Stockholm University

Puzzles of Harm

Essays on Collective Action, Death, and Non-Existence

Andrea S. Asker

Doctoral Thesis in Philosophy at Stockholm University, Sweden 2025

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Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Thursday 5 June 2025 at 13.00 in Hörsal 9, hus D, Universitetsvägen 10D.

Abstract

This compilation thesis identifies and addresses four types of puzzling cases of harm involving individual agents. These types of cases are puzzling due to uncertainty, not regarding the nature of harm, but regarding its normative implications and instantiation under particular circumstances. The relevant types of cases can be divided into two broad categories. In the first category are cases in which we think individuals do harm or act wrongly on account of being involved in harm, but it is not clear what the relationship between the individual act and the harm is, or how the harm makes the act wrong. These cases arise for instance in collective impact situations, where many individual acts together bring about harmful outcomes. In the second category are cases in which it seems that individuals are harmed, but it is not clear whether or how the harm is instantiated. Puzzling cases of the second kind often arise where the alleged harm is tied to the person's coming into or going out of existence, or where birth or death separates the subject of harm from the act or event that supposedly causes it. Papers 1 and 2 each address a puzzling case of harm within the ethics of collective action, while Papers 3 and 4 each address a puzzling case of harm within the philosophy of death and non-existence.

Keywords: *Harm, Collective action, Moral reasons, Oppression, Death, Non-existence, Posthumous harm, Pessimism, Suicide.*

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for a girl.

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I was first introduced to philosophy during my final year of high school, in a mandatory course that covered mostly 19th century continental philosophers. I liked it just fine, but didn't realize I might have a genuine interest in philosophy until my friends, Cecilia Berg and Rebecca Dray, pointed out to me that "you understand what all these dead dudes are trying to say." I thank them for that, and for being my friends to this day. I also want to thank our teacher of history of philosophy, Nils Gräns, for encouraging me and suggesting I consider studying philosophy at university.

My first year of university, I studied at the University of California San Diego. I had planned on majoring in political science, but the philosophy classes caught my interest and I ended up taking several. In my intro to ethics class, I was fortunate to have Professor Amy Berg as my teacher. I thank her for introducing me not only to the subject matter but to the discipline at large, and for playing an instrumental role on my way to a PhD position.

Later, after a few years of economics studies in Lund, I came to Stockholm University to take up philosophy again. The first person I came into contact with at the department was director of undergraduate studies, Åsa Burman, who made sure I could pick up my studies where I had left off. I thank Åsa for opening doors, sharing her wisdom, and for being a great friend ever since. Around the same time, Gustaf Arrhenius introduced me to a world of philosophy and interdisciplinary research when he took me on as his research assistant at the Institute for Futures Studies. I thank Gustaf for the opportunity and his mentorship over the years. I also want to thank all my colleagues at IFFS for welcoming me into such a productive, engaging, and social research community.

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Contents

Introduction

1. Overview

This thesis identifies and addresses four types of puzzling cases of harm involving individual agents. What makes these cases puzzling is not uncertainty or problems pertaining to the *nature* of harm, but rather its normative implications and its instantiation under particular circumstances. The relevant types of cases can be divided into two broad categories. In the first category are cases in which we think individuals *do harm* or *act wrongly* on account of being involved in harm, but it is not clear what the relationship between the individual act and the harm is, or how the harm makes the act wrong. These cases arise for instance in *collective contexts*, where many individual acts together bring about harmful outcomes. In the second category are cases in which it seems that individuals *are harmed*, but it is not clear whether or how the harm is instantiated. Puzzling cases of this second kind often arise where the alleged harm is tied to the person's *coming into or going out of existence*, or where *birth or death* separates the subject of harm from the act or event that supposedly causes it.

The thesis is a compilation thesis and consists of two parts with two papers in each:

Part I: Collective Action

Paper 1: The Problem of Collective Impact: Why Helping Doesn't Do the Trick

Paper 2: Oppression, Collective Harm, and Individual Wrongful Acts

Part II: Death and Non-Existence

Paper 3: Posthumous Harm and Changing Desires

Paper 4: Suicide and Pessimism

In section 2 of this introduction, I provide background to the two puzzling cases of harm discussed in Part I, and summarize Papers 1 and 2. In section 3, I provide background to the two puzzling cases of harm discussed in Part II, and summarize Papers 3 and 4. In the respective sections, I also discuss and make some clarificatory comments regarding framing, assumptions, and results in Papers 1 and 3, which are published, and Paper 4, which is accepted for publication.

2. Part I: Collective Action

The ethics of collective action encompasses a wide range of issues. Part of it ties into the realm of strategic interaction where cooperation and coordination problems are the primary units of analysis. These problems arise where individuals who are each acting rationally (in a self-interest maximizing sense) fail to cooperate or coordinate to obtain the outcome that is best for all, and instead end up in a suboptimal outcome. We look primarily to game theory for explanations of and solutions to these problems (Dixit et al., 2015; Ross, 2024).

Another important topic is that of collective and individual *responsibility*, and related questions about the allocation of praise and blame (see e.g. Bazargan-Forward & Tollefsen (2020)). Where individuals act together, be it as a structured or unstructured collective, and together bring about morally significant outcomes, questions arise about who is morally responsible, and for what. Typically, issues pertaining to moral responsibility are more complex where collective contexts are concerned, and it is not clear that our standard notions of moral responsibility and their application will suffice in addressing the relevant questions, hence the need for specialized analysis of moral responsibility in collective contexts.

