

Opinion

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Death: Tragedy and what it cannot tell us.

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It is commonly thought that some deaths are more tragic than others. Does this mean that one life could be more valuable than another?

When a young person dies, we are usually told of the promise they showed as a person, and reminded how they were never able to experience so many of the joys of life. When we compare this to the death of an elderly or sick person we are reminded of how miserable their lives were and how they are now free of pain and that death is a good thing or at least less hurtful to us. Peter Singer and other modern philosophers suggest that the tragedy with which we view a death is indicative of an increase or decrease in the value of that life^[1].

In his article "Life's uncertain voyage"^[1], Singer attempts to link our feelings of woe with the value of life, by giving an example of a mountaineer wishing to trek the Himalayas. Singer gives four versions of his story. The first is one in which the mountaineer successfully completes his journey. In the second version, the mountaineer is struck down with illness within days of completing the difficult journey and must abandon the expedition. In the third, the mountaineer wishes to go but cannot afford to travel to Nepal. In the fourth and final version, the character never has any interest in trekking the Himalayas. The trek is of course an analogy of life's journey, the end of which is death. So, in the first version, the character achieves his life's goal and is happy. The second character is terribly upset that he got so close, but never achieved his goal. The third is a little upset that he didn't begin his trip. Finally, the fourth character has no idea that he missed anything. Singer suggests that the reason we feel so terribly when someone we know dies in their prime is because, like the individual in the second version of the story, they got so close to achieving their peak but never made it. Thus, we feel less pain when an infant dies because they have not made any plans yet, and we feel less pain when an elderly person dies because they have already passed their peak.

I find Singer's concept of the value of life interesting, but flawed. I will use some examples of my own to highlight this flaw. Where I believe this theory of "tragedy and value" runs astray is that we are asked to believe that everything we value about life itself resides in what we can hope to achieve during it. It is true that there are many admirable things that can be done in a life, and we mourn death more when it cuts short a life full of promise, than when it ends a life full of pain and illness; but this still leaves a few problems. These problems can be made apparent by using some rather unpleasant examples.

Hostage taking is becoming quite an issue at the moment with a backdrop of war and terrorism, and it raises a large objection to many life-valuing theories such as Singer's. Consider Singer's notion, that life steadily becomes more valuable as we approach our life's pinnacle and becomes less valuable after we have passed the pinnacle of our achievement. While we are in the prime of our life, it would seem a greater loss to die right there ^[1]. If this is so, it is strange that hostage negotiators always attempt to secure the freedom of the very old and very young first. It is much the same in rescue situations. Save the young and old first, leave the healthy ones (who have more to lose!) until later... surely this isn't right. Perhaps this argument is not complete, as there are other explanations for why you would leave those in their prime, the fit and healthy and full of almost fulfilled potential. Perhaps it is because they are more likely to recover from an ordeal if it is resolved; the elderly might just keel over on the spot, and the young may be scarred by the event. In a rescue situation, those in their prime may be able to survive longer under their own steam, thus the potential to rescue more people is greater. In this case, it might be argued that my example is imperfect.

Perhaps a different example will help to strengthen my point. Imagine watching detailed footage of a car accident in which two people die: one is a young child, around six years old, and the other is a promising middle-aged philosopher. Which death would we find more distressing? Most people would suggest that the death of the child would be the most tragic. But why? Surely, the child does not have any plans in her head that could bring so much happiness to the world, such that her life is now worth more than the philosopher's. Why then do we feel so heartbroken when a child dies? Perhaps it is because they are helpless or innocent. But helplessness does not bring happiness nor does innocence. Helplessness, from a utilitarian perspective is surely a negative, rather than a positive feature of an individual. Furthermore, all things being equal, the young child will feel pain the same way that the philosopher does. So how does this fit into Singers model? Simply, it doesn't.

If Singer's method is correct, attributing value to life is based on how close we are to our life goals. The comparison of two lives ending in the same way should highlight the unequalness of the value of their lives, and indicate to us which life was worth more. This is clearly not so. In fact, it seems that in some cases we can view the death of those Singer classes as "less valuable" with more sorrow than we do the "most valuable". Thus, it appears that the tragedy which we attribute to a death is highly dependent on the circumstances of the death. Most importantly however, the fact that one death can appear more tragic in unusual circumstances, and another seem more tragic under natural circumstances, suggests that Singer may be conflating tragic circumstances with tragic outcomes. Take Singer's example of the aspiring Himalayan trekker ^[1]. The second version of the story contains both tragic outcome and tragic circumstance. The trek is cancelled (outcome) due to poor health (circumstance). The same is true of the third version. The trek is called off (outcome) due to lack of funds (circumstance). In the third version of the

story it is arguable whether having a lack of funds constitutes a tragic circumstance, but we can be sure that not having money is certainly less tragic than falling ill a day or two away from your goal. Thus, it is clear that the experience of getting close to a goal without achieving it is tragic, but the outcome remains an independent tragedy.

It still remains that some deaths do appear more tragic than others, and this may well be a result of the hopes and dreams thought of and fulfilled by the individual who passed. It may also be a result of the memories and emotional attachments people have with that individual. The loss of a close friend or family member constitutes a terribly tragic outcome. Yet, in an overwhelming and overarching event such as a disaster, the tragedy of the event itself overshadows all the minor details of life. It then becomes clear that there is nothing about the desires of a person that makes the tragedy of the outcome (their death) any more or less tragic than that of any other person. Thus, we must assume that the value of life is independent of the tragedy with which we view a death (the tragic circumstance).

Put in as simple terms as I can muster, life must have value other than utility, because it is possible to mourn the end of a life more when there is no utility. Furthermore, tragedy cannot reveal anything about the value of a life, because death often represents two separate but overlapping tragedies, one of ending utility and the other of ending life.

As Peter Singer claims, living life is a journey, but life is not the journey itself. Life is more like the road we travel. The road is the level foundation upon which we all travel, the road does not lose value because we are walking slower than before, nor is the road worth any more or less, whether we drive a Ferrari or a Mini.

Reference:

1) Singer, P "Life's Uncertain Voyage" in Pettit P, Sylvan R, and Norman J (eds), "Metaphysics and Morality", Basil Blackwell: Oxford, (1987), pp. 154-172.