

Alleviating Death Anxiety in Epicureanism

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Classics

University of Otago

September 2020

Abstract

Eradicating the fear of death is a central concern in Epicurean philosophy. As hedonists, the Epicureans seek to pursue pleasure and avoid pain in order to achieve a life of *eudaimonia*. The fear of death is viewed as a particularly damaging form of mental pain, and the Epicureans go to great lengths to demonstrate that it is, in fact, irrational.

The ‘fear of death’ is a relatively broad term. It not only encompasses the fear of being dead, but also the fear of dying, the fear of mortality, and the fear of premature death. How adequately the Epicureans address each of these fears has been the subject of much debate. I argue that the Epicureans do successfully recognise and abolish these four strands of anxiety. They use a network of arguments to combat the multi-faceted nature of the fear of death. A close examination of these arguments reveals that they are deeply entrenched in the Epicureans’ underlying physical and ethical theories. The individual arguments each form one part of a holistic attempt to remove the fear that is seen to obstruct a life of pleasure. As such, the arguments must not be viewed independently, but rather as a collective whole. I demonstrate that the Epicurean efforts to alleviate death-related concerns are comprehensive, cogent, and internally consistent. Therefore, when Epicureanism is embraced as a whole, the fundamental goal of a pleasurable life that free from the fear of death is entirely attainable.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Sean McConnell, whose guidance over the last year has been invaluable. I would also like to extend my thanks to rest of the departmental staff here at Otago. Your advice and encouragement have made all the difference.

I am very grateful to my friends and family for all your tremendous support and for tolerating my philosophical ramblings. A special thank you to my parents and to my partner, whose faith in me never fails to inspire.

Abbreviations

<i>Cic. Fin.</i>	Cicero, <i>De Finibus</i>
<i>Cic. Nat. D.</i>	Cicero, <i>De Natura Deorum</i>
<i>Cic. Tusc.</i>	Cicero, <i>Tusculanae Disputationes</i>
<i>D.L.</i>	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>
<i>D.R.N.</i>	Lucretius, <i>De Rerum Natura</i>
<i>Ep. Men.</i>	Epicurus, <i>Letter to Menoecus</i>
<i>Ep. Hdt.</i>	Epicurus, <i>Letter to Herodotus</i>
<i>Pl. Phd.</i>	Plato, <i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Sent. Vat.</i>	Epicurus, <i>Sententiae Vaticanae</i>

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Introduction

The question of how to die well – and, crucially, without being plagued by fear – is a prevalent concern in the Greek philosophical tradition. A good death is seen as the culmination of the ultimate goal: a good life. This is expressed most famously in Plato's *Phaedo*, which details the death of Socrates. This death scene portrays a clear interest in philosophy's role in addressing the fear of death. Socrates lives his philosophy right up to the moment that he dies, laying out his reasoning for why one need not be afraid of dying. He and his companions discuss the separation of the body and the soul upon death (Pl. *Phd.* 64c2-65a3), and rationalise that our souls must be immortal (Pl. *Phd.* 69e6-107b10). Death is not the genuine end of one's existence. Rather, the soul survives death and is subject to moral judgement. Therefore, death does not warrant any anxiety so long as one has led a moral life. Those who are virtuous can expect to be rewarded after death and there is nothing to fear about that, while those who are wicked can expect post-mortem punishment, and consequently they will be afraid of death (Pl. *Phd.* 107c1-115a8).¹ Socrates, epitomising his own moral commitments right to the end, is able to meet his demise without fear: both his example and his arguments serve to alleviate the anxieties of his companions (and also the readers of the *Phaedo*), who should not fear death and should instead focus on pursuing virtuous lives (Pl. *Phd.* 115b1-118a17).

It is common for not only the life but also the death of a philosopher to be shown in accordance with their system of belief.² They must embody the very essence of their philosophy

¹ See Annas (1982) for an examination of Plato's eschatological myths.

² Diogenes Laertius describes the deaths of numerous Greek philosophers in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Some philosophers are said to have followed the precedent of Socrates in that their deaths upheld their philosophical beliefs. One version of Pythagoras' death has him allow his throat to be cut rather than escape by trampling a field of beans – beans being sacred, possibly owing to their resemblance to foetuses (D.L. 8.39). Other philosophers are depicted as having died in such a way that undermines their philosophical wisdom. Thales, known for his astronomy, is perhaps the most famous example of this: he is said to have tripped into a ditch while gazing up at the stars (D.L.

right to the end. The death scene of the Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus follows in this tradition.

According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus wrote the following letter on his deathbed:³

Τὴν μακαρίαν ἄγοντες καὶ ἅμα τελευταίαν ἡμέραν τοῦ βίου ἐγράφομεν ὑμῖν ταυτί. στραγγουρία τε παρηκολουθήκει καὶ δυσεντερικὰ πάθη ὑπερβολὴν οὐκ ἀπολείποντα τοῦ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς μεγέθους. ἀντιπαρετάττετο δὲ πᾶσι τούτοις τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν χαῖρον ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν γεγονότων ἡμῖν διαλογισμῶν μνήμη.

On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them; but over against them all I set gladness of mind at the remembrance of our past conversations.

D.L. 10.22

In this letter, Epicurus details how he is able to overcome the considerable pain of dying by recalling pleasurable past conversations with his dear friend Idomeneus. This death scene epitomises the ideal Epicurean attitude towards death and dying. As is the case with Plato's depiction of Socrates, Epicurus is easily able to dismiss the fear of death, owing to his commitment to his own philosophical doctrine. Epicurus is no exception to the goal of erasing fear in the face of death, but his approach exhibits certain key differences. Plato and Epicurus both share the conviction that rational arguments can alter belief, and that 'correct' belief dictates one's attitudes towards death.⁴ In contrast to Plato, Epicurus does not declare the presence of an afterlife or conceive the soul to be immortal. Moreover, there is no expectation of reward or

2.4). Diogenes the Cynic allegedly died after eating raw octopus (in accordance with the Cynic mandate to live as natural a life as possible) or by being bitten by a dog ('Cynic' being a figurative dog) (D.L. 6.76-77). Bion, a blasphemous sophist, is said to have been so afraid of dying that he repented on his death bed and engaged in superstitious activity in an effort to continue living (D.L. 4.54).

³ Translations of all Diogenes Laertius' texts are taken from Hicks (1958).

⁴ Epicurus states this quite explicitly in *Kyria Doxa* 12: Οὐκ ἦν τὸ φοβούμενον λύειν ὑπὲρ τῶν κυριωτάτων μὴ κατειδόμενα τίς ἢ τοῦ σύμπαντος φύσις, ἀλλ' ὑποπτευόμενόν τι τῶν κατὰ τοὺς μύτους. It would be impossible to banish fear on matters of the highest importance, if a man did not know the nature of the whole universe, but lived in dread of what the legends tell us. See also: *Kyria Doxa* 21: Ὅ τὰ πέρατα τοῦ βίου κατειδὼς οἶδεν, ὡς εὐπόροστον ἔστι τὸ <τὸ> ἀλγοῦν κατ' ἔνδειαν ἐξαιροῦν καὶ τὸ τὸν ὅλον βίον παντελῆ καθιστάν· ὥστ' οὐδὲν προσδεῖται πραγμάτων ἀγῶνας κεκτημένων. He who understands the limits of life knows how easy it is to procure enough to remove the pain of want and make the whole of life complete and perfect. Hence he has no longer any need of things which are not to be won save by labour and conflict. Cf. Pl. *Phd.* 65e5-66a10.

punishment upon death. Both the Epicurean worldview and concept of death are distinctive, resulting in different therapeutic strategies. Where some form of immortality in the afterlife is the pervasive understanding,⁵ the Epicureans view death as the *complete* end of life. Nothing persists after death, marking the absolute annihilation of a given individual. Fear in the face of death is not tied to concerns of post-mortem judgement, resulting in either reward or punishment, but the state of non-existence. The Epicurean notion of death is encapsulated by the famous claim:

ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ· τὸ δ' ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.

Kyria Doxa 2

This rejection of any possibility of post-mortem survival serves a dual purpose as a depiction of what death entails and as a demonstration of the correct attitude towards death, negating fear. While many philosophers promote composure when confronted by death, Epicurus' definition of death and his conviction of mortality inform a distinct strategic approach to countering the fear of death.⁶

The cogency and effectiveness of the arguments against fearing death presented in the extant Epicurean texts are the focus of this thesis. While the extensive writings of Epicurus

⁵ The general understanding in Greek religious practice was that the soul would survive death and descend to Hades (most notably depicted in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 11). The Pre-Socratics generally claim that the soul is immortal, with some such as Empedocles and Pythagoras arguing that the soul is subject to reincarnation (see Graham (2011) for selected fragments and testimonia). The soul is also immortal and subject to reincarnation in the Platonic tradition (see especially Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*, as well as his *Republic* for a description of the tripartite composition of the soul).

⁶ Democritus is said to have significantly influenced Epicurus' theory, especially with regard to atomism. See Sedley (1982), 176, as well as Warren (2002) and Morel (2009), 69-75. However, Epicurus is definitively the dominant voice in this tradition.

himself are largely lost, Diogenes Laertius has preserved several of Epicurus' letters in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, as well as a collection of key doctrines (*Kyriai Doxai*). These offer summarised expositions of Epicurus' atomist and hedonist theories, which are intimately bound up with the Epicurean perspective on death and dying. The Roman poet Lucretius is also a vital source, as he himself is a dedicated Epicurean. His widely discussed *De Rerum Natura* provides a detailed Latinised account of Epicurus' philosophical teachings on physics and ethics. The Epicurean arguments against fearing death are embedded primarily in these philosophical texts, some more explicitly than others. Two additional sources that feature less prominently in this thesis but are nonetheless relevant are the fragmentary works of Philodemus and Diogenes of Oinoanda. Philodemus was a first-century Epicurean philosopher, whose partially extant treatise *On Death* clearly reinforces the Epicurean arguments that are found elsewhere.⁷ He appears to begin with the usual atomist arguments concerning the mortality of the soul, before moving on to address worries regarding certain potential circumstances surrounding one's death.⁸ Diogenes of Oinoanda, meanwhile, is most well-known for his Epicurean inscription, discovered in the late nineteenth century.⁹ He states his intention for the inscription as an aid for the 'morally diseased', who are ignorant of Epicureanism.¹⁰ His inscription includes Epicurus' physical theory, ethical theory, several letters, maxims, and an epitome in defence of old age.¹¹ One final and invaluable source for the Epicurean arguments against death is the criticism offered by Cicero. Predominantly in *De Finibus*, but also in *Tusculanae Disputationes* and *De Natura Deorum*,

⁷ For an English translation, see Henry (2009). For analyses of *On Death*, see Sanders (2011), 211-235 and Tsouna (2007), esp. 239-311.

⁸ Henry (2009), xviii-xxii.

⁹ For an English translation of the inscription, see Smith (1993). For an in-depth discussion of the philosophy written by Diogenes of Oinoanda, see Hammerstaedt, Morel, & Güremen (2017).

¹⁰ Smith (1993), 122.

¹¹ Smith (1993), 145-426.

Cicero finds significant fault in the Epicurean perspective.¹² While he is clearly a hostile source, he offers explanation and insight into the philosophy which he is attempting to undermine. This thesis will primarily focus on the evidence provided by Epicurus and Lucretius, as the most reliable and complete sources for the arguments against fearing death.

