

## Reevaluating the Nature of Death:

### A Critical Examination of Feldman's Reconstruction of the Epicurean Argument

In a chapter from his book, "*Confrontation with the Reaper*," Feldman critiques Epicurus' assertion that nothing inherently negative befalls us after death. However, it is essential to note that the Epicurean argument is more nuanced than Feldman suggests. In this chapter, Feldman undertakes a comprehensive revision of the Epicurean argument, incorporating numerous assumptions supported by evidence to comprehend it. This multiplicity of revisions makes it challenging to trace how Feldman distorts the original Epicurean argument.

In this paper, I will endeavor to reconstruct Feldman's line of reasoning, focusing on his conclusion, which posits that death, by depriving the deceased of the intrinsic value of life, introduces an extrinsic evil. According to this view, had death not occurred, the person would have continued to enjoy the intrinsic value of life. However, it is arguable that death does not deprive a person of the intrinsic good inherent in life because, without death, one would still have the opportunity to experience the intrinsic value of life. This perspective finds support in the examples I present to counter Feldman's conclusion: the cases of a cancer patient, a devout Christian, and a Buddhist philosopher who all met their demise.

Feldman focuses on a specific type of death: the premature demise. He firmly establishes this by stating, "Death, especially premature death, is almost universally agreed to be one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a person" (127). This perspective on death allows Feldman to juxtapose two contrasting viewpoints regarding the nature of

death. On one hand, there are "ordinary people who view death as one of the greatest misfortunes," a stance that Feldman characterizes as "wholly irrational" (127). On the other hand, the Epicureans believe that "death is not a misfortune for the one who dies" (128). In his philosophical argument against the Epicurean perspective, Feldman adopts the role of an ordinary person, arguing that Epicurus, a philosopher, is mistaken in his assessment.

Feldman presents the Epicurean argument against death as evil, asserting that death holds no significance to us because being deceased is devoid of sensory experience. This version of the argument, articulated in Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus, encourages us to "accustom ourselves to the belief that death is nothing to us. All good and evil are based on sensation, but death is the absence of sensation... So death, the most dreadful of all ills, is nothing to us since as long as we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we no longer exist. Therefore, it is of no concern to the living or the dead; for to the living, it is not present, and the dead are no longer" (128).

In essence, since death is not experienced while we are alive, and life ceases to exist when we are dead, a wise person should not be troubled by death, as the sensory experience of death is absent. Feldman suggests that this assumption is supported by a more concise version of the argument, in which Epicurus concludes that "death is nothing to us; for that which disintegrates lacks sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us" (128). Based on these initial premises, Feldman believes that Epicurus concludes that "death is not a misfortune for the one who dies" (129) because the argument is rooted in the idea that once we are dead, we no longer experience pain or suffering. However, Feldman finds this conclusion somewhat unclear and proposes a

provisional interpretation as simply stating that "being dead is not detrimental to one who is deceased" (129).

Feldman contends that the previous conclusion lacks clarity due to the distinction between "death is no misfortune for the one who dies" and "being dead is not detrimental to one who is deceased." In the Epicurean argument, the sentence's subject is a noun, while in Feldman's revision, it becomes a state. Furthermore, in the Epicurean argument, the patient is someone actively undergoing the process of dying, whereas, in Feldman's reinterpretation, the patient is in a passive state of being dead. Feldman argues that Epicurus is not addressing the process of dying, which can indeed be a distressing experience, but rather the state of being deceased. However, this interpretation poses a problem because the noun "death" does not equate to the state of "being dead."

As Feldman quotes, it is uncertain whether Epicurus is asserting that the state of being dead is not a misfortune for the one who dies or if he means that death, as a noun representing the act of dying, is not a misfortune for the one who dies. This distinction is crucial because while Feldman will later elaborate on the various implicit assumptions he identifies within the Epicurean argument, he assumes that readers already agree with the assumptions he has imposed upon the Epicurean argument. Consequently, this underlies the conclusion he derives from critiquing his assumptions about the Epicurean argument, which he perceives as implicit.

