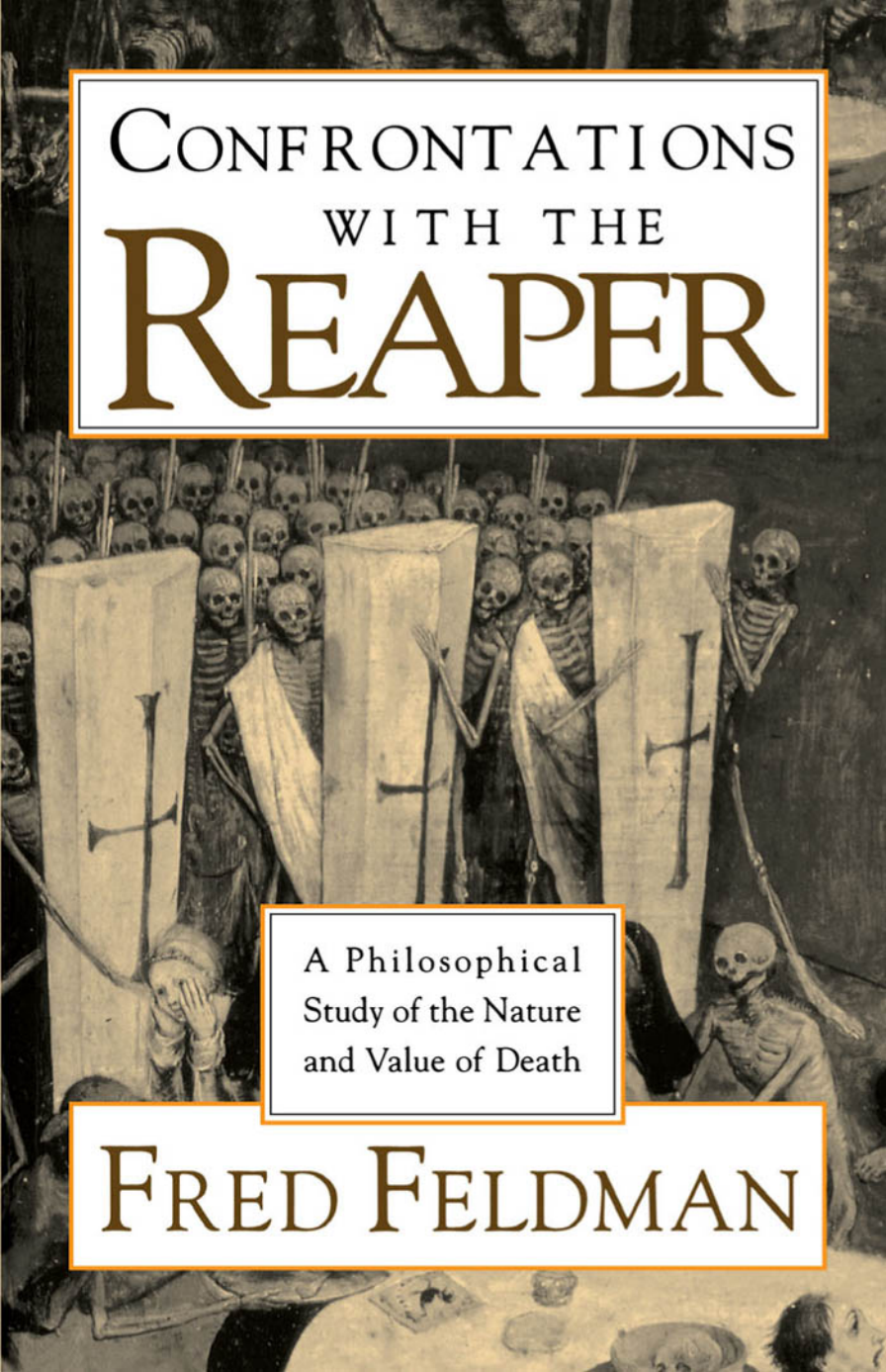
Confrontations with the Reaper



A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death

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Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland Madrid

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1994

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Feldman, Fred, 1941–
Confrontations with the reaper :
a philosophical study of the nature
and value of death / Fred Feldman.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-507102-6 ISBN 0-19-508928-6 (pbk)
1. Death. 2. Life. 3. Abortion. 4. Suicide.
I. Title. BD444.F44 1992 128′.5—dc20 91-3640