Relatedly, there is extensive discussion concerning collective and individual *obligations and duties* (Björnsson, 2014; Cullity, 2000; Salomone-Sehr, 2023). Roughly, this discussion concerns what obligations or duties of action can be ascribed to collective agents, groups, and individuals respectively in collective contexts. These issues, however, will not be addressed in this thesis. Instead, my discussion focuses on the related but distinct question of what *moral reasons* collective agents or individuals have for acting or refraining from acting in collective contexts. Some, myself included, take the issue of *moral reasons* for individual action in collective contexts to be a fundamental question in the ethics of collective action. Arguably, issues concerning responsibility, obligations, and duties require further analysis and therefore come second, as it were (McPherson, 2021; Nefsky, 2017).

Like many of the other discussions in the ethics of collective action, my discussion regarding moral reasons for individual action in collective contexts is largely centered on what I will refer to as *collective impact cases*. Collective impact cases are situations where many people collectively bring about some morally significant outcome, beneficial or harmful, but no individual act seems to make any relevant difference to the outcome in question. That is, the outcome does not seem relevantly different give or take any one individual act. Real-world examples include greenhouse gas emissions contributing to climate harms, meat purchases contributing to animal suffering on factory farms, and typical charity donations contributing to the alleviation of poverty (McPherson, 2021; Nefsky, 2017, 2019).

Stylized examples also help illustrate the structure of collective impact cases. Consider two well-known cases from Parfit (1986):

Drops of Water: A large group of people are stuck in the desert and suffering from intense thirst. An equally large group of people each have a pint of water that they can pour into a cart that is to be driven into the desert and the water distributed equally among the suffering people. For every donated pint, the thirsty people will each receive an amount of water so small that it makes no perceptible difference in their suffering. Hence, no individual act of donating a pint makes a difference to the outcome, that is the thirsty people's suffering (adapted from Nefsky (2017, p. 2751) and Parfit (1986, pp. 76–77)).

Harmless Torturers: A victim is hooked up to a machine that administers small electric shocks when its dials are turned. A large group of people each face the option of turning a dial on the machine, thereby giving the victim a small electric shock. No single turn of a dial makes any perceptible difference to the victim's pain, but if many dials are turned, the victim will be in excruciating pain (adapted from Parfit (1986, p. 80)).

Part I of the thesis, which falls in the realm the ethics of collective action, focuses on collective impact cases and moral reasons for individual action. For a substantial part of my discussion of collective impact cases and moral reasons for individual action, I use Julia Nefsky's work as a point of departure. In the process of developing her own, novel approach to identifying moral reasons for individual action in collective impact cases, Nefsky has built a framework that deals with central, long-standing issues in the ethics of collective action generally, and regarding collective impact cases specifically. In particular, she has surveyed the dialectic and identified important problems for existing accounts of moral reasons for individual action in collective impact cases. Hence, Nefsky's body of work constitutes a road map of the past and current debate, which facilitates new contributions as well as commentary and elaboration on the dialectic itself.

2.1 The Problem of Collective Impact

The problem of collective impact refers to the puzzle that arises when we consider 1) the intuition that the morally significant outcome in a collective impact case gives individuals moral

reason (not) to act, coupled with 2) the notion that no individual act makes any relevant difference to the outcome, where the truth of the latter seems to entail that the former ought to be rejected. The challenge, then, is to identify a moral reason for individual action in collective impact cases, one that has to do with the morally significant outcome of concern (McPherson, 2021; Nefsky, 2017, 2023).

Some specifications are in order. First, the challenge concerns moral reasons for individual action in momentary choice situations, such as the choice of whether to buy meat for dinner on August 5, 2024, as opposed to individual behavior over time (Nefsky, 2017). Second, it is a matter of pro tanto moral reasons, not overall reason or right acts. Hence, the question is about what an individual has reason (not) to do in a collective impact case, not what they ought to do all things considered.

Besides these baseline specifications, views differ somewhat regarding what exactly the challenge consists in, and in turn regarding how the problem of collective impact can be overcome. Some argue that, on pain of paradox, inconsistency, or implausible results, it cannot be that many individual acts together bring about some harmful outcome, for instance the victim's excruciating pain in Harmless Torturers, while no individual act makes a difference to the outcome. That is, at least some individual act(s) must make a difference in harm, e.g. by increasing the torture victim's pain (Barnett, 2018; Carlson, Edling, et al., 2021; Kagan, 2011). On this view, the initial puzzle is dissolved by denying that the problematic cases exist to begin with, that is, by denying that there are cases where 2) is true and individual acts together bring about a beneficial or harmful outcome.

Relatedly, it is implicit in Nefsky's (2015, 2023) view that the problem of collective impact is ultimately a challenge of showing that an individual act is *instrumentally non-superfluous* with respect to the outcome in a collective impact case. For an individual act to be instrumentally non-superfluous on Nefsky's view, it must be that it can *make a difference* or that it can make a *non-superfluous causal contribution* to the outcome, each of which is distinct from the act's being a *mere part of the cause* of the outcome (Nefsky, 2017).[1]

As we have seen, part of the puzzle is that the morally significant outcome in a collective impact case seems to give individuals moral reasons (not) to act. Nefsky (2015, 2023) suggests, then, that solving the problem means identifying moral reasons that 'connect appropriately' to the outcome; if the moral reason does not connect appropriately to the outcome, it does not address what is at issue in the problem of collective impact according to Nefsky.

On Nefsky's view, a moral reason connects appropriately to the outcome only insofar as it is a reason specifically for performing the type of act that can collectively bring about or prevent the outcome. A moral reason that is just as much a reason to do other, instrumentally superfluous things does not connect appropriately to the morally significant outcome on her view (2015, 2023). For instance, if a moral reason to donate one's pint in Drops of Water is independent of the instrumental non-superfluity of the donation with respect to the relief of suffering, and comes instead from, say, the expressive significance of the act of donating a pint, then it may as well be a reason to cheer on those who donate instead of donating oneself. Hence, this type of moral reason will not solve the problem (Nefsky, 2015, p. 263, 2023, p. 43).