Feldman examines the Epicurean argument's underlying premises after what might have been either a conscious or an unconscious line of reasoning. Specifically, he identifies a "termination thesis," a concept he asserts to have already refuted elsewhere. As

Feldman defines it, this thesis posits that "when a person dies, he or she ceases to exist" (130). Feldman assumes that it is evident that Epicurus adheres to this doctrine because Epicurus mentions in the Epicurean argument that "when death comes, then we do not exist" and that the deceased "is no more" (131). Nonetheless, this assumption poses a problem because it does not necessarily follow that from the statements "we do not exist" and "the dead are no more," Epicurus intended to convey the termination thesis, which asserts that we altogether cease to exist upon death. Epicurus might have meant that when death arrives, we no longer exist in the same manner as before, but we still exist in some altered form. He could suggest that the deceased are no longer the same as they were in life but still retain some form of existence, albeit different from their previous state. Feldman's belief that it "seems" clear Epicurus meant this does not necessarily make it unequivocally clear, yet Feldman proceeds with this assumption, considering it to be established.

In contrast to his previous two assertions—those concerning the termination thesis and the noun-to-state transition—Feldman supports his claim that an implicit hedonist assumption is underlying a premise of the Epicurean argument. He clarifies that, according to the Epicureans, hedonism is a "doctrine that posits pleasure as the sole intrinsic good for an individual" and asserts that other elements "are considered good for an individual only since they are connected to his or her pleasure" (131). Feldman believes that because "we naturally interpret hedonism as a doctrine stating that the only inherently good things for an individual are their own pleasurable experiences," one might mistakenly equate these

pleasurable experiences with pleasure itself. However, this assumption carries a potential flaw. It may not necessarily follow that a pleasurable experience is equivalent to pleasure.

According to Feldman's Epicurean perspective, a pleasurable experience represents an extrinsic occurrence that encompasses intrinsic pleasure but does not equate to it. The core doctrine revolves around the belief that pleasure is the intrinsic good, while the external experience is merely a conduit to this pleasure. Therefore, the proposition that "the only things that are good in themselves for a person are his or her own pleasurable experiences" should not be conflated with the proposition that "pleasure is the sole intrinsic good" and that an experience is good "only insofar as it is connected to his or her pleasure." This is because a pleasurable experience is distinct from intrinsic pleasure in the Epicurean framework.

The preceding assumptions about the Epicurean argument prompted Feldman to revise it. In this revised version, he posits that perhaps the Epicurean argument aims to establish that since the state of being dead lacks the experience of pain, it cannot be considered detrimental to a person. This revision can be broken down into the following premises:

1. Each person ceases to exist at the moment of death.
2. If (1) is accurate, no one experiences pain while deceased.
3. If no one experiences pain while deceased, then the state of being dead is not a painful experience.
4. If being dead is not a painful experience, it is not detrimental to the deceased person.

5. Therefore, the state of being dead is not detrimental to the person who is deceased (132).

Feldman assumes that the first premise of this revised argument relies on the termination thesis, which Epicurus states as, "when death comes, then we do not exist" (132), a claim that, as previously discussed, hinges on an assumption he imposes upon the Epicurean argument. He further assumes that the second premise, while not explicitly articulated in the Letter, is either implied or can be inferred from it and is, in his view, evidently valid (132). The third premise, although not explicitly found anywhere, is believed by Feldman to be inherently true (132).

Feldman also posits that the fourth premise may be a direct consequence of Epicurus' hedonistic perspective. If one agrees with the notion that "pain is the sole intrinsic evil for an individual," it follows logically that "since being dead is not a painful experience, it is not detrimental to the one who is deceased." In essence, Feldman has restructured the Epicurean argument into a series of premises laden with implicit assumptions that culminate in a conclusion that he believes reflects the intended conclusion of the Epicurean argument. However, it becomes apparent that this conclusion is, in fact, a result of Feldman's revisions to the Epicurean argument, setting the stage for his subsequent critique.