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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Epicurus and the Evil of Death

Let us begin our reflections on the axiology of death by asking an interesting (if somewhat grim) question: "What are the greatest misfortunes that can befall a person?" I suppose that most of us would list, among the great misfortunes, such things as these: suffering enormous pain, as for example if one is tortured or if one endures some terrible illness; suffering enormous injustice, as for example if one is imprisoned for years for a crime one did not commit or if one is subjected to racial or other unjustifiable discrimination; suffering great humiliation, as for example if one is discovered to be a worthless fraud, or if one is exposed as morally corrupt. There might be some disagreement about these claims, but I think there would be very widespread agreement that I have left out something I surely should have mentioned: death, especially premature death, is almost universally agreed to be one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall a person. Of all the great misfortunes mentioned so far, it is the only one each of us is sure to suffer.

In myth, literature, and art, death is represented as an ugly, menacing figure—the Grim Reaper. The Reaper has been feared and hated for as long as people have recognized his existence. Indeed, we think of the Reaper and what he represents as an especially mysterious, creepy evil—not something merely unpleasant. We find death so horrible that we avert our eyes in its presence; we rush to find a suitable blanket or coat to cover the body so that passersby will not see. In the case of a particularly unusual death, we may be at once fascinated and curious to learn more; but at the same time we are repelled and perhaps ashamed of ourselves for being interested in something so awful. Nothing, it would

seem, is more natural than to think that death is one of the worst misfortunes that can befall a person.

Yet there is a long-standing and respected philosophical tradition—Epicureanism—according to which all such attitudes are utterly irrational. Epicureanism was founded by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived from 341 to 270 B.C. and taught in his school, the Garden, in Athens. Epicureans claim that they do not fear or hate death, and they tell us that they do not think that death is a misfortune for the one who dies. They think that ordinary people, who view death as one of the greatest of misfortunes, are in this wholly irrational. This is not just a matter of opinion with Epicureans. They think they can *prove* that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies. Let us look into this strange view.

Epicurus's Argument Against the Evil of Death

One version of one of the most famous arguments for this conclusion was presented by Epicurus in his "Letter to Menoeceus." The relevant passage is as follows:

> 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. . . . 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.
>
> . . . the wise man neither seeks to escape life nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. . . .[1]

In a passage that comes down to us as a mere fragment, Epicurus seems to present a highly compressed version of his argument about the evil of death. In that passage, he says:

> Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.[2]

Lucretius (99–55 B.C.) was a later advocate of Epicureanism and the author of a famous work, *De Rerum Natura* (or *On the Nature of Things*), in which he presents a somewhat inflated poetical statement of the main Epicurean doctrines. He offers what seems to be a slightly windy version of the same argument. It appears in this passage:

> Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, . . . For he whom evil is to befall, must in his own person exist at the very time it comes, if the misery and suffering are haply to have any place at all; but since death precludes this, and forbids him to be, upon whom the ills can be brought, you may be sure that we have nothing to fear after death, and that he who exists not, cannot become miserable, and that it matters not a whit whether he has been born into life at any other time, when immortal death has taken away his mortal life.[3]

While there are obviously important differences among these passages, and it might even be claimed that each of the longer passages contains several different arguments, it seems to me that there is one central argument that is pretty clearly present in all these passages. It is an interesting and puzzling argument. The general drift of the argument is fairly clear. It is based on the idea that once we are dead, we will feel no pain. From this, together with some subsidiary premises, Epicurus seems to derive the conclusion that death is no misfortune for the one who dies. I think that this argument provides the central backing for the Epicurean view about the evil of death.[4]

Let us begin by considering what the argument is supposed to prove. The conclusion of the argument is not entirely clear. It is stated in several different ways. Each is fairly vague: "Death is nothing to us"; "[death] does not concern [us]"; "[to the wise man] the absence of life does not seem to be any evil." In other passages, it appears that the point is that it is irrational to fear death; that the fear of death is empty and "vain." I shall provisionally understand the conclusion to be this:

