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

Post by “Blank_Emu43” of November 1, 2023 at 2:20 AM

Note: I am not certain if this is the correct place for this thread, apologies if it isn't.

A Seventh-day Adventist friend of mine is reading *The Human Predicament* by David Benatar for university. I have never read the book but according to her the author disagrees with Epicurus that death is nothing to us. While the author believes that life is meaningless, death is still bad because it takes away the ability to experience good things in life.

The book asks this question:

> Quote
>
> If a child dies young, would you pity him/her (or at least feel remorseful that the child couldn't live longer)? If you do feel pity, you acknowledge a certain badness in death, namely the inability to continue experiencing good things. If death isn't bad in some way, then people shouldn't feel pity for someone who doesn't get to live a 'full' life.

My friend did also send me a picture of the book that includes an excerpt from Epicurus's Letter to Menoikeus, which I will quote here:

> Quote
>
> ... concepts of 'harm' and 'bad' are not identical. What constitutes harm is arguably even more contentious than what constitutes badness. Fortunately, it is not necessary to engage the more contested question whether death harms the person who dies. For death to be a feature of somebody's predicament, it would be sufficient that death is bad for that person. I shall focus on that question.
>
> There are a number of arguments for the conclusion that death is not bad for the person who dies, but consider first what Epicurus himself had to say in support of this conclusion:
>
> 'Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. 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. For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no trouble when it comes is but an empty pain in anticipation. So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.'
>
> In this passage, Epicurus is counselling a certain attitude to death, namely, the attitude of indifference.

That's all the text on that page. I wanted to add that in as well because it gives us a better idea as to how the author is thinking. Especially claiming that Epicurus is counselling an 'indifferent' attitude to death, which sounds Stoic.

So, how should we as Epicureans feel about a child dying since they didn't get to live past childhood and experience more good things in life?

Post by “Don” of November 1, 2023 at 7:19 AM

> Quote from Blank_Emu43
>
> Note: I am not certain if this is the correct place for this thread, apologies if it isn't.

No need to apologize at all! This is a perfect spot for this question (and even if it wasn't, Cassius and Kalosyni are adept at moving threads around.)

This is a *very* good question. I have thoughts, but I'm not going to just write off-the-cuff on this one. I think we're going to have to think about a potential life vs the non-existence of the one that died. More later. Thank you for initiating the conversation!

Post by “Cassius” of November 1, 2023 at 9:10 AM

> Quote from Blank_Emu43

> So, how should we as Epicureans feel about a child dying since they didn't get to live past childhood and experience more good things in life?

I think like most of us being confronted with a child dying would cause Epicurus to think any number of things, but I feel certain that among them he would feel feel sadness for just the reason stated here.

Epicurus said that life is desirable, and that means that longer life is also desirable, even if the pleasures involved are "variation" of pleasures already experienced. There's no need to dramatize the issue by referring to a child dying -- life is desirable - period, so long as you don't know for sure that the extra time life will not be more painful than pleasurable.

Beyond that I am sure that the particular circumstances of why the child has died, what could have been done to prevent it, etc., would all be worthy of comment by Epicurus.

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 1, 2023 at 9:20 AM

I'll venture to say a few things "off-the-cuff" so to speak...

This is a "therapuetic" element of Epicurean philosophy which helps remove unnecessary anxiety. I would say that **it is to be applied to oneself** -- **to one's own fears regarding one's own death.** You aren't tamping down any feelings of fear, but rather reasoning through "what is" and this can take time. I think it could take several years of working with this to recalibrate your internal representation of "what death is". And notice how the Letter to Menoeceus says: "Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us."

The other part of this is understanding the nature of pleasure. When we correctly understand pleasure, and we see how our own life no matter how long or how short it is, is permeated by the correct understanding of pleasure and the correct practice of the enjoyments of life, then we don't need to feel sad if we ourselves are dying at a young age.

Now when it comes to another adult person, they may not have come to this way of thinking and so they may feel great anxiety regarding death. However, perhaps children have a different perpective "on life and death" - often times they have a kind of fearlessness since they aren't fully enculturated yet (I base this on a story I heard of how a young girl with cancer was not afraid at all).