Feldman explores what he perceives as Epicurus' misconceptions with this revised version of the Epicurean argument. While acknowledging the possibility of raising various concerns about different premises, Feldman opts to direct his attention solely to the fourth premise for the time being. This revised premise posits that if a painful experience does

not accompany being dead, it is not detrimental to the deceased individual. Feldman contends that a central tenet of hedonism, as he sees it, hinges on the belief that pain is intrinsically evil, whereas the experience itself is not intrinsically wrong; instead, it acquires its badness extrinsically under its association with the intrinsic pain of the experience. Conversely, if an experience is connected to pleasure, it becomes extrinsically good due to its relationship with the intrinsic good of pleasure. These thoughts ultimately lead to the conclusion that the experience, in and of itself, is value-neutral. Feldman asserts that this core aspect of hedonism, which posits a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value, is underpinned by what he perceives as a "fundamental confusion" between intrinsicity and extrinsicity (133).

Feldman contends that the hedonist is mistaken in the belief that pleasure and pain possess inherent goodness and badness independently, while experiences derive their value solely from their relationship to the intrinsic qualities of goodness and badness. To illustrate his point, Feldman presents an example: he suggests that a hedonist might not categorize consuming a poisoned candy as intrinsically evil because it does not entail a painful experience. Instead, the hedonist might assert that eating candy is intrinsically good because it generates pleasure. However, Feldman's argument here rests on a problematic assumption. He equates eating the candy, which provides a pleasurable experience, with pleasure itself, presuming that a hedonist would concur with this equation.

Furthermore, Feldman assumes that a hedonist would consider eating the candy extrinsically sour for the person due to its association with subsequent painful

experiences, which the hedonist would deem intrinsically evil (134). Yet, Feldman overlooks a crucial distinction: painful experiences, as understood by hedonists, are not intrinsically evil for the individual because pain alone is intrinsically wrong, and experiences are considered extrinsic to this intrinsic value. Therefore, Feldman's argument does not align with the fundamental principles of hedonism.

Feldman extends his imposed framework of intrinsicality and extrinsicality to the interpretation of the term "bad" in the fourth premise of his revised version of the Epicurean argument. He concedes that "death is not inherently bad," yet he asserts that his perspective all along has been that "death is extrinsically detrimental to the person who is deceased" (135). He argues that if we interpret "bad" in the fourth premise to mean that "being dead is not extrinsically detrimental to the person who is deceased," then the argument's conclusion must be that "death is not extrinsically detrimental to the one who dies." Consequently, if death is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically detrimental to the individual who has passed away, it logically follows that "death is not detrimental in any way to the person who dies" (135). Feldman regards this conclusion as false because he contends that "many things that are not painful experiences can still be extrinsically detrimental to the person who undergoes them." He further likens death to "eating a delicious but poisoned candy," which, although not inherently a painful experience, is linked to pain in a manner that renders it extrinsically detrimental (135).

The issue here lies in how the Epicurean argument, as Feldman presents it, asserts that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies. This statement differs from claiming that being dead is not a misfortune for the deceased. Feldman's introduction of

assumptions regarding intrinsicity and extrinsicity to the Epicurean argument further complicates matters, leading to confusion surrounding the assumption that Epicurus' hedonism equates a painful experience with pain itself. As a result, Feldman inadvertently critiques his revised conclusion of the Epicurean argument without recognizing it. If he acknowledged this, he would need to argue that since death is not pain—meaning death is not intrinsically evil—it must be extrinsically detrimental to the one who dies. The conclusion would be interpreted this way: "Death is extrinsically detrimental to the one who dies." This perspective aligns with Feldman's assertion that death, "while not constituting a painful experience," is connected to pain in a way that renders it "extrinsically detrimental" (135). However, a critical issue arises when one considers that if pain is intrinsically evil and experience is only extrinsically bad, equating a painful experience with pain is problematic. An experience is only considered flawed when linked to pain's intrinsic nature. Therefore, a painful experience cannot serve as an intrinsic bad that leads to later extrinsic pains because pain and a painful experience cannot be equated.