5. Being dead is not bad for one who is dead.

Two preliminary points of clarification concerning the conclusion: First, let us distinguish between the process—sometimes long and painful—that leads up to death, and the state of being dead itself. As I tried to show in Chapter 5, it is not easy to define dying as a process (or, to avoid confusion, "dying2"). However, everyone will agree that while dying2, people always exist and are often in pain. On the other hand, once they are dead, people are never in pain, and perhaps they do not exist at all. In the passages I have cited, Epicurus does not attempt to show that there is nothing bad about *dying2*—the often painful terminal process that sometimes takes up the final days of life. Dying2 clearly can be a horrible experience, and the victim exists and sometimes suffers throughout. Rather, Epicurus seems to be talking about the state of being dead—the state one enters (if we can call it a state) after the process of dying2 has concluded; the state that takes place when we finally cease to be alive. This, he seems to be saying, is not bad for the one who undergoes it. Let us so understand the conclusion of his argument.

A second preliminary point is that the Epicureans surely do not mean to say that a person's death cannot be bad *for others*. One's friends may of course suffer as a result of one's death. I might suffer because my old friend is now dead. The Epicureans have nothing remarkable to say about this. The argument under consideration here is designed to show only that however bad it may be for others, being dead cannot be bad for the person who is dead. It must be admitted, of course, that if we were all convinced that death is not bad for those who are dead, then the burden of our own grief might be reduced a bit. I would be somewhat relieved if I came to believe that nothing bad has happened to my recently deceased friend. But this is a digression: the main point is that the argument purports to show that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies. With these points about the conclusion out of the way, let us turn to the premises of the Epicurean argument.

One premise in Epicurus's argument seems to be what I have called "the termination thesis." This is the doctrine that when a person dies, then he or she ceases to exist. This doctrine was the central topic of Chapter 6 above. I there tried to explain why I think it is false. However, it seems clear that Epicurus accepted this doctrine and used it as a premise in his argument, for he says

near the end of the first quoted passage: "when death comes, then we do not exist." And he also says, in the same context, that the dead ". . . are no more."

Another of the premises is implicit in the claim that "that which is dissolved is without sensation." I take this to mean that once we have gone out of existence (become "dissolved") we have no sensations. Since pain and pleasure are types of sensation, Epicurus undoubtedly means to imply that the nonexistent do not suffer any pain or enjoy any pleasure. In the context of the argument under consideration, the relevant point is that if a person does not exist at a certain time, then he or she does not suffer pain at that time. Although Epicurus does not explicitly assert this premise in the "Letter to Menoeceus," he does state it elsewhere in corresponding passages, and in any case it seems implicit in the Letter. Lucretius seems to be appealing to this premise when he says that "he who exists not, cannot become miserable." Furthermore, it seems an obvious truth. Thus, I have no compunctions about considering it a suppressed premise here.

Another of the premises seems to be a form of *hedonism,* the doctrine that pleasure is the only thing that is good in itself for a person, pain the only thing that is bad in itself for a person. According to this view, other things, such as money or health, are good for a person only insofar as they are connected to his or her pleasure. Similarly, other things, such as poverty or illness, are bad for a person only insofar as they are connected to his or her pain. If these things were stripped of their connections to pleasure and pain, they would be value-neutral. Epicurus's hedonism comes out fairly clearly in his claim that "all good and evil consist in sensation." Remarks Epicurus makes elsewhere confirm that he was indeed a hedonist and that he was inclined to express his hedonism with statements like the one cited. It is not an accident that we describe delicious meals as "Epicurean delights."

I suspect that we naturally take hedonism to be a doctrine about pleasure—the doctrine that the only things that are good in themselves for a person are his or her own pleasurable experiences. But hedonists typically endorse the other side of the coin as well. They also accept the view that the only things that are bad in themselves for a person are his or her own painful experiences. Maybe the Epicurean point is that since being dead is not a painful experi-

ence, it therefore cannot be bad for a person. While I have some doubts about attributing this premise to Epicurus, I think it is suggested by his remarks, and in any case it may be instructive to consider a version of the argument in which it appears. So let us consider a preliminary version of the argument:

Epicurus against the evil of death—I

1. Each person stops existing at the moment of death.
2. If (1), then no one feels any pain while dead.
3. If no one feels any pain while dead, then being dead is not a painful experience.
4. If being dead is not a painful experience, then being dead is not bad for the one who is dead.
5. Therefore, being dead is not bad for the one who is dead.