Post by “Cassius” of November 1, 2023 at 9:32 AM

I am going to have to come back later for more extended comment but I note that the question uses the word "Pity" and I think that in itself is a deep question -- made famous by Nietzsche - as to the status and desirability of "pity." Compassion, pretty clearly yes, is all over Epicurean texts. Is "pity" the same thing?

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 1, 2023 at 12:27 PM

> Quote from Kalosyni
>
> Now when it comes to another adult person, they may not have come to this way of thinking and so they may feel great anxiety regarding death. However, perhaps children have a different perpective "on life and death" - often times they have a kind of fearlessness since they aren't fully enculturated yet (I base this on a story I heard of how a young girl with cancer was not afraid at all).

Instead of pity, it seems that the natural response that would arise, toward those we love, would be compassion and so we might want to comfort them if they feel anxiety toward the thought of dying. Also, parents who are about to lose a child (or have lost a child) might feel a lot of anguish, and there isn't much that we can do except to say "I am here for you if you need anything".

In my mind "pity" is somewhat artificial and based on abstracted ideas/ideals. Where as compassion that is directed toward action would be PD5 -- acting according to necessity for the best life.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 1, 2023 at 5:48 PM

Similar to comments above by Cassius and Kalosyni , I question the relevance of "pity" here -- especially with regard to the deceased. Grief (sadness) for the loss, and compassion for other grievers -- absolutely. But I don't know how "pity" comes into it (and I agree with Kalosyni's take on pity, generally).

Post by “Cassius” of November 1, 2023 at 6:10 PM

Still thinking about this one I think we all would agree that Epicurus would not think that being sad about the death in any way benefits the deceased. I suppose as I think about it myself the primary issue would be a reflection on the cause of the situation hopefully leading to a response by the appropriate people to try to make sure the situation is not repeated. But as far as feeling pity or sorrow "for the child" it would be more "for the situation.". Definitely an interesting question.

Of course there is a Vatican saying on this too -

> Quote from Cassius
>
> VS66. Let us show our feeling for our lost friends, not by lamentation, but by meditation.

Post by “Blank_Emu43” of November 4, 2023 at 4:00 AM

> Quote from Kalosyni
>
> The other part of this is understanding the nature of pleasure. When we correctly understand pleasure, and we see how our own life no matter how long or how short it is, is permeated by the correct understanding of pleasure and the correct practice of the enjoyments of life, then we don't need to feel sad if we ourselves are dying at a young age.

This is what I was thinking. Epicurus mentions in letter to Menoikeus that the wise man chooses the most pleasurable food instead of the greatest amount, and that he'd do the same when it comes to life. Would it be right to say that a person who lives for five years can have the same amount of pleasure in their life as someone who lives for eighty years? I guess you could argue that the person who lives for five years has a more pleasure-filled life than someone who lives for eighty, simply because they most likely wouldn't have experienced as much pain in their life.

> Quote from Kalosyni
>
> Now when it comes to another adult person, they may not have come to this way of thinking and so they may feel great anxiety regarding death. However, perhaps children have a different perpective "on life and death" - often times they have a kind of fearlessness since they aren't fully enculturated yet (I base this on a story I heard of

> how a young girl with cancer was not afraid at all).

That could be true. Speaking from experience because I did have Leukaemia when I was 3-years-old for three years. I was never afraid of death but I also didn't know why I had to get chemotherapy or why I went to the hospital often. I knew I was different from other kids my age, but the ignorance of the situation meant I wasn't afraid of dying because I didn't know that that was a possibility. If I were to get it again or some other cancer, I'd know what the outcome could be, but I wouldn't be afraid anyway since I discovered Epicurus and his philosophy (and before that, Stoicism).

And if we do feel sad either for the child or maybe 'for the situation' as Cassius said, does that mean we are acknowledging that death is bad? Which is what the author is getting at. If so, then that would mean Epicurus is wrong in stating that death is nothing to either the living or the dead.

> Quote from Don
>
> This is a very good question. I have thoughts, but I'm not going to just write off-the-cuff on this one. I think we're going to have to think about a potential life vs the non-existence of the one that died. More later. Thank you for initiating the conversation!

