

Denial of Benefits: Reply to Cordeiro-Rodrigues

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In my 2024 article, “Epicureanism and Euthanasia” [1], I argued that, inasmuch as Epicurean arguments for the harmlessness of death successfully show that death is not and cannot be a harm to the person who dies, they also thereby show that death is not and cannot be a benefit to that person, even if she is experiencing intense and prolonged suffering and has little to no chance of recovery. If death is not and cannot be a benefit to a person who dies, even someone experiencing intense and prolonged suffering and for whom there is little to no chance of recovery, then any justification for ending that person’s life early on the basis that it provides some good or benefit for that person is fundamentally mistaken. We cannot justify such actions with reference to any good or benefit accrued to the person whose life is ended early. Not even the cessation of that person’s suffering can be a good or benefit for that person, since, upon her death, she is no longer there to receive or enjoy it.

In his thoughtful and well-crafted reply, Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues raises two main objections to my argument [2]. In my reply to his reply, I respond to each in turn. Cordeiro-Rodrigues first argues that I have misunderstood what Epicureans mean by death. As Cordeiro-Rodrigues points out, death can mean two different things. It can mean biological death, the cessation of life processes, or it can mean the end of a person’s existence, that point beyond which the person no longer exists. My argument relies on the assumption that these two meanings of death coincide. A person ceases to exist when her life processes cease. But, according to Cordeiro-Rodrigues, for Epicureans, these two meanings do not coincide. At least according to Epicurus, a person does not cease to exist when her life processes cease. A person’s existence ends only at bodily disintegration, when the atoms of which she is composed break

apart or disperse. Importantly, when Epicureans argue that death cannot harm the person who dies, it is death as bodily disintegration that they have in mind, not cessation of life processes [2]:

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What effect does this have on my argument? If these two meanings of death can come apart, and a person does not cease to exist at the cessation of her life processes, then this allows her to enjoy, experience, or otherwise serve as the subject for, the absence of suffering that follows shortly thereafter. In short, if there is a window, no matter how narrow, between the removal of the person's suffering and the end of her existence, then there is a window during which she can benefit from that removal of suffering. Only after her body disintegrates would death no longer provide any kind of harm or benefit for her [2]: 3.

There are three points that I would like to make in response to this first objection. First, while it may be true that some classical Epicureans, including, it seems, Epicurus himself, hold that death, in the sense of the end of a person's existence, occurs only at bodily disintegration, I do not see why contemporary Epicureans would need to take on this additional aspect of classical Epicureanism. In the way that I was using the term, an Epicurean is just anyone who finds at least one of the three main Epicurean arguments for the harmlessness of death a plausible reason not to fear death. In the same way that contemporary Aristotelians might retain certain aspects of Aristotle's thought but reject others, contemporary Epicureans might retain these two core elements of Epicurus's thought, but reject everything else, including Epicurus's bodily disintegration theory of death. Indeed, contemporary Epicureans might have very good reasons to reject that particular element of Epicurus's thought. If Cordeiro-Rodrigues is right, then, according to Epicurus, whenever any one of my atoms separates from the others, I, who am essentially composed of just those atoms, cease to exist. And so, if there is any person there

afterward, that person is not me. Notice how radical this theory is. It would commit Epicureans to a kind of mereological essentialism, the view according to which no material object can survive a change in any of its parts. As Cordeiro-Rodrigues admits, this is an implausible theory of persistence for material objects, and it is even moreso as a theory of persistence for human persons [2]: 2, fn2. If, in order to make room for the possibility of a beneficial death, Epicureans were required to accept this implausible theory of persistence, then that would be a serious cost of the view. In that case, it would be better for Epicureans to abandon this element of Epicurus's thought and accept a more plausible biological theory of death, according to which persons die and cease to exist upon the cessation of their life processes.

My second point is that the possibility that persons might not cease to exist at biological death but might continue on as the corpses that are ordinarily left behind is a possibility that I already considered in my original article [1]: 439. When discussing the various limitations of my argument, I mention that the argument assumes the truth of the termination thesis, the thesis that persons cease to exist at biological death. I noted that if persons do not cease to exist at biological death but continue on as the corpses that are ordinarily left behind, then this leaves open a possible way around my conclusion. If a person does not cease to exist at biological death but remains for a brief period after her suffering is ended, then, for that brief period, she might serve as the subject for any good or benefit provided by the removal of that suffering. If Cordeiro-Rodrigues is right about Epicurus's theory of death, then Epicurus himself rejects the termination thesis and so would not accept my argument as I have formulated it in my original article. If Cordeiro-Rodrigues is right, Epicurus would escape my conclusion by way of that second limitation. But, as we have seen, Epicurus's alternative to the termination thesis is based on an implausible theory of material persistence, one that contemporary Epicureans would be

wise not to follow. So even if Epicureans can avoid the conclusion of my argument by denying the termination thesis, this is a limitation of the argument I have noted from the beginning. And if their preferred method for denying the termination thesis is to accept Epicurus's own implausible alternative, then this is not a promising means of escape.