Before turning to evaluation, let us briefly review the premises of the argument. The first premise is based directly on the termination thesis. There can be little doubt that Epicurus relied on it, since he explicitly says that "when death comes, then we do not exist."

The second premise is one that Epicurus does not explicitly state in the Letter but which he does state elsewhere. It seems in any case to be implicit in the Letter. Furthermore, it seems to me to be clearly true. It merely says that if we stop existing at the moment of death, then we don't feel pain while dead. Surely, no one will want to claim that nonexistent persons can feel pain!

The third premise is not explicitly stated in any of the passages but seems in any case to be true. Since the dead experience no pain, being dead cannot be a painful experience for those who are dead.

The fourth premise may seem to be a direct consequence of Epicurus's hedonism. If we assume (with Epicurus and Lucretius) that pain is the only thing that is bad in itself for a person, then we seem to be committed to the conclusion that since being dead is not a painful experience, it is not bad for the one who is dead. (I will consider an objection to this premise momentarily.)

When formulated as I have here formulated it, Epicurus's argument is logically valid. That is, in virtue of the logical form of the argument, if all the premises are true, then the conclusion must be

true as well. Anyone who accepts all these premises but denies the conclusion contradicts him- or herself. So anyone who accepts all of these premises is committed to the Epicurean conclusion that being dead is not bad for the one who is dead. But, of course, we have yet to determine whether the premises are in fact true. Let us now turn to that project.

Difficulties for the First Version of the Argument

While I might want to raise various quibbles about various other premises, I want at the outset to focus on line (4), since it seems to me that this premise depends on a fundamental confusion. A central component of hedonism, as I formulated it above, is the view that painful experiences are the only things that are *intrinsically* bad for a person. That is, only pains are bad "in themselves" for a person. This view is consistent with the view that many other things can be bad for a person—so long as these other things are not *intrinsically* bad. Other bad things will be said to be *extrinsically* bad for a person. Thus, a hedonist surely can say that illness, poverty, injustice, and ignorance (to mention just a few obvious evils) are great evils for a person. But these things are not *intrinsic* evils according to hedonism. Their evil is derivative. They are evil only because they happen to be connected to pain.

To see the importance of the distinction, it may be instructive to recall some other Epicurean doctrines. Epicurus frequently insists that overindulgence in food or drink is on the whole a bad thing.[5] He realizes that such overindulgence might be quite pleasant. But since it inevitably leads to later pains, and these pains outweigh the immediate pleasures, the overindulgence is judged to be bad for the glutton—not intrinsically of course, since it is admitted to be pleasant. But extrinsically.

To sharpen this point, let us consider a case in which someone eats some tasty candy that has been contaminated with a slow-acting poison. Eating the candy is a pleasant experience. But it will cause serious pain later. A hedonist would not say that eating the candy is *intrinsically* bad for the person (because it is not a painful experience). Indeed, the hedonist will say that eating the candy is associated with many intrinsically good states. But the hedonist

can give sense to the statement that it would be bad for someone to eat the candy; he can say that eating the candy is *extrinsically* bad for the person. It is extrinsically bad for the person by virtue of the fact that it is connected with later painful experiences—and these painful experiences will be intrinsically bad for the person.

So there is an important distinction between intrinsic badness and extrinsic badness. Now we must attempt to draw out the relevance of this distinction to the argument. Notice that line (4) says that since being dead is not a painful experience, it is not *bad* for the one who is dead. But what does this 'bad' in line (4) mean? We might take line (4) as a whole to mean that since being dead is not a painful experience, being dead is not *intrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. But then, to maintain the validity of the argument, we would have to take the conclusion to mean that being dead is not *intrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. But this is no news. Most of us who think that death is bad for the one who is dead do not think that death is bad in itself. We think that death is bad for a person because of what it does to him or her; death is bad somehow indirectly by virtue of what it does to us. Surely, no one who accepts hedonism would be inclined to say that death is intrinsically bad.