Feldman raises a critical point by continuing his examination of the term "bad" within the context of the fourth premise in his revised Epicurean argument. He postulates that if "bad" in the fourth premise signifies extrinsic badness, the argument is flawed and requires revision. While he concedes that death is not inherently flawed because it is related to pain, and only pain is intrinsically evil, he contends that death can be considered extrinsically flawed because it is associated with subsequent pains. To explore this revised perspective, Feldman introduces a "causal hypothesis." This hypothesis posits

that "if something is extrinsically detrimental to an individual, it is detrimental because it leads to later intrinsic detriments for that individual" (135). If death is indeed extrinsically detrimental to an individual, it is detrimental because it paves the way for later intrinsic detriments. From this point, Feldman concludes that if the hypothesis is valid, death cannot be extrinsically detrimental to everyone because "anything triggered by a person's death must occur after the person's death." Once an individual has passed away, they can no longer experience suffering or pain; hence, "a person's death cannot be the cause of any of their subsequent pains" (135). In summary, Feldman's argument concludes that death cannot be attributed as the cause of any pain experienced by the deceased individual.

Building on his revised Epicurean argument, with the causal hypothesis now introduced as an assumption, Feldman revises the argument again to claim the following:

1. Each person ceases to exist at the moment of death.
2. If (1), then no one experiences any pain while deceased.
3. If no one experiences pain while deceased, then death does not lead to any intrinsic detriment for the deceased individual.
4. If death does not lead to any intrinsic detriment for the one who is deceased, then death is not extrinsically detrimental for the deceased individual.
5. Therefore, death is not extrinsically detrimental for the deceased individual.

Feldman proceeds to scrutinize each of these premises anew. He posits that the first premise aligns with the termination thesis. He deems the second premise as "self-evident" (136). He links the third premise to Epicurus' hedonistic stance, emphasizing pain as an

intrinsic detriment. The fourth premise is connected to the causal hypothesis, which Feldman believes "appears reasonable" (136). Hence, the resulting conclusion is that "death is not extrinsically detrimental for the individual who is deceased." Feldman, however, regards this conclusion as contentious because, if accepted, it would imply that "death is not detrimental to the individual who has passed away," which he finds "untenable" (136). Feldman contests a premise suggesting that something extrinsically detrimental to an individual must cause intrinsic detriments for that individual. He contends that things can be extrinsically detrimental to an individual for different reasons. One such reason he presents is the deprivation of pleasures. Feldman argues that "certain things can be detrimental to us, even though they are not inherently painful experiences," and they do not necessarily lead to any painful experiences. Instead, they can be detrimental because they deprive the individual of pleasures they would have otherwise experienced had death not intervened (138).

Due to his dissatisfaction with the perceived restrictiveness of the causal hypothesis, Feldman introduces a new principle called "EI." This principle, denoted as EI, posits that "something is extrinsically detrimental to an individual if and only if that individual would have been intrinsically better off if it had not occurred" (139). Feldman contends that death is extrinsically detrimental to an individual if and only if that individual would have been intrinsically better off had death not occurred. He believes EI offers a more reasonable perspective on the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic detriment (139). However, this proposition presents a challenge. It is unclear that an individual whose death did not occur would be experiencing pleasure. Feldman equates

pleasure with a pleasurable experience, suggesting that if death had not occurred, the person would not have been deprived of pleasurable, extrinsically good experiences. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the person would have experienced pleasure, an intrinsic good, if death had not occurred. This distinction will become more apparent as the argument unfolds.

The successive revisions made to the Epicurean argument by Feldman are indeed perplexing, as he has repeatedly imposed assumptions upon it. However, when we examine the Epicurean argument presented by Feldman, it becomes apparent that it conveys the idea that the dying process is not a misfortune for the dying person. Dying itself, which is not intrinsically detrimental, is not considered a misfortune for the individual because, at the precise moment of death, the person lacks sensations that could make them perceive the intrinsic detriment required for death to be considered a misfortune. Consequently, death is not extrinsically detrimental for the dying person since it does not lead to the deprivation of an intrinsic good at death. Feldman may argue that death deprives an individual of the intrinsic good associated with the experience of life.

