

Can we die a good death?

British poet and author Kate Clanchy recently wrote in *The Guardian* about her experience of helping her parents die a good death, in the midst of a pandemic where dying is portrayed as the worst of all ills. She writes about the last year she spent by their side, both of them ill (not with COVID), talking with them about how they wanted to die should that moment come, and making practical arrangements. Both her parents' desires were to avoid heroic medical interventions and, if they could, die at home. She stood by their decision.

Is dying bad? Is living good?

Is that 'good', is that 'bad'? Most of us have a preconception that dying is bad and that everything should be done to avoid it. But is that so, is dying a 'bad' thing?

In one of his discourses, Epictetus explains how to apply our preconceptions correctly. He starts by pointing out that we tend to think as 'good' what goes our way, that which is in our own benefit.

If it is to my benefit to have a piece of land, it is also to my benefit to take it from my neighbour. If it is to my benefit to have a

cloak, it is also to my benefit to steal one at the baths. Hence the origin of wars, revolts, tyrannies, and plots. - Epictetus, Discourses 1.22

In short, my preconception of 'good' acts as a filter which I apply to reality and which makes me see it in the light that suits me. It is not because things are good that I desire them, wrote Spinoza a few centuries after Epictetus, it is because I desire them that I describe them as good. I desire to be alive and so the opposite, being dead, is a bad thing.

"Where then, are we to place our good? To what kind of reality are we to apply that name?", asks Epictetus. His answer: "To what lies in our power." And what lies in our power is sound judgment. Realizing that there is no such thing as "good" in and of itself, catching our impressions as they arrive and asking ourselves if we should accept them and why.

'Good' is not outside. Neither is 'bad'

The Stoics understood something long before modern philosophers (namely Immanuel Kant) provided a full demonstration of that: that there is no

way for us, as human beings, to know the nature of things in themselves; and so 'good' cannot lie in things themselves, or events. Rather, it lies in the representations we have about them. These representations are human representations, which makes Epictetus say that good is what lies within our power, that is, in the way we think about things, which starts with the way we look at the world, the preconceptions we decide to give credit to.

If death is neither good nor bad, how we consider death, how we talk about it, how we treat people who are dying is what can be qualified as good or bad. This is surely the kind of discussion we should be having now, not only as individuals or as a family, but as a society.



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