If *what it means* for a moral reason to connect appropriately to the outcome is that it depends on the instrumental non-superfluity of the individual act, then it is *built into* the stipulation of the problem that insofar as there is a *relevant* moral reason, it depends on whether an individual act is instrumentally non-superfluous with respect to the outcome. If so, it seems that the problem of collective impact simply is the challenge of establishing the instrumental non-superfluity of an individual act, be it by identifying a non-superfluous instrumental

[1] We need not think that the notion of instrumental non-superfluity is limited to difference-making and non-superfluous causal contribution, but I set further specification of this notion aside here.

relationship other than difference-making as Nefsky's (2017) proposal does, or by denying that an individual act makes no relevant difference.

On a more general interpretation, however, the challenge is simply that of identifying some moral reason for individual action that has to do with the morally significant outcome in collective impact cases. This interpretation leaves open the possibilities that 1) there are cases where individual acts together bring about a beneficial or harmful outcome although no single act makes a difference, and 2) there can be moral reasons stemming from the morally significant outcome in a collective impact case, i.e. reasons that connect appropriately to the outcome, that do not depend on the individual act's instrumental non-superfluity with respect to the outcome. My discussion of the puzzle departs from this general interpretation and the various solutions that have been proposed in response to it. I take the next important question to be whether or to what extent the proposed accounts succeed in solving the problem of collective impact, and I address this piece of the puzzle in Paper 1.

2.1.1 Summary of Paper 1: *The Problem of Collective Impact: Why Helping Doesn't Do the Trick*

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Collective impact cases are situations where people collectively bring about a morally significant outcome by each acting in a certain way, and yet each individual act seems to make no relevant difference to the outcome. Intuitively, the beneficial or harmful outcomes give individuals moral reason to act (or refrain from acting) in collective impact situations. However, if the individual act does not make a difference to the outcome, it is not clear what those moral reasons are. The problem of collective impact is the challenge of identifying such moral reasons.

Julia Nefsky has presented an account of how an individual act can help without making a difference – call it the Helping Account – that claims to provide a general solution to the problem of collective impact while avoiding problems faced by previously suggested solutions. I present an internal critique of Nefsky's work. First, I argue that, based on the problems that Nefsky has raised against previously suggested solutions, three success conditions for a general solution to the problem of collective impact can be formulated: The Weightiness condition, the Generalizability condition, and the Connectedness condition. Second, I argue that the Helping Account fails to satisfy the three success conditions, thereby failing, by Nefsky's own standards, to provide a general solution to the problem.

2.1.2 Commentary

Internal and External Critique of Julia Nefsky's Helping Account

In Paper 1, I survey Julia Nefsky's criticism of previously proposed solutions to the problem of collective impact, identify three success conditions for a general solution to the problem based on this criticism, and show that Nefsky's own proposal, the Helping Account, fails to satisfy these conditions. In this sense, my critique of Nefsky's view is internal. A potential worry is that, if the Helping Account fails due to external problems, an internal critique is less relevant. Of course, I cannot rule out the possibility of some external challenge that the Helping Account cannot overcome, but as far as I can tell, the challenges that I identify as part of the internal critique are the most serious problems facing the Helping Account.

Moreover, I consider the problems Nefsky raises for other proposals to capture the most important, general challenges in solving the problem of collective impact. In turn, the success conditions that I identify based on these challenges seem to capture what is *in fact*, and not just

in Nefsky's opinion, required for a general solution to succeed. Moreover, as is made clear in my survey of Nefsky's criticism of previous proposals, some of the challenges she raises are long-standing issues for solutions to the problem of collective impact that the Helping Account aims to overcome. Hence, the project serves not just to show that Nefsky's proposal fails by its own standards, but to show that no existing proposal offers a successful, general solution to the problem of collective impact given plausible success conditions set up in the debate.

2.2 Collective Harm, Oppression, and the Normative Status of Individual Acts

Given that, in a collective impact case, the collectively brought about, morally significant outcome gives each individual moral reason (not) to act, it seems that an individual act's being part of a collective impact case affects the normative status of the act. Take Parfit's (1986) Harmless Torturers case described above. As we have seen, we think that the outcome in which the victim is in excruciating pain gives each potential torturer a moral reason not to turn a dial. If so, it seems that an individual dial-turn being part of this collective impact case in which many dial-turns together bring about excruciating pain for the victim is a worse-making feature of that individual dial-turn. On this view, the individual dial-turn in Harmless Torturers is pro tanto morally worse than an otherwise morally equal act that is not part of this collective impact case.

Andreas Mogensen (2019) appeals to the idea that an act's being part of a collective impact case is reason-giving (or, as I put it, that an act's being part of a collective impact case with a harmful outcome is a worse-making feature of the act) to explain the (relative) wrongfulness of racial profiling of black individuals. He suggests that, like many individual acts of emitting pollutants together bring about harmful levels of pollution, individual acts of racial profiling targeted at black individuals contribute to the oppression of black people in the United States. Therefore, an instance of racial profiling targeted at a black individual is a more severe injustice than an otherwise morally equal instance of racial profiling of a white individual which does not contribute to oppression (Mogensen, 2019, pp. 466, 468).

A more fundamental question that remains hitherto unaddressed, however, is that of *whether* and *how* the claim about collective impact cases and the normative status of individual acts applies to the case of oppression and the individual acts that are part of it. Answering this question requires unpacking the idea that an act's being part of a collective impact case affects its normative status, and evaluating whether and how it applies to the case of oppression. In Paper 2, I address this lacuna and defend the general claim that any individual wrongful act that is part of the oppression of some social group is pro tanto morally worse than an otherwise morally equal act that is not part of oppression.

