doing what we did. We might even be obligated to do something that coincides with what another wanted, yet not because she wanted it.

For example, it might fall to us to look after a child whose parents died—not because they once cared about their child but rather because we ought to care for helpless children. The proposal on offer is that we are doing something for dead people when we make something happen *because* they once wanted it to happen, and that, in at least some cases, we have an obligation to make something happen *because* they once wanted it to happen.

Thus clarified, however, the proposal is implausible indeed. If we lack independent grounds for bringing about some state of affairs, and assume that so acting neither fulfils anyone's desires nor benefits anyone, we would not be moved to act by the discovery that someone once wanted that state of affairs to occur, let alone be bound to do so.

Given that the dead prudential interests, then, there seems to be nothing in which wronging them might plausibly consist. But before we conclude that they cannot be wronged let us consider a final reservation.

## 7. Promises

When we make someone a promise we seem to bind ourselves in a way that is not contingent on her interests or even on her continued existence (unless she releases us from our burden before she dies). Now, admittedly we rarely promise people that we will do things after they die. (Even the wills people leave behind at death express wishes, not anyone's promise to honour those wishes.) But occasionally we do. Aren't the dead wronged when we break our promises?

Many questions about promises arise. (Can we make bona fide, binding promises to creatures or things that are incapable of grasping our meaning, such as people in the final stages of dementia, or our pets, or the land on which we dwell? Can we make promises to someone who has yet

to come into existence, or to someone *after* she is dead?). It is not obvious that we must keep a promise to someone after she has died. However, for the sake of argument, let us take it for granted that it is indeed wrong to renege on promises to the dead. Nevertheless, given the assumptions that the dead are beyond harm and their desires cannot be fulfilled, it seems best to deny that *the dead* are wronged when we renege. At worst, renegeing on our promise is a *victimless* misdeed. The situation is very different if we now drop these assumptions. Only if we drop the second is it plausible to say that we can do *for* people what we promise them we will do for them after they are dead. Only if we drop both assumptions can we plausibly say that renegeing on our promises wrongs the dead. It wrongs them, other things being equal, when it constitutes a setback to their interests that would have been avoided had we done what we promised.

## 8. Summing Up

If it is good for us to fulfil some sorts of desires (and bad not to) and, as suggested here, the fulfillment of our desires can be brought about by posthumous events, then others may benefit (or harm) us after we are dead by fulfilling (or thwarting) these desires. On this view, it also makes good sense to say that we may wrong the dead, given the principle that, other things being equal, it is wrong to harm anyone. If, on the other hand, posthumous events cannot affect their prudential interests, it is best to conclude that wronging them is out of the question. If beyond being harmed, they are beyond being wronged.

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