

Death in the Wasteland: What Do the Living Owe to the Dead?

Mackenzie Graham

In the world of *Fallout*, death is a constant companion. Roaming the Capital Wasteland, the deserts of New Vegas, or the Commonwealth, the player character has numerous encounters with the dead and the dying. For centuries, philosophers have argued about our obligations to the dead, and in the *Fallout* universe, these questions are made brutally tangible.

For example, the main plotline of *Fallout 3*—the completion of Project Purity—sees the Lone Wanderer’s father James die to prevent the project from falling into the hands of the Enclave. At the culmination of the game, the Lone Wanderer must choose whether to sacrifice themselves (or a companion) to initiate Project Purity and provide clean drinking water to the Capital Wasteland, align with the Enclave by contaminating the water with a virus, or allow the project to be destroyed.¹ Completing the project seems to be the morally right choice, but is it the best choice for the Lone Wanderer, or for James? In other words, would the Lone Wanderer’s death be a bad thing *for them*? Is the failure of James’s life’s work a bad thing *for him*? Can we be affected by events that happen after we die? These are the questions that will occupy us in the remainder of this chapter.

To answer these questions, we need to think carefully about the nature of death, specifically whether things can go better or worse for us after we die. On the one hand, we avoid speaking badly of the dead, we feel compelled to keep “deathbed promises,” and we worry about what will happen to our bodies and reputations after we die. This suggests that posthumous events can benefit or harm us. On the other hand, how can something be a benefit or a harm to me if I am not around to experience it? How can I be wronged by others if I no longer exist to be wronged?

“Death Is Preferable to Communism!”—Liberty Prime

Is death ever a bad thing for the person who dies? At first glance, the answer seems obvious—of course death is a bad thing for the person that dies, at least sometimes. While there may be some cases where death is a good thing, if our lives are generally good then the loss of that good must

be a bad thing. So, while the success of Project Purity might be a good thing overall (in that it would be good for most of the people in the Capital Wasteland), it was probably a bad thing for the Lone Wanderer because it meant the loss of a good thing for them (namely, their life).

Yet, as far back as antiquity, philosophers have disputed this intuitive understanding of the badness of death. Most famously, the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE) argued that it was a mistake to think that death was *ever* a bad thing for the person who died.² He reasoned that while a person is alive, they are not dead, and so their death has not harmed them. And, when a person is dead, they no longer exist, so there is nothing remaining to be harmed.

This may look a bit like philosophical sleight of hand, and there are a few assumptions Epicurus makes that are somewhat suspect. First, Epicurus was a hedonist: he argued that the only things that are *intrinsically* good or bad for us (that is, good or bad “in themselves”) are things that we experience, namely, pleasure and pain. Second, he assumes that something can be *extrinsically* good or bad only if it causes me to experience something intrinsically good. For example, Nuka-Cola is extrinsically good insofar as it causes me to experience pleasure (which is intrinsically good).

Let’s consider the first of these assumptions. It seems implausible that pleasure and pain are the *only* things that are intrinsically good or bad. For example, many philosophers argue that fulfilling my desires is intrinsically good, and having my desires thwarted is intrinsically bad—call these “desire-fulfillment accounts” of well-being. For example, if my desire is to eat some Fancy Lad Snack Cakes, it is good for me to satisfy this desire.³

Rejecting this first assumption makes the second assumption implausible. If satisfying my desires is good for me, then something that prevents me from satisfying my desires seems like it must be bad for me. But notice that, on a desire-fulfillment account, my desires can be fulfilled (or thwarted) without my being aware of it. Consider “The Power of the Atom” quest in *Fallout 3*: the Lone Wanderer is faced with the decision to destroy Megaton or disarm the nuclear bomb at the center of the town. Suppose the Lone Wanderer disarms the bomb and kills Mister Burke—we can clearly infer from this that the Lone Wanderer desires that the town and its residents survive. But suppose further that, days later and unbeknownst to the Lone Wanderer, the bomb is rearmed and the town is destroyed. The Lone Wanderer’s desire that the town be saved is thwarted, which seems like a bad thing for him (or her)—much less for the residents of Megaton!—even if the Lone Wanderer never finds out.

This makes trouble for the Epicurean account. If something can be good or bad for me without my experiencing it, the fact that I don’t experience my death doesn’t rule out its being good or bad for me. Specifically, it can be bad for me if it prevents me from satisfying my desires, even if I’m not aware that my desires have not been satisfied (which obviously I wouldn’t be).