2.2.1 Summary of Paper 2: *Oppression, Collective Harm, and Individual Wrongful Acts*

In this paper, I argue that an individual wrongful act that is part of the oppression of a social group is pro tanto morally worse than an otherwise morally equal act that is not part of the oppression of a social group. I do this by drawing on insights from the discussion of the problem of collective harm. In collective harm situations, where many individual acts together bring about a harmful outcome, we think that there is moral reason for each individual (not) to act. Assuming it is true that an act's being part of a collective harm situation is reason-giving, I suggest that an individual act's being part of a collective harm situation affects its normative status, i.e. that it is a worse-making feature of the act. More specifically, the idea is that there is a morally significant relationship between an individual act and the outcome in collective harm situations such that standing in this relationship is a worse-making feature of the act.

Based on proposed solutions to the problem of collective harm, I identify two accounts of the morally significant relationship between an individual act and the outcome in collective harm situations, and suggest that there is a third, normatively akin way of specifying this

relationship. I then argue that a relationship of this third kind holds between oppression and the individual acts that are part of it, and thus oppression is a collective harm situation in the normatively relevant sense. Hence, given that an act's being part of a collective harm situation is a worse-making feature of the act, an individual wrongful act that is part of oppression is pro tanto morally worse than an otherwise morally equal act that is not part of oppression.

3. Part II: Death and Non-Existence

The philosophy of death and non-existence is fraught with puzzles pertaining to harm and well-being. One type of puzzle arises because the act or event that supposedly harms the person occurs at a time when the person does not exist, i.e. in cases where the person is not yet born or has died at the time when the act or event occurs. In these cases, it is unclear how the person incurs the harm. For example, if the act or event that supposedly harms the person obtains after the person's death, and given that there is no such thing as backward causation, it is not clear how the person, who no longer exists, can incur harm (Boonin, 2019). Relatedly, these cases give rise to what is generally referred to as a *timing problem*. In essence, the problem is that, given that the subject of the supposed harm is the person who is yet to exist or has ceased to exist, it is not clear *at which time* the person incurs the harm. In turn, it has been suggested that if there is no time at which the person incurs the harm, then there is no harm (Boonin, 2019; Johansson, 2012, 2021; Timmerman, 2021).

Another type of puzzle concerns the notion of asymmetry in benefit and harm when it comes to bringing people into existence; it is notoriously difficult to defend the intuitive idea that there are moral reasons not to bring a person with a miserable life into existence, but no moral reasons to bring a person with a happy life into existence (Benatar, 2006; Bradley, 2013; McMahan, 2013). Moreover, there is asymmetry in the value of *coming into* existence and the value of *going out* of existence. For instance, it might seem that if coming into existence is overall bad for a person, then once that person has come into existence, it would be better for them to die as soon as possible than to continue to exist. However, even if coming into existence is overall bad for a person, once a person exists, death may be overall worse for the person than continued existence (Benatar, 2006; Sullivan-Bissett, 2022).

Part II of this thesis, which falls within the philosophy of death and non-existence, addresses puzzles of these two general types. More specifically, Paper 3 addresses a puzzle of the first type, namely that of posthumous harm, while Paper 4 addresses a puzzle that falls roughly in the category of the second type, namely the so-called suicide objection to pessimist views about well-being and existence.

3.1 The Existence of Posthumous Harm

Many of us have desires pertaining to things that will happen after our deaths. For instance, I have a strong desire that my funeral be entirely secular and free of religious practice. Moreover, it seems that whoever is tasked with arranging my funeral has at least some moral reason to honor my preferences in this regard, and that I would have a legitimate complaint against them should they go against my wishes. One potential explanation for this is that posthumous harm exists, i.e. that there are cases where acts or events that obtain after a person's death harm that person.

Posthumous harm constitutes a puzzling case of harm since, even though it seems plausible, establishing that instances of posthumous harm exist is difficult. The most prominent kind of defense of the existence of posthumous harm is based on the idea that posthumous acts or events can thwart a person's interests or desires. Views of this kind have been advanced for instance by Joel Feinberg (1987), George Pitcher (1984), Steven Luper (2012), and David Boonin (2019). Within this framework, perhaps the most thoroughly defended account of posthumous harm holds that a person is harmed, while they are alive and holding a desire that

is not conditional on its own persistence, by a posthumous act or event that frustrates that desire (Boonin, 2019; Luper, 2012).

This type of account, call it the desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm, faces a number of problems. It clearly faces a timing problem since, at the time when the act or event that frustrates the person's desire obtains, the person no longer exists, and thus it is not clear *when* the person incurs posthumous harm. As noted, a well-defended position in response to this problem is that the person incurs posthumous harm while she is alive and holding the relevant desire, but this position raises further questions, for instance about backward causation (Boonin, 2019, Chapter 4). Perhaps a more fundamental problem is that this account of posthumous harm is committed to some controversial ideas about well-being, namely that the satisfaction or frustration of at least some desires affects a person's well-being, and that a person's well-being can be affected without the person experiencing anything (Boonin, 2019, Chapter 2; Luper, 2012).

One of the most prominent challenges to the desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm is the so-called changing desires objection. In short, the problem is that, on this account, a person may be harmed by the frustration of a desire that she abandons or replaces before the time of its object, which seems to be an implausible result. For example, if I now desire that my body is buried after my death, but in fact it is cremated, the desire-satisfactionist account of posthumous harm entails that I am harmed by the frustration of my desire for burial even if, before my death, I change my mind and desire cremation instead (Boonin, 2019, Section 3.4; Heathwood, 2006).