In order to effectively evaluate the Epicurean arguments, it is necessary to first identify the exact fears of death that must be eradicated. The ‘fear of death’ is not a single, insulated fear. There are multiple aspects of concern that must be analysed. James Warren has suggested four distinct (but by no means mutually exclusive) strands of anxiety that are incorporated by the overarching ‘fear of death’:¹³

1. The fear of being dead
2. The fear of the process of dying
3. The fear of mortality (that one is going to die)
4. The fear of premature death

These four categories are specific enough to be easily distinguished from each other, yet broad enough to encompass all of the death-related concerns addressed by the Epicureans. These four fears will therefore act as the framework for this thesis. The arguments against each fear will be examined and assessed in detail. The Epicureans argue directly that the fears of being dead and of dying are irrational in light of their clearly established atomic and hedonist theories. The arguments against the fears of mortality and of premature death require more careful extrapolation, as the remedies for these concerns are deeply entrenched in the belief system that

¹² For discussions of Cicero’s philosophy in *De Finibus*, including his engagement with Epicureanism, see Annas & Betegh (eds., 2016).

¹³ Warren (2004), 4. Other scholars distinguish different sets of fears, such as Reinhardt (2002, 291), who includes the fear of the cessation of pleasure and the fear of dying while one’s life is incomplete. However, these two can easily and respectively be encompassed by Warren’s fear of being dead and of dying prematurely. More meticulous classifications used in the field of psychology include Hoelter’s (1979) ‘Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale’ and the ‘Fear of Personal Death Scale’ by Florian & Kravetz (1983), which respectively boast 8 and 6 types of death-related fears.

comprises Epicureanism. I will argue that the Epicureans recognised and addressed these four death-related fears as part of their advocacy for an ideal attitude and a holistic way of life. The ideal Epicurean attitude is a complete lack of anxiety in the face of death, secure in the knowledge that death cannot cause any harm. The way of life that the Epicureans promote is built on the premise that one should avoid all pain and pursue simple pleasures. They therefore simultaneously advise how to achieve pleasure and how to avoid the pain. The arguments against fearing death should be viewed as one component of this broader strategy.

The Epicureans' attempt to combat the fear of death has inspired criticism from both ancient and modern sources alike. Objections have been raised concerning internal consistency within Epicurean philosophy, as well as how adequately the arguments deal with the multi-faceted nature of fear. The most vocal ancient critic is Cicero, who accuses the Epicureans of asserting contradictory arguments and of not living according to their own philosophy.¹⁴ The first century Platonist, Plutarch, also seeks to challenge Epicureanism in his polemic *Against Colotes*, an early follower of Epicurus.¹⁵ Much of modern scholarship is similarly dismissive of the Epicurean arguments, but predominantly from an external perspective. The various arguments are often assessed in isolation and are found to be unintuitive or insufficient in their attempt to demonstrate that death is not harmful for the deceased. Brueckner and Fischer have repeatedly argued against the Epicurean position, claiming that death is harmful despite the lack of subject to experience it.¹⁶ This conclusion is pervasive in modern scholarship, although there is considerable contention regarding the exact nature of this harm.¹⁷ Notable scholars such as

¹⁴ See especially: Cic. *Fin.* Books I and II; *Tusc.* Book II; *Nat. D.* Book I.

¹⁵ See Inwood & Gerson (1994), 68-74 for relevant fragments.

¹⁶ Brueckner & Fischer (1986), 213-221; (1993), 327-331; (2013), 783-789; (2014a), 1-9; and (2014b), 325-330.

¹⁷ Brueckner & Fischer (2014a; 2014b) have engaged in a back-and-forth debate against Johansson (2013; 2014). They also defend their position (2013) against Feldman (2011).

Feldman and Kaufman have argued that the harm of death can be attributed to some form of deprivation.¹⁸ Currently, the leading voice in Epicurean scholarship is Warren,¹⁹ who generally argues that the Epicurean arguments are sound. However, he is sceptical of the Epicureans' ability to employ their philosophy beyond mere theory and he adheres to Cicero's claim that there are some issues regarding internal inconsistency.²⁰

This thesis will seek to defend the Epicurean position from criticism that the arguments against fearing death are inconsistent or inadequate. The majority of modern scholarship, and particularly the critics of Epicureanism, fail to evaluate the intricacies of Epicurus' arguments from within the Epicurean framework.²¹ I will demonstrate that when the supposed weak points of the Epicurean arguments are considered in conjunction with broader or underlying Epicurean theories, they prove to be cogent and able to withstand scrutiny. To do this, I will consider how Epicureanism addresses each of the four death-related fears in turn.

The first chapter will offer an Epicurean definition of death by evaluating the core tenets that uphold the four arguments. Epicurus' philosophy is built from the ground up. His physical atomic theory forms the basis of his ethical hedonist theory, which subsequently dictates his arguments against fearing death. As such, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of these foundations. After an overview of Epicurean physics, outlining their atomic theory and highlighting the vital role played by sensory evidence, Epicurus' ethical theory will be examined,

¹⁸ Feldman (1992; 2011) and Kaufman (1999; 2011).

¹⁹ Warren is a particularly prolific author on the subject of Epicureanism. See especially, (2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2001c; 2002; 2004; 2009; and 2016).

²⁰ Warren (2004), 161-121.

²¹ The most notable exception to this is Warren, although Mitsis (1988) and Rosenbaum (1987; 1989; and 1990) also examine the arguments against fearing death with appropriate consideration of the hedonism that underpins them. Generally, those who support the Deprivation Account, such as Kaufman (1999; 2011) and Feldman (1992; 2011), stray from the Epicurean framework and argue an 'intuitive' perspective that does not take Epicurean attitudes into account.

establishing the hedonist motivations that underpin the entirety of Epicurean philosophy. The chapter will then focus on the Epicurean conception of human mortality, as dictated by these two theories. The nature of the human soul, and therefore the ‘self’, will be identified, as well as its fate upon death. This will reveal the precise connotations of the claim that ‘death is nothing to us’ and elucidate the Epicurean arguments against the fears of being dead and of dying.

In the second chapter, I will investigate one of the more controversial aspects of Epicureanism: The Symmetry Argument as presented by Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura*. This argument likens pre-natal non-existence to post-mortem non-existence in an attempt to alleviate concern about the ‘nothing’ that awaits us after death. There are competing arguments regarding how best to interpret the intent of the argument: whether it is designed to combat the fear of being dead or of mortality.²² I will argue in favour of the former. The Symmetry Argument will be defended against its primary contender, the Deprivation Account, which claims that death causes harm, not by introducing pain, but by removing the pleasures of life. I will argue that the Symmetry Argument is successful in its intention, despite many modern contentions and attempts to assert asymmetry.

Finally, the third chapter will focus on the Epicurean arguments against the fears of mortality and of premature death. While some critics have accused the Epicureans of overlooking these fears, the evidence strongly suggests otherwise. The arguments against these fears, while less emphatically presented, are solidly incorporated in Epicurean doctrine. Hedonism lies at the heart of these arguments. Against the fear of mortality, Epicurus builds on his established claim that death can in no way harm an individual, adding that such a neutral state

²² This debate is driven by Warren (2004), 62, who emphatically argues that the purpose of the Symmetry Argument is purely to combat the fear of being dead. The evidence clearly supports this, although many scholars such as Kamm (1993), 25; Belshaw (1993), 103; and Mitsis (1989), 306 argue or assume otherwise.

should not be feared in prospect. Against the fear of premature death, the Epicureans broadly demonstrate that the quality of one's life is entirely independent of temporal duration.

This thesis will demonstrate that the Epicureans present sophisticated and internally consistent arguments against the four veins of death-related fear that are categorised by Warren. These arguments are embedded within Epicurean ethical and physical doctrine, and thus should be viewed as part of a complete worldview. The purpose and rationality of these arguments are evident when they are examined, not in isolation, but as part of a holistic framework. The centre of this framework is Epicurus' hedonism, which advocates for the pursuit of simple, natural pleasures. By carefully curating one's desires to maximise pleasure, and by avoiding both physical and mental pain – including death-related anxiety – a budding Epicurean can ensure a life of peace and εὐδαιμονία. Having lived such a life, with the full knowledge that death can bring no harm, an Epicurean is perfectly poised to greet death without a trace of fear.

I. Defining Death

Epicurus and his followers dedicate themselves whole-heartedly to combating one of the greatest threats to a happy life: the fear of death. The Epicurean arguments against fearing death are predominantly preserved in Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus*, *Letter to Menoeceus*, the *Kyriai Doxai*, and the *Sententiae Vaticanae*, as well as in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*.²³ They employ a multitude of arguments against this fear, built upon and around their central assertion that 'death is nothing to us' (*Kyria Doxa* 2). The source of this fear, they claim, is 'false belief' about what exactly death entails (*Kyria Doxa* 22). They therefore concentrate their efforts on dispelling any false understanding of the nature of life and death. They are unwavering intellectualists, relying on rational argument to guide belief and emotional commitment to their doctrine. Their arguments against fearing death are underpinned by their broader ethical claims, which in turn rest securely on the foundations of their physical theory.²⁴ Consequently, in order to understand the arguments against fearing death, it is necessary first to discuss Epicurean physics.²⁵

Epicurean Physics: Atomism and Sensation

Epicurus outlines the fundamental framework of his physical theory in his *Letter to Herodotus*.²⁶

He immediately establishes three essential principles, known as the Principles of Conservation,

²³ For a discussion of Roman Epicureanism, see Sedley (2009), 29-45 and Erler (2009), 46-64. Other notable Epicurean sources include Philodemus and Diogenes of Oinoanda.

²⁴ See Inwood (2007), 14-36 for a discussion of how many ancient philosophers consider knowledge of nature and physics to be an essential component to achieving happiness.

²⁵ This topic is primarily discussed by Epicurus in his *Letter to Herodotus*. The Roman poet and philosopher, Lucretius, also presents a detailed account of Epicurean physics in his work *De Rerum Natura*, which is believed to be largely derived from Epicurus' *On Nature*. See Sedley (1998).

²⁶ Much of which, according to Diogenes Laertius, was also found near the beginning of Epicurus' lost work *On Nature*.

upon which the rest of his theory is built (Ep. *Hdt.* 38-9).²⁷ The first two claims are: nothing comes into being from nothing and nothing perishes into nothing.²⁸ These are well established in the Greek philosophical tradition and are central components to the earlier atomic theory of Democritus.²⁹ The third claim is: the sum total of things is unchanging.³⁰ This is dependent on the first two claims, as nothing can be added to or subtracted from existence.

Epicurus then asserts that nature comprises only of the two binary opposites ‘body’ (σῶμα) and ‘void’ (κενός) (Ep. *Hdt.* 39).³¹ Body is simply that which is tangible, while void is intangible.³² Void creates the space in which bodies exist and are able to move, while the bodies themselves comprise everything that can be sensed, that can act, and that can be acted upon (Ep. *Hdt.* 40). At their most basic and minute form, bodies are atoms (ἄτομα), as established by Epicurus:

σωμάτων τὰ μὲν ἐστὶ συγκρίσεις, τὰ δ’ ἐξ ὧν αἱ συγκρίσεις πεποιήνται· ταῦτα δὲ ἐστὶν ἄτομα καὶ ἀμετάβλητα, εἴπερ μὴ μέλλει πάντα εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν φθαρῆσεσθαι, ἀλλ’ ἰσχύοντα ὑπομένειν ἐν ταῖς διαλύσεσι τῶν συγκρίσεων, πλήρη τὴν θύσιν ὄντα, οἷα δὴ οὐκ ἔχοντα ὅπη ἢ ὅπως διαλυθήσεται.

Of bodies some are composite, others the elements of which these composite bodies are made. These elements are indivisible and unchangeable, and necessarily so, if things are not all to be destroyed and pass into non-existence, but are to be strong enough to endure when the composite

²⁷ Cf. *D.R.N.* 1.159-173

²⁸ πρῶτον μὲν ὅτι οὐδὲν γίνεται ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος. πᾶν γὰρ ἐκ παντὸς ἐγίνετ’ ἂν σπερμάτων γε οὐθὲν προσδεόμενον. καὶ εἰ ἐφθείρετο δὲ τὸ ἀφανιζόμενον εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν, πάντα ἂν ἀπωλώλει τὰ πράγματα, οὐκ ὄντων εἰς ἃ διελύετο. (Ep. *Men.* 38-9).