This “deprivationist account” of the badness of death—the view that my death can be bad for me because it deprives me of things that are (or would be) good for me—is highly intuitive. It makes sense of the fact that, other things being equal, death is worse for us the earlier it happens—we are deprived of goods we would have had if we hadn’t died when we did, and the earlier we die, the more goods we miss out on. It also makes sense of the fact that sometimes death can be a *good* thing for the one who dies. Consider the Glowing Ones, who have an utterly miserable existence that they cannot escape. It seems plausible that their lives are so bad that they would be better off dying earlier than later, as this would result in less suffering.

However, the deprivationist account has some problems. We might think that if something makes us better or worse off than we would have been otherwise, there must be some time at which it does this. For example, getting radiation poisoning makes me worse off than I would have been had I not been poisoned, and the time at which it makes me worse off is while I am sick. We can see the problem for the deprivationist account: if my death makes me worse off than I would have been by depriving me of some future good, *when* does it make me worse off?

Various philosophers have attempted to answer this question. Contemporary philosopher Fred Feldman argues for an “eternalist” view. Imagine two possible worlds: the actual world in which I die in 2025, and a different world in which I die in 2077.⁴ If the actual world in which I die earlier is worse for me than the possible world, it has always been, and always will be, worse. Thus, my death is bad for me at all possible times. Conversely, another contemporary philosopher, Ben Bradley, argues that my death is bad for me at all the times in which I am deprived of the goods I would have had if I hadn’t died.⁵ This means that my death eventually stops being bad for me; 150 years after my birth, I wouldn’t have been alive anyway. It also means that the badness of my death can change as events in the world occur; if the world is consumed by a nuclear apocalypse, and my earlier-than-otherwise death means I avoid this, my death can suddenly go from bad for me to good for me.

Even if we can determine *when* death is bad, there remains the question of *whom* it is bad for: if I no longer exist after my death, how can it be a bad thing for me? How can *anything* be good or bad for me?

“But I’m Glad You’re Not Dead. That’d Be a Real Downer. Especially for You, I Bet” —Moirra Brown

Like the badness of death itself, the idea of posthumous harms (and benefits) has some intuitive force. As we saw above, it seems possible that something might be bad for me (like the destruction of Megaton) even if

this makes no difference to my subjective experience. So why should it matter if the reason I have no subjective experience of this thing is because I am dead?

For example, we know that James' lifelong desire was to complete Project Purity, and his sacrifice at the Jefferson Memorial facility clearly indicates he had this desire up until the moment of his death. Suppose that James hadn't died from the radiation, but merely lost consciousness, and somehow escaped with the Lone Wanderer to the Citadel. Suppose further that the Lone Wanderer goes on to complete Project Purity, but before news of their success reaches James, he dies. It seems that this success benefits James, despite the fact that he doesn't know about it—his life's work has been completed! Compare this case to the events of the game, where Project Purity is completed after James dies. In both cases, James' life's work is completed, and he is not aware of it. If we think this is a benefit in the first case, it seems it must also be a benefit in the second case.⁶ But this raises what is often referred to as the “problem of the subject”: how can something be good for dead-James, if he no longer exists?

One response to this problem is to argue that neither unconscious-James nor dead-James is benefited by the completion of his life's work—something can only be a benefit (or harm) to me if it affects me directly in some way.⁷ While we might think that the success of Project Purity is a good thing *in general*, it is not a good thing *for James*. Once we are dead, nothing can affect us, and so nothing can benefit or harm us.

A different response to this problem comes from philosophers like Joel Feinberg (1926–2004) and George Pitcher (1925–2018).⁸ They argue that the subject of posthumous benefits and harms is what they call the “ante-mortem” person. After someone's death, we can describe them as they were at some earlier stage of their life (the ante-mortem person), or describe them as they are now (the post-mortem person). Feinberg and Pitcher think that ante-mortem persons can benefit and be harmed after their death. “Ante-mortem James” desires the completion of Project Purity, and it is this James who is benefitted when it is completed (i.e., after ante-mortem James's death). Although ante-mortem James does not experience the satisfaction of his desire (because while he is alive, it hasn't been satisfied yet), the fact that he has a desire that *will be satisfied* makes a positive difference to his life. (Compare this to a James that has a desire that *will not be satisfied* after his death. His life seems to be worse, at least in that respect). So far, so good. But we might notice a problem here: ante-mortem James stopped existing before the events that satisfied his desire, which suggests that an event in the present (the completion of Project Purity) changed something in the past (ante-mortem James' well-being). This appears to be a case of backward causation: surely something that happens in the present can't improve my well-being in the past!

Feinberg and Pitcher both deny that their views imply backward causation: it is not the case that James died “un-benefited,” and then benefits

once Project Purity is completed. Instead, they argue that ante-mortem James is benefited *during his lifetime*, by the fact that his future desire for Project Purity to be completed is going to be satisfied.