The problem of changing desires is important for at least two reasons. First, it is unique to the desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm. Many of the other problems facing this account are more general, e.g. timing problems, and will arise regardless of the details of a particular conception of posthumous harm. Second, it is a challenge pertaining to the existence of posthumous harm that does not boil down to a much more general, fundamental question e.g. about the nature of well-being or the metaphysics of time. In Paper 3, I discuss this challenge in depth and defend a solution to it. As part of this defense, I advance the more general point that the desire-satisfactionist defense of the existence of posthumous harm merely requires a weak, sufficient condition for harm, not a general principle for harm simpliciter.

3.1.1 Summary of Paper 3: *Posthumous Harm and Changing Desires*

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The desire-satisfactionist defense of the existence of posthumous harm faces the problem of changing desires. The problem is that, in some cases where desires change before the time of their objects, the principle underlying the desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm yields implausible results. In his prominent desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm, David Boonin (2019) proposes a solution to this problem. First, I argue that there are two relevantly different versions of the problem of changing desires, and that Boonin's proposed solution addresses only one of them. Second, I argue that modifying the underlying principle is a better approach to overcoming the problem of changing desires since it addresses both versions of the problem. I defend this approach against objections by showing that the problems raised are problems for the principle as a general theory of harm, not for the principle as part of the desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm.

3.1.2 Commentary

Well-Being Counterfactualist Theories of Harm and the Desire-satisfactionist Account of Posthumous Harm

In Paper 3, I discuss the desire-satisfactionist account of the existence of posthumous harm. In this discussion, I assume a well-being counterfactualist account of harm, but I do not elaborate on the implications of this assumption. I take the opportunity to briefly do so here. A well-being counterfactualist account is a proposed answer to the question what is harm? This question can in turn be split into two component questions: 1) With respect to what does the thing that harms a person affect them? and 2) How is a harm related to an act or event? (Gardner, 2021; Tadros, 2014). A well-being counterfactualist account of harm takes a person's well-being as the answer to the first question, and answers the second question by stipulating that an act or event harms a person if and only if it makes the person worse off than they would have been if the act or event had not occurred (Carlson, Johansson, et al., 2021).

The desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm rests on the following principle:

Desire Principle: A person, B, is harmed by an act or event E if: (1) B wants P to be true, and (2) E makes P false

Although the Desire Principle does not by itself imply anything about well-being, it does in conjunction with a well-being account of harm; it implies that the satisfaction and frustration of at least some desires affect well-being. Since the Desire Principle is merely a sufficient condition for harm, though, it does not imply that *only* desires affect well-being. Hence, in assuming a well-being account of harm and accepting the Desire Principle as part of the desire-satisfactionist account of posthumous harm, I also assume an at least partly desire-satisfactionist account of well-being.

It should also be noted that, without additional qualification, assuming a wellbeing *counterfactualist* account of harm in combination with the Desire Principle results in an inconsistency. The Desire Principle will entail that E harms B regardless of whether it is also true that, had E not made P false, something else would have made P false. That is, the Desire Principle may yield the result that E harms B even if E does not make B worse off than they otherwise would have been. Hence, the Desire Principle as it stands is inconsistent with the necessary and sufficient condition for harm on the counterfactualist account. To avoid this inconsistency, we must assume a third, implicit condition in the Desire Principle: that if E had not occurred, P would have been true, and B would still want P to be true.

A Sufficient Condition for Posthumous Harm

In response to the so-called changing desires objection to the desire-satisfactionist defense of posthumous harm, I defend a restricted version of the Desire Principle, the Modified Desire Principle, and contend that it constitutes a convincing sufficient condition for the existence of posthumous harm since it supports at least some paradigm cases of posthumous harm and does not yield other, unacceptable results:

Modified Desire Principle: A person, B, is harmed by an act or event, E, if: 1) B wants P to be true, 2) E makes P false, and 3) B will not abandon their desire that P before the time of the object (Boonin, 2019, pp. 78–79; Luper, 2012; Portmore, 2007, p. 30).

As a sufficient condition for harm, however, the Modified Desire Principle risks identifying harm where we do not reasonably think it is present. More specifically, the principle may yield the result that the satisfaction or frustration of a desire that is seemingly irrelevant to well-being, such as a desire formed on a whim or a highly unstable desire, constitutes a harm. I suggest that such implausible results can be avoided by adding another condition to the principle such as 4)

B's desire that P is long-standing and stable. However, I leave it open exactly how this additional condition should be formulated.

It can be objected that, unless the additional condition on the Modified Desire Principle is properly specified, the principle does not provide a convincing sufficient condition for posthumous harm.[2] Note, first, that I do not intend the additional condition on the Modified Desire Principle to be a mere placeholder. The condition, which holds that the principle will identify harm only where long-standing and stable desires are concerned, blocks the potentially implausible results identified in objections to the Modified Desire Principle.[3] Since I do not see that there are any other results that obviously ought to be but are not blocked by the condition as stated, I take it to be a plausible formulation. I do not rule out, however, that further modifications may be needed depending on how we delimit the set of desires that are relevant to well-being.

Nevertheless, if this approach is unsatisfactory, e.g. because it is difficult to specify the condition in a way that blocks all results where the frustration of irrelevant desires constitutes harm, another approach is to simply set the issue of irrelevant desires aside and maintain that the Modified Desire Principle operates only on the set of desires that are relevant to well-being. If only long-standing, stable desires are relevant to well-being, then the Modified Desire Principle will operate on these desires only, and so will not identify harm where any other desires are concerned. In that case, there is no need for an additional condition on the principle that blocks results where the frustration of irrelevant desires constitutes harm.

Of course, if there are other potentially implausible results that do not have to do with irrelevant desires, some other condition must be added to the principle to block these, and my proposed version of the condition clearly does not do this. My aim, however, is to defend a solution to the changing desires objection that is better than previously proposed solutions. For this purpose, I have stated a principle that to my understanding overcomes the problems facing other proposed solutions to the changing desires objection, and provides at least as good of a defense of the existence of posthumous harm. However, I do not deny that there may be modifications that constitute improvements on this principle, or that another type of solution to the objection is possible.