²⁹ Long & Sedley (1987), 26. That much of Epicurean atomism is derived from Democritean atomism is often taken for granted, although there is ongoing debate regarding the extent to which Epicurus adopted and adapted his predecessor’s theory (Sedley (1982), 176). See also Warren (2002) and Morel (2009), 69-75.

³⁰ καὶ μὴν καὶ τὸ πᾶν ἀεὶ τοιοῦτον ἦν οἷον νῦν ἐστὶ, καὶ ἀεὶ τοιοῦτον ἔσται. οὐθὲν ἐστὶν, ὃ ἂν εἰσελθὼν εἰς αὐτὸ τὴν μεταβολὴν ποιήσαιτο. (Ep. *Men.* 39).

³¹ Cf. *D.R.N.* 1.334-390.

³² Sedley (1982), 179-191, discusses the deliberate use of the terms ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ by Epicurus in order to counter conceptual difficulties raised by Aristotle concerning the nature of void. Sedley demonstrates that the innovative use of these terms creates a neat pair of symmetrical opposites, unlike the binary terms used by earlier atomists, such as ‘empty and full’ or ‘existent and non-existent’, which lend themselves to contradiction.

bodies are broken up, because they possess a solid nature and are incapable of being anywhere or anyhow dissolved.

Ep. *Hdt.* 41

Epicurus' atoms are the smallest unit of matter, invisible to the naked eye, although in theory an atom may be as large as the universe (Ep. *Hdt.* 55-59). They form various compounds (composite bodies) which give rise to the diversity of the observable natural world. They are indivisible, so as to support the Principles of Conservation (although, conceptually they are composed of parts, referred to as *minima*).³³ Atoms are also indestructible, such that they are able to survive the dissolution of one thing and the formation of another, without incurring any damage or change themselves (Ep. *Hdt.* 40-41; *D.R.N* 1.503-598). The use of the term 'dissolve' (διαλύω) as opposed to 'destroy' (φθείρω) is therefore very deliberate.

The third claim states that the sum total of things is unchanging. Thus, both the number and the variety of atoms, which make up everything, remain constant. However, the formations of atoms change continuously. Atoms are able to form an indefinite variety of compounds,³⁴ but their position within a compound is not fixed. They are 'redistributed' into other forms, which is why change is evident, but not random in the sense of spontaneous creation or destruction of atoms. For instance, the atoms which are currently bound together in the shape of a chair were not always in the shape of a chair, nor will they be forever. The chair may perish, but the atoms which comprise the chair will simply merge together in a different combination of atoms to form

³³ Atoms must be made of 'parts', as this is necessary for motion (consider the movement of one's finger from one piano key to the key adjacent: movement is gradual, and at some point one's finger is halfway between the keys. One's finger must therefore consist of multiple parts, with one part on the first key and one part on the second). There must also, however, be a limit on the smallest unit of matter, lest everything be infinitely divisible. For further discussion of the indivisibility of minimal parts, see Long & Sedley (1987), 39, Vlastos (1965), 121-147, Konstan (1982), 60-75, and Bicknell (1992), 241-288.

³⁴ Epicurus is very explicit in his use of the word 'indefinite' (ἀπερίληπτος), as the number of ways that atoms can come together is indeed inconceivably large but stops short of 'infinite' (ἄπειρος) (Ep. *Men.* 42).

something else. Their indestructability is necessary, so that they themselves are able to survive this change. The only qualities that are inherent to an atom are its shape, size, and weight, allowing atoms to lock together in a variety of ways to form a diverse range of composite bodies (Ep. *Hdt.* 42). Other characteristics, such as colour, are changeable. These are secondary qualities belonging to the composite bodies, but not to the atoms themselves (Ep. *Hdt.* 54). Atoms are also in continual motion, sometimes rebounding off one another, and sometimes entangling together (Ep. *Hdt.* 43).³⁵ The speed at which they travel is inconceivably fast, as the surrounding void offers no resistance (Ep. *Hdt.* 44).

Atoms do not only comprise physical, observable objects. For the Epicureans, *everything* is physically constructed, including sensation. Atoms belonging to a particular object are said to be constantly streaming off the object, creating extremely thin ‘films’ or ‘images’ that retain the integrity of the object. These come into contact with our visual sense organs, thus allowing us to see the initial object. The process is the same for the other senses, such as hearing and smelling. All of our sensations are the result of physical atomic contact (Ep. *Hdt.* 46-50). The physical nature of sensation renders it inherently objective, and it is thus used by the Epicureans as the ‘criterion of truth’. That is, an objective standard by which to form judgements, as attested both by Diogenes Laertius and by the principal sayings attributed to Epicurus:

ἐν τοίνυν τῷ Κανόνι λέγων ἐστὶν ὁ Ἐπίκουρος κριτήρια τῆς ἀληθείας εἶναι τὰς αἰσθήσεις καὶ προλήψεις καὶ τὰ πάθη...πᾶσα γὰρ, φησὶν, αἴσθησις ἄλογός ἐστι καὶ μνήμης οὐδεμιᾶς δεκτικὴ· οὔτε γὰρ ὑφ’ αὐτῆς οὔτε ὑφ’ ἑτέρου κινηθεῖσα δύναται τι προσθεῖναι ἢ ἀφελεῖν· οὐδὲ ἔστι τὸ δυνάμενον αὐτὰς διελέγξαι... οὔτε μὴν λόγος, πᾶς γὰρ λόγος ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἤρτηται. οὔθ’ ἡ ἑτέρα τὴν ἑτέραν.

Now in *The Canon* Epicurus affirms that our sensations and preconceptions and our feelings are the standards of truth... Every sensation, he says, is devoid of reason and incapable of memory;

³⁵ For a discussion of atomic motion and the notorious ‘atomic swerve’, which supposedly discounted determinism in Epicurean theory, see Morel (2009), 75-78, Long & Sedley (1987), 49-50, Wendlandt & Baltzly (2004), 41-71, and Purinton (1999), 253-299.

for neither is it self-caused nor, regarded as having an external cause, can it add anything thereto or take anything therefrom. Nor is there anything which can refute sensations or convict them of error...nor again can reason refute them, for reason is wholly dependent on sensation; nor can one sense refute another.

Ep. *Hdt.* 31-32

εἴ μάχη πάσαις ταῖς αἰσθήσεσιν, οὐχ ἔξεις οὐδ' ἄς ἂν φῆς αὐτῶν διεψεῦσθαι πρὸς τί ποιούμενος τὴν ἀναγωγὴν κρίνης.

If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard to which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those judgements which you pronounce false.

Kyria Doxa 23

While sensation is equal to truth, how one *interprets* the sensory evidence is subjective, and it is incorrect interpretation of the objective evidence that leads to false belief:³⁶

τὸ δὲ ψεῦδος καὶ τὸ διημαρτημένον ἐν τῷ προσδοξαζομένῳ ἀεὶ ἐστίν.

Falsehood and error always depend on the intrusion of opinion.

Ep. *Hdt.* 50

An elaborate analogy by Lucretius further reinforces how the interpretation of sensory evidence is fundamental to one's understanding of the world:³⁷

Denique ut in fabrica, si pravast regula prima,
normaque si fallax rectis regionibus exit,
et libella aliqua si ex parti claudicat hilum,
omnia mendose fieri atque obstipa necessu est
prava cubantia prona supina atque absona tecta,
iam ruere ut quaedam videantur velle, ruantque,
prodita iudiciis fallacibus omnia primis,
sic igitur ratio tibi rerum prava necessest
falsaque sit, falsis quae cumque ab sensibus ortast.

³⁶ Cf. *Kyria Doxa* 24. See also Asmis (1984), esp. 153-154, supplemented by Asmis (2009), 84-104.

³⁷ All translations of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* are taken from Rouse (1975).

Lastly, as in a building, if the original rule is warped, if the square is faulty and deviates from straight lines, if the level is a trifle wrong in any part, the whole house will necessarily be made in a faulty fashion and be falling over, warped, sloping, leaning forward, leaning back, all out of proportion, so that some parts seem about to collapse, all betrayed by false principles at the beginning. So therefore your reasoning about things must be warped and false whenever it is based upon false senses.

D.R.N 4.513-521.

False beliefs, resulting from misinterpretation, are recognised as a source of mental pain, leading one to be concerned about something when they need not be.

The Epicurean arguments against fearing death are therefore aimed at countering these false beliefs in order to rationally justify why one need not be victim of mental pain and anxiety. Pain, either mental or physical in nature, is naturally viewed by the Epicureans as inherently negative, owing to their hedonist ethical theory that directly hinges on this theory of atomism and the infallibility of sensation.

Epicurean Ethics: Hedonism

Using sensation as the purest form of evidence, Epicureans claim that pleasure is fundamentally good, and that pain is fundamentally bad. They utilise the so-called ‘Cradle Argument’ (entitled such because the behaviour of infants is cited as evidence) to explain that one is inherently drawn to pleasurable things and repelled by painful things (D.L. 10.137; Cic. *Fin.* 1.30).³⁸ Pleasure and pain are seen as natural indicators of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as Epicurus states in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, also preserved by Diogenes Laertius:

³⁸ Brunschwig (1986), 113-144 discusses the cradle argument in relation to Epicurean and Stoic philosophy. See also Inwood (2016), 147-166, who specifically examines the argument in Cicero’s *De Finibus*.

καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος λέγομεν εἶναι τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν· ταύτην γὰρ ἀγαθὸν πρῶτον καὶ συγγενικὸν ἔγνωμεν, καὶ ἀπὸ ταύτης καταρχόμεθα πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτην καταντῶμεν ὡς κανόνι τῷ πάθει πᾶν ἀγαθὸν κρίνοντες.

Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing.

Ep. Men. 129

The Epicureans are therefore hedonists, taking the position that pleasure is the highest good and therefore the goal (τέλος) of a human life. However, they do not advocate for the pursuit of all pleasure simply because it feels good in the moment. Epicurus' particular brand of hedonism is actually incredibly frugal:³⁹

ὅταν οὖν λέγομεν ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν, οὐ τὰς τῶν ἀσώτων ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐν ἀπολαύσει κειμένας λέγομεν, ὡς τινες ἀγνοοῦντες καὶ οὐχ ὁμολογοῦντες ἢ κακῶς ἐκδεχόμενοι νομίζουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὸ μήτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μήτε ταράττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν. οὐ γὰρ πότοι καὶ κῶμοι συνείροντες οὐδ' ἀπολαύσεις παίδων καὶ γυναικῶν οὐδ' ἰχθύων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, ὅσα φέρει πολυτελεῆς τράπεζα, τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾷ βίον, ἀλλὰ νήφων λογισμὸς καὶ τὰς αἰτίας ἐξερευνῶν πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς καὶ τὰς δόξας ἐξελαύνων ἐξ ὧν πλεῖστος τὰς ψυχὰς καταλαμβάνει θόρυβος.

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or wilful misinterpretation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.

Ep. Men. 131-2

Rather than advocating for gratification, emphasis is placed on prudence and eliminating pain, as the absence of pain is itself considered a pleasure. Epicurus distinguishes between two types of pleasure: *kinetic* (κίνησις) and *katastematic* (καταστηματικός). The former refers to the process

³⁹ The Epicureans had to fight against the hedonist stereotype that they indulged in luxury and debauchery. Diogenes Laertius outlines some of the accusations launched against Epicurus (10.3-8) but rightfully dismisses them as slander.

of fulfilling some desire, while the latter refers to the state of having fulfilled that desire (Ep. *Men.* 136).