Consider the events of October 23, 2077—the beginning of the Great War in the *Fallout* universe and the day the Vaults are sealed shut.⁹ Because of these events, October 22, 2077, is the last day of the prewar era. Of course, no one realized this at the time (that is, on the 22nd): the events of the 23rd make it true that the 22nd was the last day of the prewar era.

Feinberg and Pitcher argue that we should think of posthumous harms and benefits the same way: events after a person's death retroactively change the properties of the ante-mortem person, and this can make them better or worse off. Suppose I shoot a Raider, but before they die, a second Raider kills me. At the moment of my death, I am not (yet) a killer, but the death of the first Raider makes it true of me that I was a killer, even if this happens after my death.¹⁰ This example shows that ascribing new properties to a person after their death does not require the possibility of backwards causation.

Yet, even if it is possible that events in the present can result in persons that existed in the past acquiring new properties, these may not be the same kinds of properties as “being harmed” or “being benefitted.” The property “being a killer” is an extrinsic property, something that is true of me because of my relationship to other things. The change I undergo when the description “is a killer” goes from false of me to true of me is not a genuine change to *me*.¹¹ Conversely, harms and benefits involve changes to my intrinsic properties (for example, my physical and mental states). This is not to say that my extrinsic properties do not matter to my well-being; changes to my extrinsic properties can, and often do, give rise to changes to my intrinsic properties. For example, actions the Lone Wanderer takes affect their reputation with the various wasteland factions. These changes to my reputation (extrinsic property) can affect my physical or mental states by changing what I think or feel (intrinsic properties), but it is only these latter changes that harm or benefit me. Thus, because the dead lack intrinsic properties, they cannot be benefited or harmed.¹²

“You Think You’ll Rest When You’re Dead, Children?” — Three Dog

Up to now, we have been mostly concerned with the idea of whether someone can be harmed by events occurring after their death. But we might also wonder whether someone can be *wronged* after their death (or whether we can “do right by the dead”). Something might be harmful, without being wrong. Killing a Raider in self-defense is one such example: the Raider is worse off than they would have been otherwise (say, if I didn’t resist), but by harming my attacker, I have not acted wrongly. Conversely,

something might be wrong, even if no one is harmed. Suppose I promise to meet you at a particular place and time, though I never intend to show up. Coincidentally, while you're waiting for me to arrive, your shanty is attacked by Super Mutants. Thus, my making a false promise to you is what saved your life (which benefits you), but it was still wrong.

In some ways, the idea of posthumous wrongs is even more intuitive than posthumous harms. As Feinberg points out, we readily accept that we ought not break promises, defame, betray, or otherwise disrespect the deceased—this is not (merely) harmful, but *wrong*.¹³

A particularly provocative example of wronging the dead occurs in the *Fallout 3* side-quest “Blood Ties,” in which the Lone Wanderer interacts with members of a commune of cannibals called The Family. Even in the post-apocalyptic *Fallout* universe, cannibalism is considered wrong (as suggested by the fact that even with the Cannibal perk, consuming a corpse reduces Karma). Importantly, the wrongness of cannibalism seems to go beyond any harm that it causes. Even if a person is already dead (so no harm is caused through killing), and is cannibalized in secret (so no distress is caused to others), it still seems that a wrong has occurred, and in particular, that the dead person has been wronged.

One way of understanding this wrong is in terms of our obligations to the living, obligations which might extend past the ends of their lives. A familiar example of this kind of obligation involves promising: suppose that while you're alive, I promise that I will scatter your ashes from the top of Tenpenny Tower after you've died. If I toss them in the sewer instead, and thereby break the promise I made, it seems like I've wronged you.¹⁴ The point here is that my obligation to keep my promise seems to persist, even after the person I've made the promise to ceases to exist.

We can easily imagine a situation in which a person, while alive, makes it clear to us that they do not want to be eaten after they die. And, if we promise that we will not, it seems that we continue to be bound by that promise once they are dead. This does not show that cannibalism is wrong, however, but only that breaking a promise to the deceased is wrong. Does this mean that unless we've made a promise not to eat someone after their death, it's okay?

Maybe it simply goes without saying that we wouldn't want to be eaten after our death, and so although no explicit promises are made, we still have an obligation to respect the wishes of the living about how their bodies will be treated after their death. Indeed, while promises require a clear act of promising and accepting in order to generate an obligation, many of our obligations apply to us whether we like it or not.

But notice that the above obligations are obligations to the living, not to the dead. Unless we have obligations *to the dead*, it is difficult to see how we might wrong them by failing to satisfy these obligations. Thus, if an act like cannibalism is wrong, it is not a wrong to the dead person. Yet, it is also unclear how it could be a wrong to the formerly living person, since this person no longer exists.