3.2 The Badness of Existence and the Betterness of Suicide

Several pessimist views about well-being and existence entail or at least support the idea that coming into existence is an *overall bad* for the person coming into existence, which in turn may entail that coming into existence is a *harm* to that person. The relevant views hold, for instance, that life could not be better than neutral and is most often overall bad for a person, that the bads in life necessarily or contingently outweigh the goods, or that only the bads in life, not the goods, determine the value for a person of coming into existence.

It has been suggested that these views also imply that it is *better*, and thus perhaps *less harmful*, for a person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living, and that this is a serious drawback of these views; this is the so-called suicide objection to pessimist views about well-being and existence (Cholbi, 2021; McGregor & Sullivan-Bissett, 2012; Sušnik, 2020). However, the *inference* from the relevant pessimist views to the result that suicide is better for a person than continued existence has not received much detailed attention. I carefully construct and evaluate this inference in Paper 4. I conclude that it *does* follow from the pessimist views

[2] I thank Erik Carlson for raising this objection.

[3] When I say that the additional condition "blocks" the result that the frustration of an irrelevant desire is a harm, I mean that, with the additional condition, the Modified Desire Principle does not entail that the frustration of an irrelevant desire is a harm. However, the principle does not entail that the frustration of an irrelevant desire is *not* a harm.

in question that it is better for a person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living, at least at some earlier rather than later time(s).

3.2.1 Summary of Paper 4: *Suicide and Pessimism*

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If it is bad for a person to come into existence, wouldn't it be best for those of us who do exist to kill ourselves? This is a reasonable question to ask philosophical pessimists, but, as it turns out, the answer is not obvious. In this paper, I explore the inference from the pessimist claim that it is a serious overall bad for a person to come into existence, to the view that it is better for an existing person to end their own life than to continue living. More specifically, I consider some pessimist views that support the claim that it is a serious overall bad for a person to come into existence, and discuss whether it follows from these views that it is better for a person to end their own life than to continue living. First, I argue that it follows from the relevant pessimist views that it is better for a person to die than to continue living. Second, I argue that, given that it is better for a person to die than to continue living, it is also better for them to end their own life than to continue living in those instances. Hence, it does follow from the pessimist views in question that it is better for a person to end their own life than to continue living.

3.2.2 Commentary

The Betterness of Suicide and Subsequentism about the Badness of Death

As part of the argument in Paper 4, I discuss some accounts of the badness of death for the person who dies, but I do not say much about the *timing* of the badness of death for the person who dies, yet this too is relevant for parts of the argument. Consider *subsequentism* about the timing of the badness of death for the person who dies. On this view, a person accrues the harm of death from deprivation at the times after their death when they would have been alive and had a positive well-being level, had their actual death not occurred (Bradley, 2009, Chapter 3; Johansson, 2012). It seems that this view is inconsistent with or at least that it challenges parts of the argument in Paper 4.[4] I address these concerns below.

First, I contend that Benatar's (2006) asymmetry argument entails not only that pre-natal non-existence is preferable to existence for a possible person who never comes into existence, but also that posthumous non-existence is preferable to existence for an existing person. In both cases, the absence of pleasure in non-existence is not bad since there is no one in that state for whom it is a deprivation, but the absence of pain in this state is good for the possible person who never comes into existence on Benatar's view. It follows that, in the comparison between an existing person's existence and their posthumous non-existence, the latter state is preferable to the former. However, to go from the state of existence to that of non-existence, the person must die, and death may be worse for them than continuing to exist. In other words, even though the state of non-existence is better than the state of existence, the *transition* from the latter to the former, i.e. death, may be worse for a person than continued existence.

According to subsequentism, however, it seems that the absence of pleasure is bad for a person in posthumous non-existence. To be clear, subsequentism is about the timing of the badness of *death*, not about the value for a person of *the state of non-existence*. Nevertheless, it follows from subsequentism that the absence of pleasure *in* posthumous non-existence is bad, because this is where the badness of deprivation due to death is located in time. In turn, it follows that the state of posthumous non-existence could be overall bad, and perhaps worse than existence, for the person.

[4] I thank Erik Carlson for making this point.

Since part of the asymmetry argument is that the absence of pleasure in non-existence is not bad for a person, we might interpret the argument as rejecting subsequentism about the badness of death. On the other hand, since the idea that the absence of pleasure in non-existence is not bad refers to non-existence where a person never comes into existence, and not to posthumous non-existence, it can be argued that the argument is consistent with subsequentism about the timing of the badness of death. If so, my point that the asymmetry argument entails that posthumous non-existence is preferable to existence for the existing person should be read as conditional on rejecting subsequentism.

Second, it may seem that my discussion of annihilation as a worse-making feature of early death presupposes the rejection of subsequentism. I suggest that earlier annihilation is not worse for a person than later annihilation since the badness of annihilation does not depend on the amount of life or the goods that a person would have had if their actual death had not occurred. It might appear, however, that if the bad of annihilation accrues to a person after their death, then it is better that their death, and thus their annihilation, occur later rather than earlier because this decreases the time during which the person is dead and incurring the bad of annihilation where, had they not died, they would have been alive not incurring this bad.

However, it is reasonable to think that the severity of a bad-making feature of death generally does not depend on *when* this bad accrues to the person.[5] Of course, death may be worse for a person the earlier it occurs, e.g. because it deprives the person of more good life. But whether the bad of deprivation accrues to the person while they are alive or after death does not matter for the severity of this bad; what matters is only how much good the person is deprived of. Presumably, something similar ought to be true of the bad of annihilation, i.e. what matters is only how bad annihilation is. On this view, the point that annihilation does not make an earlier death worse than a later one stands regardless of whether subsequentism is true.