Unfulfilled desires are a source of mental pain, and so it is necessary to employ prudence in the pursuit of desire. This is a crucial aspect of Epicurean ethics, and one which any discussion of eradicating anxieties must reiterate. The power to attain happiness is held entirely by the individual, and it is achieved by carefully curating one's desires so as to guarantee (as far as possible) their fulfilment. Of desire, Epicurus recognises three different kinds: those which are both natural and necessary, those which are natural but not necessary, and those which are neither natural nor necessary (Ep. *Men.* 127-8). Any desire which is natural and necessary, such as food or shelter, should be fulfilled. They ensure survival and basic comfort; when one has fulfilled such desires, one is not experiencing any 'need'. Desires which are natural but not necessary, such as sexual gratification, should be fulfilled in moderation, and *only* if doing so will not result in any unnecessary pain or anxiety. Finally, a desire which is neither natural nor necessary – including any kind of luxury or ambition – ought to be avoided; indeed, such desires are self-perpetuating and cannot be fulfilled at all, leading inevitably to the pain of unfulfilled desire. Epicurus famously advocated for a life 'lived unnoticed' (λάθε βιώσας), avoiding the traps of politics and fame, which – according to Epicurus – would always fall short of bringing fulfilment. This went very much against the grain of popular thought in ancient Athenian society, in which a good reputation and public honours were sought after as sources of pleasure.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Roskam (2007), 29-33.

The relationship between pleasure and pain is seen as purely binary. The absence of one equates to the presence of the other: pleasure is a lack of pain, and pain is a lack of pleasure.

Epicurus' third principal saying encapsulates this:⁴¹

Ὅρος τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν ἡδονῶν ἢ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος ὑπεξαίρεσις, ὅπου δ' ἂν τὸ ἡδόμενον ἐνῆ, καθ' ὃν ἂν χρόνον ἦ, οὐκ ἔστι τὸ ἀλγοῦν ἢ τὸ λυπούμενον ἢ τὸ συναμφοτέρον.

The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

Kyria Doxa 3

The absolute height of pleasure is simply a state that is devoid of any pain. This is a key aspect of Epicurean hedonism, particularly in relation to erasing the fear of death: the removal of any threat of pain allows space for the purest pleasure to flourish. The absence of mental pain is referred to as ἀταραξία, while the absence of bodily pain is referred to as ἀπονία. Cicero also summarises the Epicurean doctrine on this matter:⁴²

Sic in omni re doloris amotio successionem efficit voluptatis. Itaque non placuit Epicuro medium esse quiddam inter dolorem et voluptatem; illud enim ipsum quod quibusdam medium videretur, cum omni dolore careret, non modo voluptatem esse verum etiam summam voluptatem...ut postea variari voluptas distinguique possit, augeri amplificarique non possit.

So generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place. Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterised as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order...beyond this point pleasure may vary in kind, but it cannot vary in intensity or degree.

Cic. Fin. 1.37-9

⁴¹ See also *Kyria Doxa* 18: Οὐκ ἐπαύξεται ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ ἢ ἡδονῇ, ἐπειδὴν ἅπαξ τὸ κατ' ἐνδειαν ἀλγοῦν ἐξαίρεθῃ, ἀλλὰ μόνον ποικίλλεται. τῆς δὲ διανοίας τὸ πέρασ τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀπεγέννησεν ἢ τε τούτων αὐτῶν ἐκλόγησις καὶ τῶν ὁμογενῶν τούτοις, ὅσα τοὺς μεγίστους φόβους παρεσκεύαζε τῇ διανοίᾳ. Pleasure in the flesh admits no increase when once the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits of variation. The limit of pleasure in the mind, however, is reached when we reflect on the things themselves and their congeners which cause the mind the greatest alarms.

⁴² Translation by Rackham (1983).

The practical implications of this claim are rather optimistic: all one needs to do in order to reach the happiest state possible is to avoid mental and physical pain. Physical pain is believed to be a relatively easy obstacle to overcome, as Epicurus' fourth principal saying establishes:⁴³

Οὐ χρονίζει τὸ ἀλογοῦν συνεχῶς ἐν τῇ σαρκί, ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν ἄκρον τὸν ἐλάχιστον χρόνον πάρεστι, τὸ δὲ μόνον ὑπερτεῖνον τὸ ἡδόμενον κατὰ σάρκα οὐ πολλὰς ἡμέρας συμμένει. αἱ δὲ πολυχρόνιοι τῶν ἀρρωστιῶν πλεονάζον ἔχουσι τὸ ἡδόμενον ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ ἢ περ τὸ ἀλογοῦν.

Continuous pain does not last long in the flesh; on the contrary, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which barely outweighs pleasure in the flesh does not last for many days together. Illnesses of long duration even permit an excess of pleasure over pain in the flesh.

Kyria Doxa 4

Therefore, the Epicurean attitude towards physical pain is that if it is ongoing, it is tolerable, whereas if it is intolerable, it is brief. This takes the notion of 'intolerable' quite literally; if your body cannot tolerate the pain, you will soon die and be put out of your misery. The advocacy of using mental fortitude to overcome such pain is a practical illustration of the Epicureans' intellectualist approach. Famously, Epicurus' own death is given as a demonstration of how one can bear great physical pain. He is able to counterbalance the pain of dying by contemplating past pleasures (D.L. 10.22). The mind's ability to reflect on lived experiences and to consequently enjoy pleasures that have since passed is crucial. While the body can experience both pleasure and pain, this only occurs as an immediate reaction to a concurrent stimulus. The mind, however, is able to recall circumstances from the past and anticipate those in the potential

⁴³ See also *Sent. Vat.* 4.

future.⁴⁴ Physical pain can therefore be overcome by way of distraction, whereas mental pain presents a far greater challenge.⁴⁵

The Epicureans posit that mental pain is caused by unfulfilled desires and false beliefs. The cure is therefore simple in theory: one should only pursue natural and necessary desires, which are easy to obtain and result in ἀταραξία,⁴⁶ and one should interpret sensory evidence correctly, so as not to be plagued by unnecessary fear. The eradication of needless fear is central to Epicurean doctrine, and the two greatest fears identified by the Epicureans are those related to religion and to death (Ep. *Hdt.* 81).⁴⁷ The ‘traditional’ Greek assertion, that one’s soul departs to Hades upon death to be either punished or rewarded,⁴⁸ generates fear of the gods and fear of death. The Epicureans reject this traditional religious outlook and the associated reasons for fear. Considerable emphasis is therefore placed on arguing against it, thus removing this threat to human happiness.

Firstly, they attempt to instil the belief that the gods are entirely unconcerned with human affairs. They argue that the gods are perfect beings, who exist in an intermediary divine state and act simply as an ideal to be emulated by mortals. They did not create humans, nor do they impart

⁴⁴ For further discussion of anticipation and retrospect in Epicurean hedonism, see Chapter 3, as well as Warren (2001b).

⁴⁵ There is ongoing debate surrounding some of the details of pleasure and pain in Epicureanism. See Warren (2001b), as well as Woolf (2009), 158-178.

⁴⁶ See *Kyria Doxa* 21: Ὁ τὰ πέρατα τοῦ βίου κατειδὼς οἶδεν, ὡς εὐλόριστόν ἐστι τὸ <τὸ> ἀλγοῦν κατ’ ἔνδειαν ἐξαιροῦν καὶ τὸ ὅλον βίον παντελεῖ καθιστάν· ὥστ’ οὐδὲν προσδεῖται πραγμάτων ἀγῶνας κεκτημένων; He who understands the limits of life knows how easy it is to procure enough to remove the pain of want and make the whole of life complete and perfect. Hence he has no longer any need of things which are not to be won save labour and conflict.

⁴⁷ See also *D.R.N* 3.59-90, where Lucretius discusses the profound negative impact that fearing death can have on an individual.

⁴⁸ The phrase ‘traditional’ here and elsewhere refers to the Homeric and Hesiodic depictions of theology, especially with regard to the Underworld, which is ruled by the god Hades. Homer’s *Odyssey* Book 11 contains a (generally accepted) representation of what the soul is expected to undergo upon death. The untethered soul continues to exist as a wandering shade, which undergoes moral judgement upon descending to the Underworld in order to determine their fate (*Od.* 11.569-71).

any moral judgement (Ep. *Men.* 123). It is therefore needless to be afraid of the gods or any potential divine punishment. Within the intellectualist Epicurean framework, the internalisation of this ‘correct’ view replaces the traditional ‘false belief’, thereby neatly removing religious fear and any associated mental pain.

Additionally, to counter the fear of death that ‘traditional’ religion imposes, the Epicureans argue against the notion that there is some form of life after death which carries the potential for punishment.⁴⁹ Rather, death marks the ultimate end of an individual. Upon death, the soul is said to perish along with the body instead of descending to Hades. The Epicureans offer numerous arguments that the soul is physical and mortal, thus demonstrating that it cannot survive death (most notably by Lucretius, *D.R.N.* 3.425-849). Of course, the fear of post-mortem punishment is not the only reason that one might feel anxious about the prospect of death – far from it. The Epicurean stance that death is the complete annihilation of an individual brings with it a variety of additional concerns, all of which the Epicureans are dedicated to refuting. Before placating the fear of annihilation, however, they must first prove that the soul perishes with the body upon death. Their argument for the mortality of the soul, like every other aspect of Epicureanism, is founded on their physical theory of atoms.

Death: Soul and Self

In his *Letter to Herodotus*, Epicurus states that the soul is a physical component of one’s body, similar to an eye or a limb. It is made up of particularly fine particles, which are dispersed all throughout the body (Ep. *Hdt.* 63; *D.R.N.* 3.180-230). Epicurus describes the soul as being

⁴⁹ Even if an individual is not being punished in Hades *per se*, the Greek depiction of the afterlife is extremely bleak, as demonstrated by Achilles’ famous lament in Homer’s *Odyssey* (11.488-91).

composed of multiple kinds of atoms, those of wind and heat, which each contribute to its overall nature. Lucretius expands on this description:

Nec tamen haec simplex nobis natura putanda est.
Tennis enim quaedam moribundos deserit aura
mixta vapore, vapor porro trahit aera secum.
Nec calor est quisquam, cui non sit mixtus et aer

...iam triplex animi est igitur natura reperta;
nec tamen haec sat sunt ad sensum cuncta creandum

...quarta quoque his igitur quaedam natura
necesses adtribuatur. Est omnino nominis expers

...sensiferos motus quae didit prima per artus.

But we must not believe this nature to be single. For a kind of thin breath mixed with heat leaves the dying, and the heat, moreover, draws air with it. Nor is there any heat which is not mixed with air... therefore, the nature of the mind is found to be threefold; yet all these three together are not enough to produce feeling...a fourth nature must therefore be added to these; this is entirely without name...and this first distributes the sense-giving motions through the limbs.

D.R.N. 3.231-245 (with omissions)

Four components of the soul can therefore be identified: wind or breath,⁵⁰ heat, air, and an unknown fourth substance, which somehow allows for sensation. The role that the Epicureans give to the soul is therefore both granting sensation to the body and interpreting what the body senses (D.L. 10.64). Lucretius differentiates between two aspects of the soul, which are generally translated as ‘mind’ (*animus*) and ‘spirit’ (*anima*).⁵¹ The *anima* is dispersed throughout the body,

⁵⁰ It is not at all uncommon in Greek philosophical history for the soul to be synonymised with breath or air, and for death to be described in terms of breath departing the body (McKirahan (2010), 53-4). The Greek term for soul, ἡ ψυχή, has been etymologically linked to breath by Bremmer (1993), 14-15 and Nussbaum (1972), 2.