Nevertheless, we still have reasons to do (or avoid doing) certain things with respect to the dead, despite the fact that they can seemingly neither be harmed nor wronged. As contemporary philosophers J.S. Taylor and Ernest Partridge (1935–2018) argue, we honor the wishes of the now-dead to ensure the continuance of such honoring as a social practice, so that our wishes will in turn be honored.¹⁵ Thus, we should honor the wishes of the dead because doing so is good for the living. Notice that on this view, however, if we could fail to honor the wishes of the dead without affecting the social practice of honoring (for instance, if we could be cannibals in secret), not only would there be no reason not to do this, no one would be wronged. Similarly, we could imagine circumstances—such as a post-apocalyptic wasteland—where even if a person wished not to be eaten after death, there is no expectation that this wish will be respected. On this view, there would be no moral reason against cannibalism.

One other possible way of understanding potential obligations to the deceased is to appeal to impersonal views of morality. These views hold that an action can be wrong without making things worse for anyone in particular. Suppose that you are the last person alive in a sealed Vault, and about to die. If you push a button, you will start a process that will create 100 Vault Dwellers who will go on to live happy lives. If you don't, these future Vault Dwellers will not exist. Failing to push the button doesn't harm or wrong anyone (since the future Vault Dwellers don't exist yet), but it seems to be the wrong choice.¹⁶

Perhaps cannibalism, if it is a wrong, is an “impersonal” wrong—it is wrong, but without wronging anyone in particular. In this way, our obligations toward the dead are analogous to our obligations toward things like nature—for example, we ought to show respect for nature not because failing to do so is harmful, or because it violates a right, but because nature has an impersonal sort of value. Similarly, cannibalism is wrong because it is disrespectful, not to a particular person, but to *personhood*.

“You’re ... Different. If You Die, You Stay Dead. Better Be Careful!”—Dr. Stanislaus Braun

It is a necessary feature of video games like those in the *Fallout* series that when the player-character dies, the world stops. The story cannot continue without the player. Of course, in reality, we know that the world will continue in some form after our deaths (barring a nuclear apocalypse). In this chapter, we’ve considered some challenging philosophical questions about our connection with the world after our deaths. Given that we no longer exist, it is difficult to see how we might be harmed or wronged by what happens after we die. Still, how we treat the dead seems very much to matter; if not to them, then to those of us who are still surviving.

Notes

1. In *Fallout 4*, interactions between Deacon and the Sole Survivor indicate that the Capital Wasteland is exporting purified water, suggesting that canonically, the Lone Wanderer activates the purifier without contaminating it with the Forced Evolutionary Virus (FEV).
2. Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," in Diogenes Laertius ed., *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).
3. It is possible that my desires might be harmful to others (e.g., if I desire to kill someone). In this case, satisfying this desire would be good from the point of view of my well-being, but it would be morally bad.
4. Fred Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death," *The Philosophical Review* 100 (1991), 205–227.
5. Ben Bradley, "When Is Death Bad for the One Who Dies?," *Nous* 38 (2004), 1–28.
6. Philosophers Derek Parfit (1942–2017) and Joel Feinberg (1926–2004) both appeal to comparisons like this to argue for the idea of posthumous harm. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of Criminal Law*, vol. 1: *Harm to Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
7. Philosophers like Ernest Partridge (1935–2018) and contemporary philosophers Mark Bernstein and Walter Glannon make this kind of argument.
8. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of Criminal Law*.
9. With the exception of Vault 12, which was designed never to close so the effects of radiation on inhabitants could be studied.
10. A similar example comes from Dorothy Grover (1936–2017).
11. Philosophers call these "Cambridge changes," after the influential Cambridge philosophers Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and J.M.E. McTaggart (1866–1925). A simple example of a "Cambridge change" is what occurs when I change my location relative to a fixed point. A sentence that was true, such as "Big Town is north of me" when I'm standing at the Red Racer Factory, is no longer true when I'm standing in Paradise Falls, even though nothing about my physical make-up has changed.
12. This sort of argument is made by the contemporary philosopher J.S. Taylor. J.S. Taylor, "A Defense of the Obligation to Keep Promises to the Dead," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 49 (2024), 547–549.
13. Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of Criminal Law*.
14. There is a large philosophical literature on the nature of promising, and philosophers disagree about whether we have an obligation to keep promises made to the living, once they are dead. For an overview, see Allen Habib, "Promises," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/promises>.
15. Taylor, "A Defense of the Obligation to Keep Promises to the Dead."
16. These kinds of cases are related to the philosopher Derek Parfit's famous non-identity problem. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*.