Dead and Gone? Reply to Jenkins

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In a recent article, Joyce L. Jenkins challenges the common belief that desire satisfactionists are committed to the view that a person's welfare can be affected by posthumous events. Jenkins argues that desire satisfactionists can and should say that posthumous events only play an epistemic role: though such events cannot harm me, they can reveal that I have already been harmed by something else. In this response, however, we show that Jenkins's approach collapses into the view she aims to avoid.

According to desire satisfaction theories of welfare, a person's welfare is determined by the satisfaction and frustration of her desires – at least so long as these are, in some appropriate sense, about her own life. In a recent article in this journal, Joyce L. Jenkins argues that, contrary to a common belief, desire satisfaction theories are not 'committed to the view that changes in welfare levels can happen after death, or that events that occur after death impact the agent's welfare level now'.[1] This result, she suggests, is good news for these theories; indeed, she had long supposed the idea that a person's welfare can be affected by posthumous events to be 'one of those wacky ancient views – similar to the view that hysteria is caused by a traveling uterus – which no one anymore holds'.[2]

The reason that desire satisfactionists are usually taken to be committed to the view in question is that they deny that awareness of my desire satisfactions, or desire frustrations, is necessary for me to be benefited, or harmed, by them. Jenkins focuses on one of Parfit's examples: the desire to be a successful parent. Unlike the desire that my children fare well, this is a desire about my own life. I try to give my children 'the right education, good habits, and psychological strength'.[3] However, unbeknownst to me, their lives go badly: 'One finds that the education I gave him makes him unemployable, another has a mental

[1] Joyce L. Jenkins, 'Dead and Gone', *Utilitas* 23 (2011), pp. 228–34, at 229.
[2] Jenkins, 'Dead and Gone', p. 228.
[3] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), p. 495.

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breakdown, another becomes a petty thief.'[4] Despite my ignorance of these events, they apparently frustrate my desire, and thus seem to harm me according to desire satisfactionism. If so, Parfit says, they must do this regardless of whether they occur before or after my death, for all my death does is to *guarantee* that I will never be aware of them.

Jenkins argues, however, that desire satisfactionists can and should resist the view that these later events harm me. 'The thing to notice is that my desire to be a good parent involves wanting to have a certain causal impact on my children. That's why it's a desire about my own life.'[5] It is when I make my unsuccessful attempts, Jenkins claims, that my welfare level is affected negatively. And, she points out, it is only while I am still alive that I make these attempts; I cannot act while dead. That my children's lives later go badly has only epistemic relevance: these events do not affect my welfare level, but only *reveal* that my attempts were unsuccessful, and that I was harmed already when I made them.

It may be objected, Jenkins notes, that her approach cannot handle a different kind of case. Suppose I desire a good posthumous reputation, but someone spreads lies about me after my death. These lies may seem to affect my welfare negatively, rather than merely reveal that something else has already done this. But Jenkins replies that desire satisfactionists should regard such a desire as irrelevant to my welfare, since it is not about my own life. 'Distinguish the desire to do things that will make people remember me from the desire that people remember me.'[6] The former desire, Jenkins claims, is about my own life, as it concerns the causal impact of my own actions; the second desire, by contrast, 'could be satisfied even if I do nothing memorable'.[7]

However, Jenkins's approach collapses into the view she aims to reject. She may well be right that the relevant desires concern the causal impact of my own actions; that these actions are performed only while I am still alive; and that it is only my welfare level prior to death that is affected by my causal failures. But whether my actions have the relevant causal impact nonetheless depends on what happens after I have performed them: even if an action is *performed* at a certain time, it has its causal *properties* partly in virtue of subsequent events. In particular, the satisfaction of my desire to have a certain causal impact on my children – to cause them to fare well, or at least to cause them to have certain dispositions which will increase the likelihood of their faring well – depends on what happens after my actions. And obviously,

[4] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 495.
[5] Jenkins, 'Dead and Gone', p. 233.
[6] Jenkins, 'Dead and Gone', p. 234.
[7] Jenkins, 'Dead and Gone', p. 234.

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I might well die immediately after these actions, before they have had any effect on my children. Similarly, whether I now do things that will make people remember me after my death depends on whether or not people actually do remember me after my death. The role of these future events is not only epistemic: they not only *reveal*, but are part of what *determines* whether my attempts were successful. As a result, Jenkins's version of desire satisfactionism, too, is in fact committed to the view that posthumous events can affect my welfare level now; wacky or not, it is Jenkins's own view.[8]

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[8] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

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