However, it is essential to note that a life experience is not intrinsically good; instead, it is an extrinsic experience that derives its goodness from its connection to something intrinsic. Therefore, death is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically a misfortune for the deceased person. Consequently, as Feldman contends, it is not accurate to assert that "the evil of death is a matter of deprivation" because it "deprives an individual of intrinsic value." This assertion is flawed because a life experience is not intrinsically good,

and it remains uncertain whether "the pleasure an individual would have enjoyed if they had not died" (140) would indeed be present had the individual's death not occurred.

Ultimately, Feldman finds himself casting accusations of shortsightedness upon Epicurus, contending that the Greek philosopher failed to anticipate the seemingly implicit assumptions that Feldman has identified in the Epicurean argument. He asserts that "Epicurus erred in believing that he only needed to demonstrate that nothing intrinsically bad occurs to us once we are deceased" (140). However, Feldman goes astray by imposing unwarranted assumptions regarding intrinsicality and extrinsicality upon the Epicurean argument. Even if these assumptions are granted for the sake of Feldman's argument, they may not independently lead to the conclusion that Feldman presents. Epicurus' perspective was that since death is not a misfortune for us, it holds no significance. Yet, ensnared by his assumptions regarding intrinsicality and extrinsicality within the Epicurean argument, Feldman contends that Epicurus has misconstrued the argument. In summary, Feldman finds himself critiquing the assumptions he has superimposed upon the Epicurean argument, mistakenly believing that he is challenging Epicurus. However, the argument he is contesting is not the Epicurean argument but his revised rendition.

While I have tried to articulate my concerns regarding Feldman's persistent revisions of Epicurus' argument, my primary aim is to scrutinize the conclusion he ultimately arrives at after introducing numerous imposed revisions. Specifically, I intend to focus on his assertion that death is detrimental because it robs the deceased individual of the intrinsic value of life and the enjoyment they would have experienced had death not

occurred. To illustrate my perspective, I will provide three examples: a terminally ill cancer patient, a devoted Christian, and a contemplative Buddhist philosopher.

Consider a scenario: I find myself on my deathbed, grappling with the throes of stomach cancer. Bile seeps from my mouth as my stomach shuts down, and I endure excruciating pain. While I do not argue that death is stripping away the intrinsic value of the life I once had before falling ill, the reality is that this value is not necessarily evident at the moment of death. I might have been slowly dying on my deathbed for weeks or even months, wrestling with relentless agony. It is a formidable challenge to persuade me that my death is ultimately robbing me of an intrinsic good associated with life, particularly when life may have seemed far from good at the time of death. Considering the grim diagnosis and the terminal stage of my illness, it is questionable whether life, as I experienced it in the preceding months, possessed any intrinsic goodness. Thus, Feldman's conclusion that my death is undesirable because it deprives me of an intrinsic value of life is tentative and inconclusive.

While Feldman contends that death deprives me of an intrinsic value of life, it cannot be conclusively asserted that my death inflicts an extrinsic harm upon me, implying that, had I not passed away, I would have relished an intrinsic value of life that is positive. In fairness, Feldman anticipates and addresses this counterargument. In his own words, he acknowledges that "it may seem as though I am asserting that death is invariably detrimental to the individual who passes away" (140). However, he makes an exception for a scenario involving a "very old and unhappy person," for whom death may be viewed as a "blessing." In such a case, death is not considered extrinsically harmful but beneficial

for the individual because they "would have been in a worse state if death had not intervened" (141).