⁵¹ These Latin terms are coined by Lucretius. Epicurus simply uses the term ἡ ψυχή to refer to the soul or any aspects thereof. Lucretius acknowledges the difficulty in converting the Greek terminology into Latin, citing the ‘poverty of his mother tongue’ (*D.R.N.* 1.136-9; 3.260). For an examination of how Lucretius Latinised the technical Greek terms of Epicurean philosophy, see Sedley (1998).

providing the means for sensation, while the *animus* acts as the control centre and resides in the chest:

Nunc animum atque animam dico coniuncta teneri
inter se atque unam naturam conficere ex se,
sed caput esse quasi et dominari in corpore toto
consilium quod nos animum mentemque vocamus.
Idque situm media regione in pectoris haeret.
Hic exultat enim pavor ac metus, haec loca circum
laetitiae mulcent: hic ergo mens animusquest.
Cetera pars animae per totum dissita corpus
paret et ad numen mentis momenque movetur.

Next, I say that mind and spirit are held in conjunction together and compound one nature in common, but that the head so to speak and lord over the whole body is the understanding which we call mind and intelligence. And this has its abiding place in the middle region of the breast. For in this place throbs terror and fear, hereabouts is melting joy: here therefore is the intelligence and the mind. The rest of the spirit, dispersed abroad through the whole body, obeys and is moved according to the will and working of the intelligence.

D.R.N. 3.136-144

The *animus* and *anima* therefore act in conjunction with one another in a way that is comparable to the modern notion of the nervous system. The *animus* acts as the ‘brain’, receiving and interpreting physical messages from the *anima*, which is akin to the ‘nerves’, stimulating sensation. The *animus* in turn sends instructions to the *anima*, initiating movement. Together, the *animus* and *anima* comprise the soul, the loss of which not only results in death, but also defines death.

The Epicureans define death as the dissolution of the soul, resulting in the absence of all sensation. Without the ability to sense pleasure or pain, one cannot be impacted positively or negatively, according to Epicurus’ hedonist framework. When the soul atoms are no longer bound together and to the body, they disperse and the individual dies. The fact that the soul itself undergoes death is in stark contrast to traditional Greek thought, which posits that while the *body*

perishes, the *soul* continues on to some form of afterlife. Within this mainstream theoretical framework, the immortal soul represents the full identity of the individual, while the body acts as a mortal vessel.⁵² The Epicureans wholeheartedly reject this with their physicalist approach, going to great lengths to argue that the soul, too, is mortal.⁵³ This argument has intriguing implications concerning the Epicurean concept of ‘self’. The unity of body and soul in life *and* in death suggests that the Epicureans regard one’s sense of self as comprised of both, rather than just the soul. In mainstream Greek thought, the self is able to survive death, encapsulated as it is by the soul.⁵⁴ Within the Epicurean framework, however, all aspects of the self are bound to the mortal admixture of body and soul, and will thus be obliterated upon death. Therefore, the notion of death is drastically different for the Epicureans, as what defines death is not just a lack of sensation and awareness (such as one would experience while asleep, for instance), but the complete annihilation of the self.

What constitutes the nature of the Epicurean ‘self’ is a matter of conjecture, as there is no evidence that Epicurus himself offered a concrete definition. A general description can be applied, that the ‘self’ pertains to an individual’s essential being which distinguishes them from anyone else. Németh discusses in detail what the Epicurean ‘self’ entails, which can be crudely summarised as follows:⁵⁵ psychological development begins with experiences, which become

⁵² In the texts of Homer, the soul (ἡ ψυχή) is described as leaving the body at death to descend to the Underworld (*Od.* 11.62-5). Any reference to the individual is thereafter linked to the soul, and not to the body, suggesting that *only* the soul represents the individual. There is, however, some debate concerning how much of one’s ‘self’ remains with the shade, as Bremmer (1993), 13-70 and Nussbaum (1972), 1-3 argue that the shades are simple echoes of the self, yet there is evidence that the shade has access to pre-death memories (*Od.* 11.217-22; 11.62-5) and shows consistent personality traits (*Od.* 11.541-6).

⁵³ As will be discussed in Chp.2, Lucretius dedicates a large portion of his third book in *De Rerum Natura* to this issue, lobbying a range of (sometimes bizarre) arguments in an attempt to prove that the soul is mortal.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Book 11 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus communicates with the souls of deceased friends and family. See also Book 23 of Homer’s *Iliad*, in which Achilles speaks with the shade of Patroclus.

⁵⁵ Németh (2017), xvii.

memories. Experience and memory inform both one's 'psychophysical conception' (recognition of oneself as a mental and physical being), and one's self-awareness (which includes recognition of agency). The psychophysical conception and self-awareness lead to the gradual formation of a personal identity, which can be defined as one's own specific qualities. The findings of self-reflection, which accommodates all of the above components, thereby constitute the self. In essence, the notion of one's self is the result of experience and reflection, including one's discovery of one's own physical and atomic nature. This is crucial to Epicurean ethical practice, as the process by which desires are deemed naturally worthy and false beliefs are counteracted hinges on reflection of one's own attitudes and behaviours, followed by the appropriate alteration of these so as to adhere to Epicurean doctrine.⁵⁶

Of particular importance within this theory of self is memory. Personal identity is formed gradually over the course of many experiences, and, most notably, subsequent self-reflection. Without the capability to remember and recall past experiences, there could be no cumulative self, and the notion of forming a consistent identity would disintegrate. Epicurus demonstrates the power and key role of memory when recalling past pleasures in order to bear the physical pain of his own death (D.L. 10.22). His ability to recall these occurrences and re-experience the associated emotions demonstrates a consistent sense of self. Lucretius also drives home the significance of memory to a consistent self when arguing that the soul is mortal:

nec, si materiem nostrum collegerit aestas
post obitum rursimque redegerit ut sita nunc est,
atque iterum nobis fuerint data lumina vitae,
pertineat quicquam tamen ad nos id quoque factum,

⁵⁶ While Philodemus, *On Frank Speech*, fr. 84.11-12 (see Konstan, Clay, Glad, Thom & Ware (1998) for translation), suggests that some people possess difficult natures that render them 'incurable' in terms of Epicurean ethical therapy, Lucretius is adamant that one's nature is never an obstacle to philosophical benefit (*D.R.N* 3.307-22), as is Epicurus himself (*Ep. Men.* 122).

interrupta semel cum sit repetentia nostri.
et nunc nil ad nos de nobis attinet, ante
qui fuimus, neque iam de illis nos adficit angor.
nam cum respicias immensi temporis omne
praeteritum spatium, tum motus materiai
multimodi quam sint, facile hoc adcredere possis,
semina saepe in eodem, ut nunc sunt, ordine posta
nec memori tamen id quimus reprehendere mente;
inter enim ictast vitae pausa, vageque
deerrarunt passim motus ab sensibus omnes.

Even if time should gather together our matter after death and bring it back again as it is now placed, and if once more the light of life should be given to us, yet it would not matter one bit to us that even this had been done, when the recollection of ourselves has been broken asunder. And even now we are not concerned about any self which we have been before, nor does any anguish about it now touch us. For when you look back upon all the past expanse of measureless time, and think how various are the motions of matter, you may easily come to believe that these same seeds of which now we consist have been often before placed in the same arrangement they now are in. And yet we cannot call that back by memory; for in between has been cast a stoppage of life, and all the motions have wandered and scattered afar from those sensations.

D.R.N. 3.847-860

Lucretius clearly demonstrates that memory is, above all else, vital to one's sense of self. Once an individual dies, memory is lost. This is evident, according to Lucretius, as even if the possibility of reincarnation is entertained, past lives are not able to be recalled. In the hypothetical scenario of a cycle of rebirths, death 'interrupts' the process of both experience and memory formation and thereby prohibits recall before death. As such, even if all the atoms constituting an individual should reform in the future exactly as they are now, the future individual would not be the same. While they would look identical, they would be nothing more than a blank slate without the memories of formative experiences. Lucretius is therefore arguing that a change to oneself that is drastic enough to interrupt memory is essentially death.⁵⁷ This

⁵⁷ This carries interesting implications for those who undergo trauma or experience any illness that interrupts memory. Nagel (1979), 5-6, raises this issue in relation to the possibility of experiencing post-mortem harm. This is also discussed in Ch. 2.

further informs our definition of death in the Epicurean framework: it is not simply the reorganisation of atoms or a lack of sensation. It is not simply that ‘one will no longer be able to sense’, but rather that ‘there will be no *one* at all’. It is the eradication of oneself, as the essential aspect of an individual being ceases to be.

The famous Epicurean maxim that ‘death is nothing to us’, is therefore not merely an expression of their attitude towards death, but a description of what they believe death entails:

ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ· τὸ δ’ ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.

Kyria Doxa 2

Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinent hilum,
quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur
...sic, ubi non erimus, cum corporis atque animai
discidium fuerit, quibus e sumus uniter apti,
scilicet haud nobis quicquam, qui non erimus tum,
accidere omnino poterit sensumque movere,
non si terra mari miscebitur et mare caelo.

Therefore death is nothing to us, it matters not one jot, since the nature of the mind is understood to be mortal...so, when we shall no longer be, when the parting shall have come about between body and spirit from which we are compacted into one whole, then sure enough nothing at all will be able to happen to us, who will then no longer be, or to make us feel, not if earth be commingled with sea and sea with sky.

D.R.N. 3.830-831; 838-842

It is upon this ‘nothingness’ that the Epicurean arguments against the fear of death rely. While the assertion that ‘death is annihilation’ may prompt considerable apprehension, the necessary implication that nothingness is entirely neutral inherently supports the position that it would be irrational to fear it. One cannot experience pain in the absence of sensation. The acceptance of

this argument results in the removal of any rational reason to be afraid of being in a state without sensation, as there is no risk of harm. Indeed, no one will ever be in this state, as they will not *be* at all. There will be no ‘them’ to experience death. There will be nothing, and therefore nothing to fear.

This definition of death as the complete annihilation of the self, eradicating any possibility of sensation (and therefore pain), functions as the primary argument against the fear of death. Specifically, it serves to undermine the fear of *being dead*, and it is used as a central tenet from which other arguments against death-related fears develop. The fear of *dying* is also addressed by this sensory argument, as this fear can easily be reduced to a fear of pain. During the process of dying, if it painful, then it is brief, and it can be dealt with by overriding physical pain with mental pleasure (which can be done with alleged ease, if one is to take Epicurus’ own death scene at face value). Once one has died, all sensation and pain will cease. By clearly establishing the nature of death in relation to their physical and ethical theories, the Epicureans have demonstrated that it is needless to fear both the state of being dead and of dying.

Concluding Remarks

Building on the foundational claim that all matter is comprised of atoms, Epicurus has argued against the ‘traditional’ Greek outlook which fosters the greatest threat to a pleasurable life: fear of the gods and of death. He has posited that the soul is a physical component of the body and that the self is comprised of both body and soul. Death is the dissolution of the soul, which marks the absolute annihilation of the self. Death is therefore nothing. Epicurus has also presented his hedonist ethical theory, wherein pleasure is inherently good, and pain is inherently bad. Fear is

an acute form of mental pain and must therefore be eradicated if one hopes to achieve the human τέλος of εὐδαιμονία. He has illustrated that the state of being dead and the process of dying do not warrant any fear, as the former cannot cause one pain and any pain resulting from the latter can be overcome.

However, the arguments thus far only address the fear of death when death is *present*. One may still feel apprehension at the *prospect* of death, and harm may be identified that is independent of physical pain. Fear felt at the anticipation of death, including concerns about one's own mortality or premature death, have yet to be addressed. Evidently, the task of eradicating death anxiety is by no means complete with the above arguments alone.