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

Post by “Cassius” of November 4, 2023 at 6:08 AM

> Quote from Blank_Emu43
>
> Would it be right to say that a person who lives for five years can have the same amount of pleasure in their life as someone who lives for eighty years?

I would say that we can't be sure of that (I wouldn't argue that a shorter life necessarily means less pain) but I would definitely argue that this observation **could** be true, depending on the circumstances of the person. It's easy to think of people who live long lives with a negative attitude who seem (at least to us) to be suffering the whole way through. In contrast it's also easy to think of people who "die young" but seem to have had a positive upbeat and happy attitude during most of that shorter life. I'd definitely choose the shorter happier life over the longer miserable life.

> 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.

A good reminder that Don has been "slacking off" and still owes us his commentary on this one!

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:

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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] Metrodorus[39] commands Pythocles, [how many] (good things) he has obtained,[40] though he is no more than eighteen [years] old[41] 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.

Post by “Cassius” of November 4, 2023 at 9:07 AM

> Quote from Don
>
> Suffice to say that I don't think one should pity the potential life that isn't going to exist.

Seems to me this is sort of a continuation of our search for a good way to express the issue that *life is desirable, and we want it to continue under favorable circumstances if that is possible, and yet we don't get bent out of shape over the fact that continuous extension isn't possible.*

This is an issue that applies to we ourselves or to little girls or to whatever heart-rending example we'd like to pose as the hypothetical.

> Quote from Don
>
> 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.

This is similar to the way Frances Wright expresses it in chapter 10, and I'd recommend that as additional food for thought:

> Quote from A Few Days In Athens Chapter 10
> Display Spoiler

> But there is yet a pain, which the wisest and the best of men cannot escape; that all of us, my sons, have felt, or have to feel. Do not your hearts whisper it? Do you not tell me, that in death there is yet a sting? That ere he aim at us, he may level the beloved of our soul? The father, whose tender care hath reared our infant minds — the brother, whom the same breast hath nourished, and the same roof sheltered, with whom, side by side, we have grown like two plants by a river, sucking life from the same fountain and strength from the same sun — the child whose gay prattle delights our ears, or whose opening understanding fixes our hopes — the friend of our choice, with whom we have exchanged hearts, and shared all our pains and pleasures, whose eye hath reflected the tear of sympathy, whose hand hath smoothed the couch of sickness. Ah! my sons, here indeed is a pain — a pain that cuts into the soul. There are masters that will tell you otherwise; who will tell you that it is unworthy of a man to mourn even here. But such, my sons, speak not the truth of experience or philosophy, but the subtleties of sophistry and pride. He who feels not the loss, hath never felt the possession. He who knows not the grief, hath never known the joy. See the price of a friend in the duties we render him, and the sacrifices we make to him, and which, in making, we count not sacrifices, but pleasures. We sorrow for his sorrow; we supply his wants, or, if we cannot, we share them. We follow him to exile. We close ourselves in his prison; we soothe him in sickness; we strengthen him in death: nay, if it be possible, we throw down our life for his. Oh! What a treasure is that for which we do so much! And is it forbidden to us to mourn its loss? If it be, the power is not with us to obey.
>
> Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good? Shall we shut love from our hearts, that we may not feel the pain of his departure? No; happiness forbids it. Experience forbids it. Let him who hath laid on the pyre the dearest of his soul, who hath washed the urn with the bitterest tears of grief — let him say if his heart hath ever formed the wish that it had never shrined within it him whom he now deplores. Let him say if the pleasures of the sweet communion of his former days doth not still live in his remembrance. If he love not to recall the image of the departed, the tones of his voice, the words of his discourse, the deeds of his kindness, the amiable virtues of his life. If, while he weeps the loss of his friend, he smiles not to think that he once possessed him. He who knows not friendship, knows not the purest pleasure of earth. Yet if fate deprive us of it, though we grieve, we do not sink; Philosophy is still at hand, and she upholds us with fortitude. And think, my sons, perhaps in the very evil we dread, there is a good; perhaps the very uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes; perhaps all our pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption. What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns,

> and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness. This, then, my sons, is our duty, for this is our interest and our happiness; to seek our pleasures from the hands of the virtues, and for the pain which may befall us, to submit to it with patience, or bear up against it with fortitude. *To walk, in short, through life innocently and tranquilly; and to look on death as its gentle termination, which it becomes us to meet with ready minds, neither regretting the past, nor anxious for the future."*

Post by "Godfrey" of November 4, 2023 at 4:21 PM

One way to process the death of a child is to understand that, just as my being dead is nothing to me, being dead is nothing to the child. They no longer exist and so aren't missing out on any hypothetical pleasures. The pains that they may suffer before dying are a different discussion, and those pains may be heartbreaking.