The Timing of the Betterness of Suicide

I argue in Paper 4 that it follows from certain pessimist views about well-being and existence that it is better for an existing person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living. I distinguish, however, between a strong and a weaker, yet non-trivial version of this claim:

Strong version: It is better for a person at every point in time to perform an act of suicide than to continue living.

Weaker version: It is better for a person at some earlier time(s) to perform an act of suicide than to continue living.

The strongest pessimist views, those that deny that anything is intrinsically good for a person, lead to the strong version. However, the more moderate views according to which there are intrinsic goods for a person, and these can outweigh the intrinsic bads, merely lead to the weaker version of this result. As it stands, there is some nuance in how this weaker version of the result might be interpreted. First, there is a question of what the earlier time(s) is relative to – earlier than what? One option is that it is specifically a matter of time(s) earlier than the end of a person's *actual* life, another is to think of it as some time(s) earlier than the end of one's *statistical lifespan*.

However, both options set arbitrary boundaries. The time at which it is better to perform an act of suicide than to continue living is determined by the balance of good and bad in a person's life and their distribution in time, and there could be lives such that this time is later than the end of one's actual life or the end of one's statistical lifespan. That is, at either of these

[5] Some have suggested that, if the bad of death accrues to the person *atemporally*, i.e. at no particular time, then it cannot be a very serious bad (Bradley, 2004). However, it seems less plausible that the severity of death's badness should depend on whether the bad accrues to the person *before*, *at*, or *after* death.

times, it might be that it would have been better for the person to continue living for some period than to die at that time because, during that period, the intrinsic goods would have outweighed the intrinsic bads for the person. Instead, then, we should think of the time(s) at which it is better for a person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living simply as a matter of an earlier rather than *some* later time.

A second, related question, is *how early* are the time(s) at which it is better for a person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living? According to the relevant pessimistic views about well-being and existence (even the more moderate ones), life is overall bad for the person who lives it, meaning the bads in life outweigh the goods. It may seem, then, that the earlier one performs an act of suicide, the better (preferably immediately after birth if that were possible). As we have seen, however, the time at which it is better for a person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living depends on how the bads and goods in a given life are distributed in time. If all the bad in life is concentrated late in a person's life, clearly it is best to perform an act of suicide at the time when the bad starts to occur, which would then be a time late in the person's life.

However, given that the goods and bads are more evenly spread, for most people, the time(s) at which it would be better for the person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living for some additional period of time is likely to be much earlier, *considerably* earlier than the end of their statistical lifespan or their actual death if they do not perform an act of suicide. Clearly, the *optimal* time for a person to perform an act of suicide will differ depending on whether we look at a person's life as a whole or from some specific point in time and onwards. Looking at it from, say the middle of their statistical lifespan, the optimal time of suicide from the whole-life-perspective may well have passed, and the optimal time of suicide from that time forward would of course be some time later than the optimal time of suicide from the whole-life-perspective.

Note also that the relevant type of life considered is assumed to be something like a typical human life in terms of its length and its nature. There may of course be some lives for which it does not follow from the pessimist views that it is better for a person to end their life at some earlier time(s) than to continue living. For instance, some very short lives might not contain any bads at all (or goods for that matter), and thus the person living such a life would not be better off by cutting their life even shorter. We can also imagine, at least on the more moderate pessimist views, nearby possible worlds where all lives are overall good until the last ten seconds, during which they are very bad. In such a world, it is of course true even on non-pessimist views that it is better for a person to end their life at some earlier time than to continue living. These, however, are not the type of lives we are concerned with.

Pessimist Views and Standard Theories of Well-Being

In my discussion in Paper 4 of the inference from the pessimist views about well-being and existence to the result that it is better for a person to perform an act of suicide than to continue living, I do not take a stand on what counts or does not count as intrinsic goods or bads for a person. In their most general form, the pessimist views considered do not directly concern *what things* are intrinsically good or intrinsically bad for a person. Rather, these views concern the (non-)existence of intrinsic goods and bads for a person as well as their balancing. For instance, the type of pessimist view that holds that there are no intrinsic goods for a person, only intrinsic bads, holds this for any account of what things are intrinsic bads for a person.

Hence, although specific versions of these views, e.g. anti-frustrationism or undisturbedness as the upper limit of pleasure (Fehige, 1998; O'Keefe, 2013; Striker, 1993), commit to a particular view about the nature of intrinsic good and bad for a person, it seems the pessimist views in their general form are compatible with more than one view about the nature

of intrinsic goods and bads for a person. However, this is not to suggest that the pessimist views and my discussion of them are compatible with any *theory of well-being*.

Theories of well-being are not just about the nature of what is intrinsically good or bad for a person, but they also encompass ideas about whether there are both intrinsic goods and bads for a person as well as how they weigh against each other in the well-being calculation. Hence, some of the pessimist views considered are clearly incompatible with some theories of well-being. For instance, the pessimist views according to which there are no intrinsic goods for a person are incompatible with theories of well-being according to which there *are* intrinsic goods, which is true for all the major theories of well-being such as hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, and objective list theories.