Furthermore, the claim that death is not intrinsically bad seems to have no bearing on the claim that we shouldn't fear death; or that death is "nothing to us"; since obviously lots of things that are not intrinsically bad are nevertheless worthy of being feared and are "something" to us. Consider eating poison, for example, or living in a country in which seething racial hatred is about to emerge. All of these things are bad for us, and worthy of our fear, but none of them is intrinsically bad. Once we are clear about the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic badness, we will be happy to grant that death is not intrinsically bad. Our view all along has been that death is extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

The second option is to take (4) to mean that since being dead is not a painful experience, being dead is not *extrinsically* bad for the one who is dead. If we understand (4) in this way, then we can understand the conclusion, (5), to be the claim that death is not extrinsically bad for the one who dies. That would be genuinely

interesting and controversial, and it would support the further conclusion that death is not bad in any way for the one who dies. However, if we interpret (4) in this second way, it seems obviously false. Lots of things that are not painful experiences are nevertheless extrinsically bad for the one who undergoes them. Consider eating tasty but poisoned candy. Maybe death is like that. Maybe death, while not itself a painful experience, is connected to pain in such a way as to make it extrinsically bad.

My point, then, is this: 'bad' in line (4) of the argument is ambiguous. It might mean 'intrinsically bad'. But in this case the conclusion of the argument is uncontroversial. Most of us are willing to grant that death is not intrinsically bad. On the other hand, 'bad' in (4) might mean 'extrinsically bad'. In this case, (4) is clearly false. So the argument has to be revised.[6]

A New Version of the Argument

A natural reinterpretation of the argument might proceed by appeal to considerations such as these: Eating poisoned candy is bad for a person because it leads to, or causes, later pains. The same is true of gluttony or overindulgence. We might suppose that all extrinsic evils are like this. We might maintain that whenever something is extrinsically bad for a person, it is extrinsically bad for him or her because it leads to later pains. Since it will play an important role in the discussion to follow, let us take special note of this principle, which we can call "the causal hypothesis":

> CP: If something is extrinsically bad for a person, then it is bad for him or her because it leads to later intrinsic bads for him or her.

If CP is correct, then we can readily formulate a new version of the Epicurean argument for the conclusion that death cannot be extrinsically bad for anyone. Anything caused by someone's death must occur later than his or her death. But once he or she is dead, a person can never again suffer pains. Thus, a person's death cannot be the cause of any of his or her pains. Given CP, our new principle about the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic evil, it

follows that death cannot be extrinsically bad for anyone. Let us attempt to reformulate the argument, making use of this line of thought.

Epicurus on the evil of death—II

1. Each person stops existing at the moment of death.[7]
2. If (1), then no one feels any pain while dead.
3. If no one feels any pain while dead, then death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who dies.
4. If death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who is dead, then death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.
5. Therefore, death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

Once again, let us review the premises. Line (1) is just the termination thesis. It will not be debated here.

Line (2) seems obvious. If you do not exist at a time, you do not feel pain then. I will not debate (2) either.

Line (3) is a new premise. It is based directly on Epicurus's hedonistic thesis that pain is the only intrinsic evil for a person. Since pains are alleged to be the only intrinsic evils, and these cannot occur once a person is dead, death does not lead to any intrinsic evils for the one who dies. This seems plausible, once we grant the hedonistic assumption (and the assumption that we never live again after death). For present purposes, I grant both assumptions.

Line (4) is based on the causal principle, CP. According to that view, something is extrinsically bad for a person only if it leads to, or causes, things that are intrinsically bad for that person. So if death does not lead to, or cause, anything intrinsically bad for the one who dies, it cannot be extrinsically bad for the one who dies. That is what (4) says. It seems to make sense.

The conclusion of the argument is now the controversial and interesting claim that death is not extrinsically bad for the one who dies. Since I have already granted that death is not intrinsically bad for the one who dies, this conclusion is important. If it is established, we will be forced to agree that death is not bad in any way for the one who dies. I find that further conclusion unacceptable.

The Fallacy in the New Version

My own view is that this version of the argument is also fallacious. The fallacy is in line (4). As I see it, line (4) is based on a faulty conception of the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic evil. That faulty conception is embodied in the causal hypothesis itself, which says that in order to be extrinsically bad for a person, something must *cause* intrinsic evils for that person. I think this is an overly narrow view. Things can be extrinsically bad for a person for other reasons. Let us consider an example.