If it was our child, after the initial grief has mellowed, we will probably often feel sadness when we think of what the child would be doing if they had lived. We see somebody else their age and maybe feel sadness or envy that our child isn't alive, experiencing various joys, and thereby bringing us various joys. We will always have emotions regarding the child, but these have nothing to do with any actual future the child might have had: we have no way of knowing what that might have been. The only sense in which the child being dead is bad is in the pain it brings to those still living.

To my mind, both we and the child can only experience physical reality (which is both bodily and mental, since the mind is physical). So there is no point in wracking one's brain as to whether there is a loss of potential for something which will never occur and, at best, is only an abstract projection of something that might have occurred.

Post by "Godfrey" of November 4, 2023 at 4:27 PM

This paper by Emily Austin has an interesting take on death which might be pertinent.

(Can't remember where I got this; I'm not sure if I'm re-posting what somebody else posted or not...)

Post by “Don” of November 4, 2023 at 10:56 PM

> Quote from Godfrey
>
> They no longer exist and so aren't missing out on any hypothetical pleasures. The pains that they may suffer before dying are a different discussion, and those pains may be heartbreaking

Well said.

> Quote from Godfrey
>
> The only sense in which the child being dead is bad is in the pain it brings to those still living.

Agreed, however, I'd rephrase that to say:

The only sense in which the child's current nonexistence is bad is in the pain that thinking what could possibly have been brings to those still living. 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.

I want to add that I have no clue as to how I would react in this scenario, nor do I even really want to entertain the notion. It brings pain. But Epicurus did encourage his students to meditate on death, to dig into it, to internalize the fact that "death is nothing." We all have wrestle with our own mortality as well as every person's we know and love. This is tough stuff everybody, but necessary.

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

Menoeceus:

> Quote from Letter to Menoeceus
>
> 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 discussiing. 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.*"

Post by “Don” of November 5, 2023 at 6:38 AM

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

You raise some interesting points. To add a little more context, I was specifically referring to thinking things like "If only X were alive, they would be graduating from high school and going off to college. X wanted to be a doctor when they were [pick an age when few people really know what they'll do]. I know they would have been a great doctor...etc." That kind of thinking is a rabbit hole of despair. *Maybe* something more healthy would be "X always loved to pretend they were a doctor. I remember them hitting my knee with their little plastic hammer and listening to my heart with the toy stethoscope...etc." Remembering things that actually happened rather than torturng oneself with regrets and prognostications that can never be. If those regrets and prognostications bring pain to the one doing the regretting and making up "little X would be doing ABC IF they were alive...", those things are "bad" by virtue of the pain they bring. If, on the other hand, the living person uses X's possible path to medicine to create a foundation to send other children to medical school and takes pleasure in that endeavor, it could be positive to imagine "what might have been." It all comes round to context.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 5, 2023 at 10:50 AM

I posted this elsewhere, but since Godfrey seems on the same track, I'll repost here (re the Austin article posted above):

She argues cogently from the source material to the following conclusion – which she sums up thusly: “I have argued that Epicurus does not believe all forms of the fear of death are irrational and eliminable. At least one fear – the fear of violent death caused by others – is brute and must be managed politically.” And: “In sum, I argue that Epicurus believes there is a fear of death that does not disappear, which we can control with due care and with close attention to the social environs.”

My thought is that, from a modern point of view, we might distinguish between that “brute fear” – which is likely part of the evolutionarily inherited “survival response,” which is a natural response, of physiological/neurological nature, to an immediate perceived threat – versus “maladapted” fears (which I’ll call “anxiety”), which are both unnatural and irrational (e.g., that I won’t be able to afford that trip to Rome, or that my girlfriend will break up with me … .)