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Swedish Summary

Denna sammanläggningsavhandling identifierar och behandlar fyra sorters förbryllande fall av skada som involverar individuella agenter. Dessa sorters fall är förbryllande på grund av osäkerhet kring skadans normativa implikationer och förverkligande under specifika omständigheter. De förbryllande fallen ifråga kan delas in i två övergripande kategorier. Den första typen av fall är sådana där vi anser att individer orsakar skada eller handlar moraliskt fel genom att vara inblandade i skada, men där det är oklart vad relationen är mellan den individuella handlingen och skadan, eller hur skadan gör handlingen moraliskt fel. Sådana fall uppstår till exempel i kollektivt handlande, där många individuella handlingar tillsammans leder till skadliga utfall. Den andra typen av fall är sådana där det verkar som att individer drabbas av skada, men där det är oklart om eller hur skadan förverkligas. Förbryllande fall av detta slag uppstår ofta när den påstådda skadan är kopplad till början eller slutet av en persons existens, eller när födelse eller död skiljer skadans subjekt från den handling eller händelse som påstås orsaka skadan. Uppsats 1 och 2 behandlar förbryllande fall av skada inom det kollektiva handlandets etik medan uppsats 3 och 4 behandlar förbryllande fall av skada inom dödens filosofi.

Uppsats 1 diskuterar det så kallade problemet med kollektiv påverkan. Problemet uppstår i situationer där människor tillsammans åstadkommer ett moraliskt betydelsefullt utfall genom att var och en handlar på ett visst sätt, samtidigt som ingen enskild handling tycks göra någon relevant skillnad för utfallet. Det verkar som om varje individ har ett moraliskt skäl att agera (eller avstå från att agera) i dessa situationer, men om den individuella handlingen inte gör någon skillnad är det oklart vilka dessa moraliska skäl är. Problemet med kollektiv påverkan består i utmaningen att identifiera dessa moraliska skäl. Julia Nefsky (2017) har presenterat en teori om hur en individuell handling kan "hjälpa till" att påverka utfallet utan att göra någon skillnad. Denna teori påstås erbjuda en generell lösning på problemet med kollektiv påverkan, samtidigt som den undviker svårigheter som tidigare föreslagna lösningar har stött på. Jag presenterar en intern kritik av Nefskys arbete. Baserat på de problem Nefsky påstår att andra lösningsförslag står inför identifierar jag tre adekvansvillkor för en generell lösning på problemet med kollektiv påverkan. Jag visar sedan att Nefskys eget förslag inte uppfyller dessa villkor och därmed misslyckas med att erbjuda en generell lösning på problemet enligt Nefskys egna kriterier.

I uppsats 2 argumenterar jag för att en individuell handling som är en del av förtrycket av en social grupp är moraliskt sämre än en annars moraliskt likvärdig handling som inte är en del av ett sådant förtryck. Jag gör detta med hänvisning till insikter från diskussionen om problemet med kollektiv påverkan. Jag föreslår att det faktum att en individuell handling ingår i kollektivt handlande med ett skadligt utfall påverkar handlingens normativa status – det vill säga, att det utgör en egenskap som gör handlingen moraliskt sämre. Mer specifikt menar jag att det finns en moraliskt betydelsefull relation mellan en individuell handling och utfallet av kollektivt handlande och det faktum att en handling står i denna relation till utfallet gör handlingen moraliskt sämre. Med utgångspunkt i föreslagna lösningar på problemet med kollektiv påverkan identifierar jag två teorier om den moraliskt betydelsefulla relationen mellan en individuell handling och utfallet av kollektivt handlande, varpå jag föreslår att det finns ett tredje, normativt likartat sätt att specificera denna relation. Jag visar därefter att en relation av detta tredje slag råder mellan förtryck och de individuella handlingar som ingår i förtrycket och att förtryck därmed utgör kollektivt handlande i normativt relevant bemärkelse. Det följer

således att en individuell handling som är en del av förtryck är moraliskt sämre än en annars moraliskt likvärdig handling som inte är en del av förtryck.

Uppsats 3 behandlar frågan om huruvida det finns postum skada, det vill säga huruvida sådant som händer efter en persons död kan skada den personen. Enligt en av de mest framstående teorierna om postum skada uppstår sådan skada då en handling eller händelse som inträffar efter en persons död gör så att en önskan personen hade när hen levde inte går i uppfyllelse. Till exempel, om jag önskar att min aska sprids i havet och den istället hälls ut i rabatten, så skadas jag enligt denna teori av att askan hälls ut i rabatten istället för i havet och denna skada åsamkas mig medan jag lever och har önskan att min aska sprids i havet. Ett problem för denna teori är det så kallade problemet med föränderliga begär. Problemet är att teorin leder till orimliga slutsatser i de fall där en persons önskningar ändras innan önskans objekt infrias, t.ex. ifall jag medan jag lever ändrar mig angående var min aska ska spridas. I sin framstående teori om postum skada föreslår David Boonin (2019) en lösning på detta problem. Jag hävdar för det första att det finns två olika versioner av problemet med föränderliga begär och att Boonins föreslagna lösning endast bemöter den ena. För det andra menar jag att en annan föreslagen lösning är bättre eftersom den bemöter bägge versionerna av problemet. Jag försvarar detta senare lösningsförslag mot invändningar genom att visa att de problem som lyfts fram gäller en allmän teori om skada, snarare än teorin om postum skada.

I uppsats 4 undersöker jag kopplingen mellan det pessimistiska påståendet att det är dåligt för en person att komma in i existensen och uppfattningen att det är bättre för en existerande person att avsluta sitt eget liv än att fortsätta leva. Mer specifikt tittar jag närmare på några pessimistiska synsätt som stöder påståendet att det är dåligt för en person att komma in i existensen och diskuterar huruvida det följer av dessa synsätt att det är bättre för en person att avsluta sitt liv än att fortsätta leva. Jag visar först att det följer från de pessimistiska synsätten i fråga att det är bättre för en person att dö än att fortsätta leva. Sedan visar jag att, givet att det är bättre för en person att *dö* än att fortsätta leva, så är det också bättre för personen att *avsluta sitt eget liv* än att fortsätta leva i dessa fall. Därmed hävdar jag att det följer från de pessimistiska synsätten i fråga att det är bättre för en person att avsluta sitt eget liv än att fortsätta leva.