Suppose a young man is accepted by two colleges. We can call them College A and College B. After some reflection, he decides to attend College A. Suppose he spends four happy years at College A, but never studies any philosophy—because they do not offer any courses in philosophy at College A. Suppose he never learns anything about philosophy. Suppose, however, that he has outstanding aptitude for philosophy and that he would have enjoyed it enormously if he had been given the opportunity. He goes to his grave never realizing how much enjoyment he missed. If he had not gone to College A, he would have gone to College B, which offers many excellent philosophy courses. He would have become a philosophy major, and his life would have been much happier. In such a case, I would want to say that the fact that he went to College A was a misfortune for this young man. It's a pity; too bad for him. He would have been much happier if he had gone to College B.

For present purposes, one fact about this example is of crucial importance. It is this: although attending College A was bad for this young man, it was not in itself a painful experience, and it did not cause him any pain. Thus, the causal hypothesis is false. Some things are extrinsically bad even though they cause no pain.

Let us consider another example to illustrate the same point. Suppose a girl is born in a strange country—call it Country A. In Country A, they do not permit girls to learn to read and write. In this strange country, girls are taught to do laundry and raise children. Suppose this girl goes through life bearing children and washing laundry. Suppose she is reasonably satisfied, thinking that she has lived as a woman ought to live. She goes to her grave never

realizing what she has missed. Suppose also that she had very considerable native talent for poetry—that she would have been a marvelously successful and happy poet if only she had been given the chance. I would want to say that it is a great pity that this woman had not been born in another country. I would say that something very bad happened to her, even though she never suffered any pain as a result.

These two examples illustrate the same point. Some things are bad for us even though they are not themselves painful experiences, and they do not lead to any painful experiences. In each case, as I see it, the thing that is bad for the person is bad for him or her because it deprives the person of pleasures he or she otherwise would have experienced. In the first example, going to College A did not cause our young man any pain. It was bad for him because he would have been happier if he had gone to College B. Similarly in the second example: being born in Country A did not cause the woman any pain. Still, it was very bad for her. She would have been much better off if she had been born elsewhere. Thus, we must reject the causal principle, CP. It is too restrictive.

How Death Can Be Bad for the One Who Dies

It is reasonable to suppose that there is some connection between intrinsic value and extrinsic value. We have seen that the connection cannot be the simple causal connection expressed by CP. My own view is that the connection is more accurately expressed by this principle:

> EI: Something is extrinsically bad for a person if and only if he or she would have been intrinsically better off if it had not taken place.

It should be obvious that EI generates much more plausible results in the two cases I have mentioned. Going to College A is extrinsically bad for the young man in the first example, according to EI, because his life would have contained more pleasure if he had gone elsewhere. The same holds true in the second example. Being born in Country A did not lead to any pain for the woman in that

example. But she would have experienced more pleasure if she had been born elsewhere. So CP is false. EI is a more plausible view about the connection between intrinsic and extrinsic evil.

Now let us consider the application of my proposal to the case of death. Suppose a boy is undergoing minor surgery, and as a result of some foul-up with the anesthesia, he dies while unconscious on the table. His death is utterly painless, since it occurs while he is unconscious. Nevertheless, we might think his death is a terrible misfortune for him. My proposal (unlike CP) permits us to say this. We may imagine that he would have been quite happy on the whole for another fifty years if he had not died when he did. Then this boy's life contains less intrinsic value for him, measured hedonistically, than it would have contained if he had not died when he did. Therefore, according to my view (which is summarized in EI), this person's death is extrinsically bad for him even though it is not itself a painful experience, and it causes him no pain.

Notice what I am *not* saying. I am not saying that the boy's death is bad for him because it is a painful experience. That would be absurd. Death is not a sort of pain. Furthermore, I am not saying that his death is bad for him because it leads to, or causes, something intrinsically bad for the boy. I am assuming that pain is the only thing that is intrinsically bad for a person and that this boy cannot possibly suffer any pain while he is dead. So the evil of death cannot be explained in that way. What I am saying is that his death is extrinsically bad for him because his life is on the whole intrinsically less valuable for him than it would have been if he had not died when he in fact died. The evil of death is a matter of *deprivation;* it is bad for a person when it deprives him or her of intrinsic value; if he or she would have been better off if it had not happened.

Now let us return to the second version of Epicurus's argument. Take another look at line (4). It says:

> 4. If death does not lead to anything intrinsically bad for the one who is dead, then death is not extrinsically bad for the one who is dead.