For illustration, suppose the previous life-threatening example does not adequately address the matter. Instead, let us consider the perspective of a devout Christian who firmly believes that after their earthly life ends, they will ascend to heaven to experience eternal peace of mind. While it is not my contention that my death does not entail the loss of an intrinsic value associated with an excellent earthly life, assuming it was indeed a fulfilling existence, it becomes rather challenging to persuade me that my death is depriving me of an intrinsic value of life that is positive. This skepticism arises from my profound conviction that the heavenly afterlife promises an abundance of intrinsic goodness and surpasses the value of my earthly life, according to my Christian beliefs. Following my faith, the time spent in the heavenly afterlife is anticipated to be replete with incomparable goodness and surpass the quality of life on earth.

Given this perspective, Feldman's conclusion that my death is unfavorable because it deprives me of an intrinsic value of life appears overshadowed by the more excellent intrinsic value of life in the heavenly afterlife, which promises far more substantial goodness for me. Therefore, Feldman's conclusion remains tentative and inconclusive, implying that my death inflicts an extrinsic detriment upon me. The truth is that had I not experienced death, I would not have enjoyed a superior existence on earth compared to the immense goodness awaiting me in the heavenly afterlife.

Indeed, while Feldman does not extensively delve into the concept of an afterlife in his critique of the Epicurean argument, it is worth considering the perspective offered by

Brueckner and Fischer in their discussion on the nature of death in "Why Is Death Bad?" In their words, they present the notion that, although it is conceivable that an individual facing a terminal and agonizing illness might view death as an event not to be lamented, a belief in an afterlife can significantly influence one's perception of death. In cases where an afterlife is believed to entail eternal torment, death may be seen as a negative outcome, whereas the prospect of experiencing eternal bliss in the afterlife may lead one to regard death as a positive event (213). However, it is essential to acknowledge that the existence of an afterlife remains a highly contentious issue, and it is entirely plausible to reject the notion of an afterlife altogether. Therefore, it becomes necessary to formulate an understanding of death that does not hinge on the presupposition that there are experiences beyond death (213).

For illustration's sake, suppose the previously presented religious example does not adequately address the matter. Instead, let us consider a scenario where I adhere to a non-theistic philosophy, such as Buddhism. In this context, the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu posits that the concept of self can be fundamentally reduced to ontological and conceptual elements known as aggregates, with the self not extending beyond these aggregates. For the sake of this discussion, let us imagine that Vasubandhu also applies a similar reductionist approach to the concept of death, contending that death does not encompass anything beyond its aggregates. In this perspective, one might even question whether death truly exists.

Now, the crucial question arises: Would Vasubandhu consider his ostensibly non-existent death to be depriving him of an intrinsic value associated with a not-really-

existing life, one that is deemed suitable, exceptionally when both "Vasubandhu" and his "death" can be conceptually and ontologically reduced to the impermanence of non-being? It becomes a formidable challenge to convince Vasubandhu that his "death" constitutes the deprivation of an intrinsic value of "life," significantly when his entire life and death are reduced to the impermanence of non-existent constructs. Once again, Feldman's conclusion appears to be tentative and inconclusive. While Feldman may argue that Vasubandhu's "death" deprives him of an intrinsic value associated with "life," it is not accurate to claim that Vasubandhu's "death" inflicts extrinsic harm upon him. This is because it is not the case that, had Vasubandhu not experienced "death," he would have enjoyed a more significant existence than the transient goodness of a non-existent self and life, per his philosophical beliefs.

Hence, Feldman's assertion that death is inherently harmful due to its deprivation of an intrinsic value in life, which is supposedly good, remains, at best, tentative and falls significantly short of offering a conclusive argument. This conclusion relies heavily on many assumptions superimposed upon the Epicurean argument. Further exploration into this topic could delve into a more comprehensive understanding of what the Epicurean argument truly represents. Additionally, it could encompass a deeper exploration of relevant epistemological and philosophical aspects of language to account for the extensive revisions made in Feldman's reconstruction of the Epicurean argument.

As the current discussion stands, it becomes apparent that while Feldman may express a desire to scrutinize various aspects of the premises within the Epicurean argument to arrive at his contrived conclusion, it remains far from certain whether he is

not, in fact, the one who should be engaged in a nuanced examination of the nature and essence of death itself.

## Works Cited

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