

Should we Feel Pity for someone Dying Young? 'The Human Predicament' by David Benatar

Post by “Don” of November 4, 2023 at 8:43 AM

[Quote from Blank Emu43](#)

I can't wait to read your reply! I've read a lot of your posts and I always learn something new. 😊

That is very kind of you to say. The others jumped right into the deep end of this discussion, so I'll try to add some complementary thoughts to theirs.

Admittedly with brief moments of backsliding due to my religious acculturation (I'm working on it), I believe Epicurus was absolutely correct to hammer on the fact that death is truly non-existence for the one that dies. After a person dies, they do not exist. It's even hard to say the sentence "they do not exist" is factual because it implies the subject "they" experiences some kind of action of the predicate "do not exist." We definitely cannot say "So-and-so is dead"! There is no "state of being dead" unless we acknowledge that it is simply a metaphorical way of saying not existing. Death is the end of consciousness, sensation, cognition, and everything. "Death is no thing to us" conveys A LOT in a short sentence.

But I'm dodging the question, aren't I?

Quote from : original question

If a child dies young, would you pity him/her (or at least feel remorseful that the child couldn't live longer)?

The question presupposes a particular life the child would have led. Had they lived, what if the child had a terrible accident and fell into an irreversible coma if they lived a year after they died? What if five years after they died, they were visiting the Grand Canyon and had an accident and fell to their death? You get the idea. The question presupposes a good long life where the child experienced all the good things life has to offer, and none of us are guaranteed that. Some of our life is by chance. Epicurus was also not a fan of predicting the future, so prognosticating what the non-existent potential life not lived is not a fruitful pursuit. Would I share this line of thought with grieving parents or family? No, I probably would not. This may be how I would process the tragedy.

Which moves into how one may try to process this. Epicureanism acknowledges that the death of a friend or loved one or family member is going to "bite." There is nothing wrong with feeling

grief, unlike the Stoics who teach that losing a child should no more affect one than breaking a tea cup. There is nothing wrong with deeply feeling the loss and sadness. But... Epicureans should not let grief overwhelm them. That isn't healthy. We need to turn to the memories that bring us both joy for the experience and sadness that the person is gone.

Philodemus's *On Death* appears to have discussed this general topic in the lost and fragmentary early portion of his book, but here is a taste of that:

TEXT AND TRANSLATION

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[they] will win no great ... thought concerning ... the [future], emptily ... foolishly ... dying ... [12.31] ... pitiable,³⁸ but an old man who has found nothing naturally good, [convinced that he will carry off (?)] all of his [expectations] of the future. [12.34] For in what respect is (one) to pity a young man ... considering, [as] Metrodorus³⁹ commands Pythocles, [how many] (good things) he has obtained,⁴⁰ though he is no more than eighteen [years] old⁴¹ rather than one who has lived the life [of an old man (?)], unsuspecting ... he should become ... of every kind? [13.3] [And when it is possible] in a finite time both to win and to enjoy the greatest (one) of them,⁴² as [he] demonstrated, one who goes by the appellation “young” will not in addition,⁴³ [when he has] this, require even infinity,⁴⁴ never mind the life of an old man:

It talks about the teenage Pythocles, but the hammers home the idea that one is never too young to learn to live well.

So, to paraphrase Epicurus, I've prattled on long enough. Suffice to say that I don't think one should pity the potential life that isn't going to exist. There's no way to prognosticate what good or bad might have been. But feel the sting of grief and loss *for the living* and cherish memories.

That's my belated off the cuff remarks. As Cassius says, I reserve the right to revise or extend my remarks later.