The Epicureans must now turn their attention to death-related anxieties that fall outside of one's immediate experience of death and consider potential harms that are independent of physical pain. Lucretius' Symmetry Argument brings such issues to the fore, sparking significant scholarly debate concerning the timing of pleasure and pain, and the role this plays in determining any potential harm resulting from death.

II. The Symmetry Argument

Death is clearly defined in the Epicurean framework as the annihilation of the self. In pursuit of their goal to eradicate the fear of death, the Epicureans must address any anxieties related to this state of non-existence. Epicurus established that being dead cannot be a painful experience, owing to the lack of sensation. However, apprehension in the face of death is not solely due to the anticipation of pain. The very concept of ceasing to exist is liable to produce some anxiety, despite Epicurus' assurance that it will be 'nothing to us.' The key argument employed by the Epicureans to combat this fear is known as the Symmetry Argument. This argument posits that post-mortem non-existence is relevantly identical to pre-natal non-existence. Just as our period of non-existence before our birth did not cause us any concern, so too will our non-existence after death be harmless. While simple in concept, the Symmetry Argument has incited significant debate and is thus worthy of careful examination.

There is some dispute over how to interpret the precise intention of the argument, and the rendering of the symmetry claim dictates whether it is able to challenge the fear of being dead or the fear of mortality. The Symmetry Argument must also withstand the strongest counterargument levelled against the Epicurean claim that death cannot harm the deceased, that is known as the Deprivation Account. Scholars who support the Deprivation Account posit that it provides grounds for asymmetry, but there is considerable disagreement as to how exactly it does so.

First, I will examine the Symmetry Argument as established by Lucretius and determine how it can be most accurately interpreted. I will then explore how the Deprivation Account opposes the Symmetry Argument, specifically in connection to identifying any potential harm caused by death. Finally, I will investigate – and ultimately dismiss – several modern assertions

of asymmetry which threaten to undermine Lucretius' Symmetry Argument. I will conclude that, while the Deprivation Account presents a powerful challenge, it is nevertheless found to be unsatisfactory, and the appropriate rendering of Lucretius' Symmetry Argument is able to withstand it.

Lucretius' Symmetry Argument

The Symmetry Argument has inspired great contention among scholars of Epicureanism. It was put forward by Titus Lucretius Carus, a Roman poet and philosopher writing in the first century BCE.⁵⁸ Lucretius is very explicit in his desire to present Epicurean doctrine in a Latinised form, a task that he acknowledges is difficult (*D.R.N.* 1.136-45). He does not claim to make any original contribution to the philosophy (*D.R.N.* 3.3-6). It is therefore likely that the 'novel' arguments in

⁵⁸ Smith (in Rouse, 1975), x-xiv. Very little is known about the life of Lucretius. He was evidently an educated aristocrat, widely read, and fluent in both Greek and Latin (Kenney, 1970, 369). Lucretius was a devout Epicurean who dedicated his six-book poem, *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), to the physical and ethical theories of Epicureanism. His text is didactic epic, designed to teach Epicurean philosophy. The addressee of the poem is Memmius (*DRN*, 1.21-27), likely the prominent Roman politician Gaius Memmius. He is addressed, not as a patron, but as the object of attempted moral reformation and conversion to Epicureanism. According to Smith (in Rouse, 1975), xliii-xlix, Memmius was the son-in-law of Sulla, enjoyed the position of *tribunus plebis* in 66, praetor in 58, propraetor of Bithynia in 57, and unsuccessful candidate for the consulship in 54. He was also a patron of poets (including the famous Catullus) and was the subject of some measure of political and personal scandal. He was therefore a fitting representative of the Roman elite who could benefit from the Epicurean message. It would seem, judging by the choice of Memmius as the addressee and the choice of poetry as the medium of the message, that Lucretius was targeting the cultured Roman elite as his audience and his aim was to convince them of the wisdom of Epicureanism. The choice of poetry as the medium is also rather unorthodox for an Epicurean; Epicurus himself states that a wise man should be able to discuss poetry and music, but should not compose it (D.L. 10.121). However, Lucretius claims that it serves the purpose of sweetening the somewhat unpalatable Epicurean doctrine, comparing himself to a doctor administering medicine in a cup rimmed with honey (*D.R.N.* 1.936-950). See Segal (1990) for a discussion of the interplay between Lucretius' poetry and philosophy.

his work, including the Symmetry Argument, were initially established in Epicurus' lost work *Περὶ Φύσεως (On Nature)*.⁵⁹

The third book of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* focuses on the nature of the soul.⁶⁰ After describing the atomic constitution of the soul (*D.R.N.* 3.94-322), Lucretius posits numerous arguments to demonstrate that the soul is mortal, in order to support the claim that 'death is nothing to us'. These arguments initially rely on commitment to the established claim that the soul is a physical component of the body, and as such, the fates of both body and soul are inextricably linked. For instance, that which affects the body (*corpus*) also affects the mind (*animus*), such as age, pain, alcohol, and medicine (*D.R.N.* 3.425-525). Having drawn conclusions from observable phenomena that link the mind with the body, Lucretius constructs arguments that gently ridicule the contrasting view that the soul is immortal. For instance, if a soul were immortal, it would have to exist prior to a body and would therefore have to be reduced to the mental capability of an infant when it entered a newly born body. This is plainly absurd, as is the idea that there are numerous souls jostling to enter a new body (*D.R.N.* 3.760-784).⁶¹

The soul perishes at the moment of death, and with it, any possibility of experience. There is no afterlife to endure and no threat of post-mortem suffering. Lucretius proceeds to argue that death therefore cannot be harmful, and it is here that he introduces the Symmetry Argument. There are two key passages:⁶²

⁵⁹ Sedley (1998), 62-91;134-5, argues that *On Nature* was Lucretius' only source, although this is open to debate (see Farrell (2009), 76).

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the rhetoric and diatribe of Lucretius in Book III specifically, see Wallach (1976).

⁶¹ West (1975), 95-116, offers a detailed and insightful analysis of Lucretius' methods of argument with regards to the soul being mortal.

⁶² All translations of *De Rerum Natura* are from Rouse (1975), unless stated otherwise.

Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinent hilum,
quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur;
et, velut anteacto nil tempore sensimus aegri,
ad confligendum venientibus undique Poenis,
omnia cum belli trepido concussa tumultu
horrida contremuere sub altis aetheris auris,
in dubioque fuere utrorum ad regna cadendum
omnibus humanis esset terraque marique,
sic ubi non erimus, cum corporis atque animai
discidium fuerit, quibus e sumus uniter apti,
scilicet haud nobis quicquam, qui non erimus tum,
accidere omnino poterit sensumque movere,
non si terra mari miscebitur et mare caelo.

Therefore death is nothing to us, it matters not one jot, since the nature of mind is understood to be mortal; and as in time past we felt no distress, while from all quarters the Carthaginians were coming to the conflict,⁶³ when the whole world, shaken by the terrifying tumult of war, shivered and quaked under the lofty and breezy heaven, and was in doubt under which domination all men were destined to fall by land and sea; so, when we shall no longer be, when the parting shall have come about between body and spirit from which we are now compacted into one whole, then sure enough nothing at all will be able to happen to us, who will then no longer be, or to make us feel, not if earth be commingled with sea and sea with sky.

D.R.N. 3.832-842

Respice item quam nil ad nos anteacta vetustas
temporis aeterni fuerit, quam nascimur ante.
hoc igitur speculum nobis natura futuri
temporis exponit post mortem denique nostram.

Look back also and see how the ages of everlasting time past before we were born have been to us nothing. This therefore is a mirror which nature holds up to us, showing the time to come after we at length shall die.

D.R.N. 3.972-975

The argument seems relatively straightforward. If one is concerned by the absence of existence after death, one need only to compare it to the non-existence that occurred before one's birth, an everlasting time (*temporis aeterni*) when one did not suffer any mental or physical distress. In

⁶³ This mention of war with the Carthaginians is a reference to the Second Punic War, some two hundred years prior.

the future, after one's death, there likewise will be an everlasting time free from pain. Thus, pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence are symmetrical. In both cases alike there is neither distress nor suffering.

There are two possible ways to interpret Lucretius' argument, succinctly described by Warren.⁶⁴ Version 1, as he coins it, concerns the *time during* non-existence. It states that our pre-natal non-existence was nothing to us before we were born. Therefore, since the two states are symmetrical, our post-mortem non-existence will be nothing to us after death. Version 2, however, concerns our *present attitudes*. It states that when we look back during our lifetime at our pre-natal non-existence, it is nothing to us now. Therefore, since the two states are symmetrical, when we look forward during our lifetime to our anticipated post-mortem non-existence, it is nothing to us now.

There is some debate as to which version of the Symmetry Argument was intended by Lucretius. While the two versions are not mutually exclusive, they each invite very different avenues of discussion. The version that one favours therefore greatly informs how one engages with the symmetry debate. Of the two possible interpretations of Lucretius' Symmetry Argument, Version 1 is the least controversial. Owing to the inherently binary relationship between 'existence' and 'non-existence', there is very little reason to argue that past non-existence is relevantly different to future non-existence *while it is in effect*. In either case, there can be no subject at all. It precisely echoes Epicurus' second principal saying,⁶⁵ and therefore serves as an argument against the fear of 'being dead'. In contrast, Version 2 offers an argument against the

⁶⁴ Warren (2004), 62. See also, Warren (2001a).

⁶⁵ *Kyria Doxa 2*: ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ· τὸ δ' ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς; Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling, and that which has no feeling is nothing to us.

fear of ‘mortality’ and would thus serve as an addition to the above argument, as opposed to a repetition or reinforcement of it. Version 2 is therefore the more attractive possibility. However, the evidence seems to favour Version 1.

The tenses of the verb in the first passage clearly convey the argument of Version 1, with *sensimus* (perfect; we felt) securely situating lack of distress in the past and *erimus* (future; we shall be) creating a parallel feeling in the future. There is no indication in this first passage of an identifiable symmetry between present attitudes towards pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence. The symmetry exclusively refers to feelings (or lack thereof) during the time at which we are non-existent.

The intention of the second passage is more ambiguous and may allude to present attitudes. The present imperative *respice* (look back) seems to invite the interpretation of Version 2. The metaphor of looking through the *speculum* (mirror) reinforces this, conjuring up the mental image of oneself looking to past non-existence with an apathetic attitude, and having this attitude reflected in how one then contemplates future non-existence.⁶⁶ However, it is again the tense of the verb that gives us pause. Rather than stating that past non-existence *is* to us nothing, Lucretius states that it *has been* to us nothing. The verb *fuert* is perfect rather than present (*sit*), which suggests that, as in the first passage, Lucretius is discussing one’s lack of feeling *during* past non-existence and not one’s *present attitude* towards past non-existence. If Lucretius had intended to demonstrate present attitudes, he would have needed to use the present tense. Warren

⁶⁶ Of course, the fact that the mirror metaphor appears to encourage the interpretation of Version 2 does not mean that it is inconsistent with Version 1.

expresses no doubt that this evidence is conclusive and that Lucretius' symmetry argument is only intended to convey Version 1.⁶⁷ This is reminiscent of Furley's appeal to the tense evidence:

Lucretius does not argue here from the observation that we are not *now* concerned about what happened in the Punic Wars to the claim that we should not *now* be concerned about anything that may happen after our death. He argues that we felt no pain in the past, when the Carthaginians came: so we shall feel no pain in the future, when we are dead. The tenses of the verbs are conclusive about this; there is no statement at all about our present emotions.

