

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

Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2023 at 5:12 AM

To some extent the problems inherent in the phrasing "The only sense in which the child being dead is bad is in the pain it brings to those still living" is the reason for the selection of one of the four "points of emphasis" singled out here at the forum, which comes the letter to Menoecus:

[Quote from Letter to Menoecus](#)

For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality.

"Good and evil" and "good and bad" are phrases that have to mean something in order to be useful. If they don't mean "approved or prohibited by god" or "approved or prohibited by Platonic form / absolutist views of virtue" then what use do those phrases have?

Epicurus grounds ideas of good and evil in sensation, which I think most of us agree means that good and evil comes through pleasure and pain. I think there's a passage where Torquatus says exactly that too (perhaps we even covered it last week in the podcast) and I know Frances Wright brings out the same point.

So anything which causes pain to you as a living being is bad for you, and anything which causes pleasure is good for you. When you no longer exist nothing is good or bad for you.

I think this statement of Don's is tempting (especially the part I underlined) but I think he is right to pull back from it in his last paragraph:

[Quote from Don](#)

Actual memories that can be remembered with joy are good. Imagining hypothetical what might have beens, while probably a natural outgrowth of grief, does not lead to healing.

Actually, regardless of whether he's right or wrong to pull back from it, I think it's a point worth discussing. Does (or can) imagining "hypothetical what-might-have-beens" lead to healing?

Some might draw an analogy here between the "hypothetical what might have been" to the issue of "the [Epicurean gods](#)," and say that Epicurus was constructing hypothetical god abstractions for "good" purposes. I personally wouldn't approach it that way because I don't think he saw the gods as pure hypotheticals.

But what about fictional stories of monsters or bad situations from earlier Greek mythology, such as Lucretius references repeatedly in his poem? Lucretius seems to get much productive use out of stories that he clearly does not believe ever happened. The reason I bring those fictional stories up is that they seem to me to be pretty close to "hypothetical what-might-have-beens" that are being used for healing. I am not sure we have any examples of Epicurus using "hypothetical bad things," but Lucretius sure does use them.

[I am close to deleting this whole post because I am not sure the point I am making is worth the space on the page, but maybe it will stir someone else's more productive way of expressing this.]

What I think is interesting to discuss is sort of the entire question of the use of heart-rending hypotheticals or "bad" fictional constructions and how we should consider (or IF we should consider) them as "bad." I don't think anyone would assert that Epicurus would construct an out-and-out falsehood like "hell" in the way that religion does, but what is the general status of hypothetical "what-might-have-beens" or "what-might-be's" as good or bad?

Thinking about the uses of "fiction" might lead to another perspective on: *"The only sense in which the child being dead is bad is in the pain it brings to those still living."*