In my view, this is where Epicurus went wrong. I think Epicurus has shown (given his hedonism) that nothing intrinsically bad happens to a person while he is dead. And I think it is also correct to

say that death does not lead to, or cause, any painful experiences for the one who dies. But it is a mistake to conclude that death is not bad for the one who is dead. Death might be very bad for the one who is dead. If death deprives him of a lot of pleasure—the pleasure he would have enjoyed if he had not died—then death might be a huge misfortune for someone. More explicitly, death might be extrinsically bad for the one who is dead even though nothing intrinsically bad happens to him as a result. In my view, death would be extrinsically bad for him if his life would have contained more intrinsic value if he had not died then.

So my view is that Epicurus went wrong in thinking that all he had to prove was that nothing intrinsically bad happens to us once we are dead. He thought that it would follow that "death is nothing to us." Given the traditional causal conception of the connection between intrinsic and extrinsic evil, he would be right. But the traditional conception is mistaken. Things can be extrinsically bad even though they do not cause any intrinsic evil. Depriving us of intrinsic good can make something extrinsically bad as well. And that is why death is extrinsically bad. It is bad (when it is bad) because it deprives us of the intrinsic value we would have enjoyed if it had not taken place.

I would like to conclude this chapter by emphasizing some points of clarification.

1. It may appear that I am claiming that death is always bad for the one who dies. This is in fact not my view, and it is not entailed by my view. My view is that the badness of a given death depends on what would have taken place if that death had not taken place. Consider the case of some very old and unhappy person. Suppose that further life for this person will inevitably contain more pain than pleasure. Suppose he dies peacefully in his sleep. Then his death is not extrinsically bad for him. In fact, it is good for him. Such a death is extrinsically good for the one who dies, according to EI, because he would have been worse off if it had not taken place. His life, as a whole, would have contained more pain if he had lived longer. In such a case, as I see it, death is a blessing. I will consider this issue and its implications further in Chapter 13.

2. Since Epicurus tried to convince us that it is irrational to fear death, and I am denying some Epicurean views, it may appear that I am claiming that we should fear death, or that it is rational for us

to think of death as the Grim Reaper. This is not entailed by my view. Epicurus claimed that death is not bad for the one who dies. He also claimed that we should not fear death. I have debated the first point. I have argued that Epicurus was wrong about the evil of death. According to me, death is sometimes bad for the one who dies. So far as I can tell, nothing follows about whether we should fear death. Perhaps Epicurus was right about the fear of death. Maybe it is never rational to fear death, even though it is sometimes a great misfortune. Nothing I have said here commits me to any view on that topic.

But I am inclined to say this: if the fear of death makes your life worse for you than it would have been if you had not feared death, then the fear of death is also bad for you. You would be better off if you did not fear death. I would recommend, then, that if possible, you stop fearing death. No matter how bad death may be for you, you will be better off if you don't fear it.

3. I have claimed that in many cases, death is very bad for the one who dies. I have also been working within the framework of a hedonistic theory of value. Thus, it might seem that I am committed to the view that being dead is painful for the one who is dead.

Once again, nothing I have said here commits me to any such view. I agree with Epicurus that the dead suffer no pain. Being dead is not painful. Death itself does not lead to any pain. Nevertheless, in my view, death may be bad for the one who dies. It is bad, to repeat, precisely when it deprives the decedent of intrinsic value.

Perhaps there is something useful to be gleaned from Epicurus's remarks. There may be some people who fear death because they suspect that it will be a painful experience. Epicurus convincingly showed that any such person has an utterly irrational fear. Death—genuine death, that is, and not some other event that has been confused with death—will not be painful. If you fear death because you think it will hurt, then your fear is irrational. If possible, you should stop worrying about death. On the other hand, if you fear death and think it will be bad for you because you think it will deprive you of happiness, you might be right. In this case, I think, the fear of death has a perfectly rational basis.

I am by no means the first to have claimed that death can be bad for the one who dies. Nor am I the first to have claimed that

the badness of death is primarily a matter of deprivation. The approach is well known.[8] However, many philosophers have claimed that the deprivation approach is unacceptable. They have presented a variety of arguments designed to show that it fails. These objections to the deprivation approach are the subject of Chapter 9.