Furley (1986), 76

Nevertheless, there are many who are convinced that Lucretius' intention in the second passage is to establish symmetry between our present attitudes towards past and future non-existence, despite the past tenses of the verbs. Some scholars, such as Kamm, Belshaw, and Mitsis, implicitly assume Version 2 without directly engaging in the debate over which interpretation is most appropriate.⁶⁸ This is exemplified by the summary that Mitsis offers of Lucretius' Symmetry Argument.⁶⁹

Lucretius alludes in this passage to a common asymmetry in our attitudes towards death and prenatal non-existence: most of us find it painful to think about our death and its deprivations, but we seem completely unconcerned about our previous non-existence and its deprivations.

Mitsis (1989), 306

⁶⁷ Warren (2004), 64-67.

⁶⁸ Kamm (1993), 25; Belshaw (1993), 103; Mitsis (1989), 306. Whether the popularity of supporting Version 2 is due to a common conviction that it is the correct interpretation or due to ignorance of the debate is unclear.

⁶⁹ This can be contrasted to Glannon (1994), 236, who, likewise without engaging in the explicit debate, demonstrates that his interpretation of Lucretius' Symmetry Argument is consistent with Warren's Version 1: "Herein lies the "mirror-image" argument. It says that neither the time before we existed nor the time after we cease to exist can be good or bad for us, precisely because we cannot experience pleasure or pain at either time. Hence the state of the world before we were born and the state of the world after we die are equally devoid of value for us. This judgment underwrites the claim that we have no reason – now or at any time when we exist as persons – to fear death".

Others are explicit in their interpretation of Version 2, such as Rosenbaum, who argues directly against Furley's conclusion.⁷⁰ Interestingly, Rosenbaum agrees with him that the tenses in the second passage point to the past, but remains entirely convinced that Lucretius is concerned with the symmetry of present attitudes, seemingly due to the conviction that an argument against fearing death *ought* to target presently held attitudes. He argues that this is clear from the surrounding context of the symmetry passages, which contains reference to attitudes, fears, and anxieties. This is a weak assertion, for while it demonstrates that Lucretius cares about the anxieties that plague his fellow man, it does not dictate that the symmetry argument *specifically* is about symmetrical attitudes rather than symmetrical experiences. Rosenbaum makes the following statement:

Lucretius' symmetry argument may justifiably be taken to be about present attitudes, not simply past and future attitudes. It seems clear that the symmetry comments are directed against death anxiety during one's life.

Rosenbaum (1989b), 359

If Rosenbaum intends here to hinge his second statement on his first, then he is mistaken.⁷¹ Lucretius is undeniably aiming to eradicate death anxiety within one's lifetime. He is explicit and unambiguous in this purpose. But this does *not* rely on Lucretius arguing that our attitudes are symmetrical.

Warren has been able to offer further linguistic support of Version 1 beyond the tense of the verbs. He has suggested a variation on the traditional translation of the second passage which eliminates a great deal of ambiguity. He takes the phrase *quam nascimur ante* (before we were

⁷⁰ Rosenbaum (1989), 358-360.

⁷¹ Note that while Rosenbaum differs in his interpretation, he does support the effectiveness of the Symmetry Argument, and defends it against critics who assert asymmetry. See Rosenbaum (1989), 372-373.

born) as qualifying *fuert* (was to us) rather than amplifying *anteacta vetustas* (the ages of everlasting time past).⁷² Warren frames the original translation (which is consistent with Rouse, above) as follows:

Look back at how all the immense amount of time before we were born was nothing to us.

Warren's adaptation reads:

Look back at how all the previous immense amount of time was nothing to us before we were born.

This alternate translation situates the attitude towards the past non-existence *in the past*, contemporaneously with the experience, thus removing the possibility of interpreting this argument as Version 2.

I argue that Lucretius' intention with the Symmetry Argument is to establish the symmetrical experiences of non-existence that bracket one's life (Version 1), with the hope that acceptance of this symmetry would produce symmetrical attitudes in the present. The notion of symmetrical present attitudes (Version 2) should therefore be considered a desired outcome of the Symmetry Argument, rather than a premise. It is entirely logical that if one commits to the argument that neither state of non-existence is harmful in any way, then one's response to both states of non-existence should be a present lack of concern. Indeed, Lucretius seems fully aware that asymmetrical attitudes towards past and future non-existence are the norm, and he believes that this is leading to unnecessary anguish. His attempt to convince his audience that the experience is symmetrical is based on the premise that many currently have asymmetrical attitudes, and that this is based on the false belief that post-mortem non-existence is harmful in a

⁷² Warren (2004), 67.

way that pre-natal non-existence is not. In other words, Lucretius is not trying to demonstrate that we *do* have symmetrical attitudes, but that we *should* have symmetrical attitudes.⁷³

The evidence of the verb tenses is itself sufficiently convincing that Lucretius intends to argue for symmetry between the experience of non-existence rather than attitudes towards non-existence during one's lifetime. The translation offered by Warren adds further justification for this interpretation. It is therefore extremely doubtful that Lucretius' Symmetry Argument offers anything more than reinforcement against the fear of being dead. If Lucretius intended Version 2 of the argument, it would be considered an attempt to also combat the fear of mortality, or the fear that one is going to die. The evidence thus far indicates that this is not the case. However, this does not negate the significance of the discussion surrounding Version 2, which remains a relevant challenge within Epicurean ethics. The fear of mortality must be addressed in order to successfully eradicate death-related anxieties, and the wealth of modern debate in reaction to the interpretation of Version 2 is entirely bound up with concerns over the potential harms resulting from mortal existence.

The Symmetry Argument should be interpreted as additional support in the form of a persuasive analogy for the central Epicurean claim that 'death is nothing to us.' This central assertion has, of course, not gone uncontested. An argument that seeks to undermine this claim is the Deprivation Account.

⁷³ Feldman (2011), 316, also makes this point, as does Kaufman (2011), 118.

Symmetry vs. Deprivation

Deprivation & The Badness of Death

The Symmetry Argument relies on the basic conviction that both pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence are essentially the same. This is the case regardless of whether one leans towards to the interpretation of Version 1 or Version 2. It is therefore worth examining contributions to the debate that adopt either interpretation. In the case of the former, one simply needs to agree that the ‘experience’ (or ‘non-experience’, as the case may be) is the same during the state of non-existence. This is straightforward and uncontroversial. In the case of the latter, however, one would need to accept that our attitudes towards past and future non-existence do not reasonably differ. As scholarly debate demonstrates, this position is considered by many to be counterintuitive. The goal of anyone who is attempting to discredit the Symmetry Argument is therefore to illustrate and justify asymmetry between past and future non-existence, thus explaining why our present attitudes reasonably differ.

The argument that stands the tallest against Symmetry is Deprivation. The Deprivation Account was introduced by Nagel, who argues against the Epicurean stance that death cannot be harmful by claiming that the harm comes in the form of depriving the deceased of the goods of life. Nagel accepts that there is no post-mortem subject, and that death, being ‘nothing’, can only be considered a ‘neutral’ state rather than a negative one. The harm resulting from death is therefore not due to the addition of something negative (i.e. pain), but the removal (i.e. loss) of something positive:

It is *being* alive, *doing* certain things, having certain experiences, that we consider good. But if death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or non-existent, or unconscious, that is objectionable.

Nagel (1979), 3

This is a compelling argument, both intuitively and logically. Death is often expressed as a sense of loss, either for those who are grieving at the loss of a loved one, or for the deceased who have lost their life and their future. The Deprivation Account is also consistent with the Epicurean hedonist framework, in which pleasure has the greatest value. Cutting someone off from current or potential pleasure would surely be viewed as harmful to a hedonist.

Not only does this argument threaten to undermine the very heart of the Epicurean stance against death – that it is ‘nothing to us’ and therefore not harmful – but it also makes a case for asymmetry. A relevant difference between pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence is proposed here, which is the fact that life is lived in the interim. Life does not exist before pre-natal non-existence, but it certainly does before post-mortem non-existence. Post-mortem non-existence therefore marks the loss of life and the cessation of potential pleasure, unlike pre-natal non-existence, where there can be no loss or cessation (even if potential pleasures are yet to be realised). This is a difficult position to argue against.

Nevertheless, a simple and powerful defence is offered by Lucretius himself:

“Iam iam non domus accipiet te laeta neque uxor
optima, nec dulces occurrent oscula nati
praeripere et tacita pectus dulcedine tangent.
non poteris factis florentibus esse, tuisque
praesidium. misero misere,” aiunt, “omnia ademit
una dies infesta tibi tot praemis vitae.”
illud in his rebus non addunt: “nec tibi earum
iam desiderium rerum super insidet una.”
quod bene si videant animo dictisque sequantur,

dissoluant animi magno se angora metuque...

Hoc etiam faciunt ubi discubere tenentque
pocula saepe homines et inumbrant ora coronis,
ex animo ut dicant: "brevis hic est fructus homullis;
iam fuerit neque post umquam revocare licebit."
tamquam in morte mali cum primis hoc sit eorum,
quod sitis exurat miseros atque arida torrat,
aut aliae cuius desiderium insideat rei.
nec sibi enim quisquam tum se vitamque requirit,
cum pariter mens et corpus sopita quiescunt;
nam licet aeternum per nos sic esse soporem,
nec desiderium nostri nos adficit ullum.

"No longer now will your happy home give you welcome, no longer will your best of wives; no longer will your sweet children race to win the first kisses, and thrill your heart to its depths with sweetness. You will no longer be able to live in prosperity, and to protect your own. Poor man, poor man!" they say, "one fatal day has robbed you of all these prizes of life." But they do not go on to add: "No longer too does any craving possess you for these things." If they could see this clearly in mind and so conform their speech, they would free themselves from great anguish and fear of mind...

This also is the way among men, when they have laid themselves down at table and hold goblets in their hands and shade their brows with garlands, that they often say from their hearts: "Short enjoyment is given to poor mankind; soon it will be gone, and none will ever be able to recall it." As if after death their chief trouble will be to be miserably consumed and parched by a burning thirst, or a craving possess them for some other thing! In fact, no one feels the want of himself and his life when both mind and body alike are quiet in sleep; for all we care that sleep might be everlasting, and no craving for ourselves touches us at all.

D.R.N. 3.894-903; 3.912-922

Lucretius targets those who are grieving the loss of a loved one and those who are anticipating their own demise. In both instances, the source of grief is the belief that the deceased will be deprived, either of the joy of seeing their family or indulging in the goods that life has to offer. Lucretius seeks to remind them that there will also be no post-mortem desire or craving for these things. The deceased no longer exists and therefore experiences neither loss nor harm. So, even if an Epicurean were forced to concede that there is harm in the form of a loss, there would be no-

one to experience it regardless. Lucretius' method of countering the fear of being deprived is to fall back on the mantra 'death is nothing to us.' In this instance, Lucretius is specifically alluding to the meaning that *we* are nothing after death.⁷⁴ In the absence of existence there can be no experience. But there can also be no desire and therefore no deprivation. Essentially, the argument is that there cannot be harm where there is no subject to experience it. This, I would argue, is logically sound. However, scholars have found something unsatisfying about it. It is not especially effective in softening anxiety towards one's impending death. It, like Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument, offers a defence only against the fear of being dead, but nothing against the fear of mortality. The fear of mortality is the present fear that one's life is going to end. It is surely this fear that represents the greatest threat to one's happiness, and therefore this fear that ought to preoccupy the Epicureans. Lucretius' arguments thus far, however, seem solely concerned with the fear of being dead. The other 'threads' of fear – that of mortality, premature death, and the dying process – are largely ignored.⁷⁵ Of course, it has been demonstrated that the most appropriate interpretation of Lucretius' Symmetry Argument is that it is purely designed to establish symmetry between the two states of non-existence that bracket one's life. This means that the Symmetry Argument itself survives this particular objection, but the overall Epicurean stance that 'death is nothing to us' is still open to criticism.