My third point is that it is not enough to show that a person might survive the removal of her suffering brought about by the termination of her biological life. It is also not enough to show that the person might then be able to serve as the subject for some good or benefit which the cessation of her suffering provides. What must be shown is that in such a state, the person remains the sort of thing that can be benefitted or harmed. For even if the person does survive her own biological death, she may no longer possess the capacity to be benefitted or harmed in such a state.

This is especially true on the hedonistic theory of value espoused by classical Epicureans, as Cordeiro-Rodrigues himself notes [2]: 3. For classical Epicureans, including Epicurus himself, the only intrinsic goods are sentient goods, that is to say, pleasures. And the only intrinsic evils are sentient evils, that is to say, pains. Thus, if someone or something is incapable of experiencing pleasure or pain, then there is nothing that can be good or bad for that person or thing. There is no sense in which that person or thing can be benefitted or harmed.

As I wrote in my original article, if, upon her biological death, the person is neither conscious nor aware nor capable of any kind of sensory experience, then it is hard to see how her death, and the lack of suffering that it provides, could be something that she enjoys or experiences or otherwise benefits from [1]: 439. It is plausible to suggest, even if we do not accept the full-blown hedonistic theory of value espoused by classical Epicureans, that, upon her death, the person no longer has any interests or desires whatsoever. If that is right, then it is hard

to see how death (or anything else) could be any kind of benefit or harm to her in such a state. In short, a corpse just does not seem like the sort of thing that can be meaningfully benefited or harmed. And so, even if a person can survive her own biological death as a corpse, her survival in such a state would not affect the conclusion of my argument.

If I am understanding Cordeiro-Rodrigues's second objection correctly, then I think his point is this: the cessation of suffering brought about by ending a suffering person's existence can be a benefit to the person whose existence is ended not because the absence of suffering has positive value, but because it has zero value, and zero value is still greater than the negative value or disvalue of the person's prolonged suffering [2]: 3-4.

But I think that this second objection makes the same mistake that the deprivationist does [1]: 441-443. Even if the value of the absence of suffering is greater than the negative value or disvalue of the suffering, and even if, in that respect, the state of affairs in which the person's life is ended early and suffers no more is better than, or preferable to, the state of affairs in which the person's suffering is prolonged, that value or valuable state of affairs cannot be greater, or better than, or preferable for the person whose life is ended early. If the person ceases to exist upon the removal of her suffering, then any value that the absence of her suffering has cannot be valuable to her. We might say that there is overall more value in the state of affairs in which her suffering is not prolonged. But we cannot say that there is overall more value for the person in that state of affairs. The zero value that tips the scales in favor of the state of affairs in which the subject's life is ended early is only present when the subject herself is not. And thus, that zero value is not in any way valuable for her. Once again, I think that what Cordeiro-Rodrigues is sliding into is a kind of agent-neutral utilitarian calculation of the total value of the situation. If a state of affairs can be better or more valuable than some other state of affairs without there being some subject

for whom it is better or more valuable, then perhaps we can say that ending the suffering subject's life early is better or more valuable than continuing to let her suffer. But that is a very different sort of argument. That would be arguing for the termination of that person's life on utilitarian grounds, not on the grounds that it provides some good or benefit for the person herself [1]: 440-441.

To sum up, Cordeiro-Rodrigues has raised two objections to my Epicurean argument that death is not and cannot be a benefit to the person who dies, even someone who is experiencing intense and prolonged suffering and has little to no chance of recovery. First, he has challenged my assumption that persons cease to exist at biological death. According to Cordeiro-Rodrigues, classical Epicureans, including Epicurus himself, hold that persons cease to exist only upon bodily disintegration, which often comes later than biological death. Second, he has argued that even if the person ceases to exist at biological death, the cessation of her suffering that follows can still be of greater value to her than her continued suffering. And this is so because her lack of suffering, even in a state of non-existence, would be of zero value, while her continued suffering would have negative value.

While I am open to being persuaded that my Epicurean argument falls short, I remain unconvinced by Cordeiro-Rodrigues's objections. I still do not see how any kind of value, even zero value, can be attributed to a subject who simply does not exist. And even if the subject does persist beyond her biological death to serve as the subject of that value, I still do not think that she would be the right sort of subject to be capable of being benefitted or harmed in that sort of state. All the same, I thank Cordeiro-Rodrigues for his careful reading of my article and his intriguing suggestions for how an Epicurean might try to avoid my (admittedly counterintuitive) Epicurean-inspired conclusion.

References

1. Skrzypek, Jeremy W. 2024. "Epicureanism and Euthanasia." *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (Dec., 2024): pp. 433-446.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11017-024-09684-0>
2. Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Luis. 2025. "Euthanasia in Light of Epicurean Ethics and Metaphysics." *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, xxx.