The Necessity of Experience

Lucretius' argument that there is no post-mortem subject has inspired an interest in the notion that something could be harmful *without* a subject to experience that harm. If it could be proven

⁷⁴ As opposed to the other meaning of the phrase, that we are not troubled by death, or we care nothing about death.

⁷⁵ Fear of the dying process would have been considered already dealt with, as it can be reduced to a fear of pain.

theoretically possible that something can be harmful even in the absence of experience, it would directly contradict the Epicurean claim that ‘death is nothing to us’, and lend considerable support to the notion that death is bad because it deprives the deceased of life. Nagel presents a scenario in which harm is inflicted on someone without their knowledge or experience. This is intended to be analogous with death, as a deceased person could not be aware of any suffering or harm.⁷⁶ Nagel considers the hypothetical case of a man whose life is irrevocably altered by a brain injury:

Suppose an intelligent person receives a brain injury that reduces him to the mental condition of a contented infant, and that such desires as remain to him can be satisfied by a custodian, so that he is free from care. Such a development would be widely regarded as a severe misfortune, not only for his friends and relations, or for society, but also, and primarily, for the person himself. This does not mean that a contented infant is unfortunate. The intelligent adult who has been *reduced* to this condition is the subject of the misfortune. He is the one we pity, though of course he does not mind his condition – there is some doubt, in fact, whether he can be said to exist any longer.

Nagel (1979), 5-6

Nagel’s man experiences a misfortune in the form of brain trauma. Following this trauma, the man is unable to comprehend that he has experienced any harm. The man is clearly happy in his ignorance and all of his needs are met.⁷⁷ This is presented as an example in which something can be bad for someone even though they do not actually experience it. Other scenarios that attempt to demonstrate this possibility include undiscovered deception or betrayal by a friend.⁷⁸ Nagel intends for this case to serve as a parallel of his conception of death; the state of death is not

⁷⁶ Nagel (1979), 5.

⁷⁷ Having one’s basic needs met is, of course, all that is really necessary to fulfil the Epicurean criteria for happiness (*Kyria Doxa* 21).

⁷⁸ These scenarios are suggested in passing by Nagel (1979), 5, and explored in depth by Warren (2004), 24-34, who ultimately finds them wanting.

negative because the experience is bad, but because death deprives the subject of life.⁷⁹ Nagel's man is unable to pursue the life that he otherwise would have, and is thus deprived by the brain injury; yet, he is happy after the injury. This is a crucial point: Nagel needs the subject of harm to be the version of the man that exists *prior* to the injury in order for it to be appropriately comparable to death because he accepts that there is no post-mortem subject. Nagel also attempts to demonstrate the possibility of harm that is temporally distant from its subject. He claims that there *is* a subject, but the subject precedes the harm.⁸⁰

However, while these scenarios present agreed-upon 'bad things' in conjunction with a lack of knowledge on the part of the 'victim', they are not adequate analogies for death. Rosenbaum argues the case that *existence* is the key difference between these scenarios and death. The continued existence of the brain-damaged man (or the deceived man) makes it incomparable to death, which is defined by the cessation of existence.⁸¹ This is contested by Kaufman, who claims that there is sufficient similarity between the brain-damaged man and the deceased in the sense that it is impossible for either to experience the life that they are being denied.⁸² With this line of thought, it is not existence but rather the ability to experience which is the necessary condition for comparison. However, Rosenbaum's issue is still relevant. One can certainly see a parallel between the brain-damaged man and the deceased, in the sense that the life that they would have led (were it not for the interruption of trauma or death) is no longer a

⁷⁹ Nagel (1979), 4: "If we are to make sense of the view that to die is bad, it must be on the ground that life is a good and death is the corresponding deprivation or loss, bad not because of any positive features but because of the desirability of what it removes." This view is reliant on the assumption that life is inherently positive, and not just a means by which to experience that which is positive.

⁸⁰ Nagel (1979), 5: "It therefore seems to me worth exploring the position that most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment – and that while this subject can be exactly located in a sequence of places and times, the same is not necessarily true of the goods and ills that befall him."

⁸¹ Rosenbaum (1987), 212.

⁸² Kaufman (1999), 2.

potential reality. Yet, existence is not merely a conduit for experience. As has been established, the Epicurean definition of death is *complete* annihilation. It is not a long sleep in which the deceased is numb and unable to feel anything. It is the eradication of the self. Existence and sense-experience must be kept distinct.

It could be argued that if the brain damage suffered by the man is extensive enough to alter his psychology, then it *is* a form of death.⁸³ Indeed, Nagel alludes to this (above), apparently in an attempt to divorce the pre-trauma version of the man from his post-trauma counterpart and strengthen the comparison to death (where there is no post-mortem counterpart). In examining the Epicurean notion of self-identity, it has become plain that cumulative memory and experience are vital in the formation of one's self. This is emphasised by Lucretius' argument against hypothetical reincarnation (*D.R.N.* 3.847-860), in which he claims that the interruption of memory between death and rebirth is enough of an identity change that the deceased individual and the individual who is reborn are actually two completely different people with unique concepts of self. If the brain-damaged man is reduced to a mental state that is inconsistent with the previous version of his self, then the version of his self before the trauma is no longer existent and is effectively dead. Using this framework of understanding, the brain-damaged man is directly comparable to the deceased. This appears to undermine the Epicurean position by forcing them to concede either that *both* the brain-damaged man and the deceased are harmed, or that *neither* of them is. However, an Epicurean could very reasonably take the latter argument. If it is conceded that the pre-trauma man is dead, and the brain-damaged man is a different psychophysical being, then it is perfectly logical to conclude that the pre-trauma man is not

⁸³ This position is examined briefly by Kaufman (1999), 2-4. He favours the opinion that it threatens the Epicurean argument by coercing them into the position that nothing bad has happened to the brain-damaged man (when 'clearly' something bad has happened).

suffering in the slightest, precisely because he no longer exists to suffer. Nagel's effort to closely align his pre-trauma man with an ante-mortem person does not actually offer sufficient evidence that they are harmed. Neither exists after trauma or death to experience any kind of deprivation. Nor does Nagel's attempt to temporally separate the subject and the harm that befalls them fix this issue, for the effect of the harm cannot precede its cause.⁸⁴ This case study simply does not demonstrate how something could be considered harmful when there is no subject to experience the harm. The brain-damaged man is also not suffering because his needs are met and he is not in pain. Lucretius' argument that desire is a necessary condition for deprivation is therefore relevant here. If the brain-damaged man does not wish for anything beyond his basic needs, and these needs are met, then he meets the criteria for happiness. He is in a state of ἀταραξία and therefore εὐδαιμονία. An Epicurean can therefore claim that the man has not been harmed. There is nevertheless considerable resistance to this conclusion. There seems to be some concern that genuinely believing that the brain damage has not harmed this person is counterintuitive and rather cold-blooded. But, if this reaction is determined to be the result of a false belief (that the man has been harmed), then this fear is wholly unnecessary, and it is precisely what the Epicureans are attempting to fix. The notion that this perceived harm is actually 'false' invites the question of what is considered to be 'truly' harmful within the Epicurean framework.

The Epicurean Definition of Harm

The disagreement over whether the brain-damaged man is harmed raises an integral issue: what exactly constitutes 'harm' in this context, and is it distinguishable from something 'bad'? According to Epicurean hedonism, they are essentially the same thing. Pain, be it mental or

⁸⁴ See Warren (2004), 48-50.

physical harm, is bad. It would seem that something could only be considered bad in terms of the pain that it causes.⁸⁵ It is therefore fundamentally necessary for there to be a subject that is harmed in order for something to be considered bad within the Epicurean framework.

Fred Feldman attempts to make a distinction between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ harms, which directly or indirectly cause pain, respectively. He argues that things such as illness, poverty, and ignorance cause harm only indirectly and are thus extrinsically bad. Death, he claims, also falls into this category, as he concedes that it cannot be directly experienced but nevertheless causes harm indirectly (in the form of deprivation).⁸⁶ However, as Warren elucidates, extrinsic evils are considered to be evils because they cause an intrinsic bad (pain) or prevent an intrinsic good (pleasure). As such, it is possible to reduce all extrinsic evils to intrinsic evils, blurring and removing the need for the distinction between the two.⁸⁷ In essence, it remains that the only true evil is pain, even if the road to pain is more convoluted in some situations compared to others. It is therefore a reasonable Epicurean argument to claim that neither the brain-damaged man nor the deceased have suffered any harm. Feldman anticipates this issue and attempts to counter it by demonstrating that there can be genuine extrinsic evils that do not produce intrinsic evils. He describes the following scenario:

⁸⁵ An implication of this argument is that the intent to cause harm may not be considered bad if no harm actually occurs. This is morally problematic; however, the Epicureans argue that virtuous behaviour is naturally reinforced by their hedonism, as the unjust are plagued by guilt and fear, which are forms of mental pain. This is laid out in *Kyria Doxa* 17: Ὁ δίκαιος ἀταρακτότατος, ὁ δ’ ἄδικος πλείστης ταραχῆς γέμων (The just man enjoys the greatest peace of mind, while the unjust is full of the utmost disquietude), as well as *Kyria Doxa* 34: Ἡ ἀδικία οὐ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν κακόν, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ κατὰ τὴν ὑποψίαν φόβῳ, εἰ μὴ λήσει τοὺς ὑπὲρ τῶν τοιούτων ἐφεσθηκότας κολαστάς (Injustice itself is not an evil, but only in its consequence, viz. the terror which is excited by apprehension that those appointed to punish such offences will discover the injustice). Cf. *Sent. Vat.* 7. For some modern discussions of Epicurean justice, see Van den Steen (2009), 137-150, O’Keefe (2001a), 133-146, and Armstrong (1997), 324-334.

⁸⁶ Feldman (1992), 133-5. Kaufman (1999), 3, finds this to be a convincing argument, stating that “Feldman’s distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic evils easily explains why Nagel’s brain-damaged man suffered a misfortune, and in a way acceptable to the Epicurean, at least insofar as the Epicurean admits that the man still exists. Since this is so, and since deprivation need not be experienced as such (as argued above) our confidence in the deprivation account as the correct response to Epicurus’ challenge is increased.”

⁸⁷ Warren (2004), 29.

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 marvellously 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.

Feldman (1992), 137-8

Feldman argues that this example illustrates a situation in which something is bad for someone (being born in Country A) even though it does not cause pain. It is an extrinsic evil that cannot be reduced to an intrinsic evil. The badness is found not in pain, but in being deprived of pleasure that would otherwise have been experienced. This is the kind of harm that Feldman attributes to death – not that it causes pain, but that it deprives the subject under consideration of intrinsic value.⁸⁸ There are three significant factors to consider about Feldman’s proposal. The first is that it is necessary in such examples for the subject to be unaware that they are being harmed in some way. If the subject were to perceive the harm, it could be considered an intrinsic evil as it would result in some form of mental pain. This is also the only way in which the situation could be analogous to death, as the deceased are not capable of awareness. The second factor is that the subject is living a genuinely contented existence. This must be the case or the harm would again be attributed to intrinsic evil.⁸⁹ The third factor is that the nature of extrinsic evil is purely comparative; the only case in which it can be considered an evil is when the subject would otherwise have been in a better situation.⁹⁰ That something is comparatively worse does

⁸⁸ Feldman (1992), 139, is very clear on this point, stating that it would be absurd to assert that death is an intrinsic evil, as it is not a form of pain.

⁸⁹ Warren (2004), 30-31, discusses how an Epicurean could exploit the argument if the subject were aware of the harm they were experiencing or were in fact discontent.

⁹⁰ Feldman (1992), 138.

not necessitate the conclusion that it is *bad*. Indeed, Feldman must concede that the life that is in fact lived by the subject is not bad in of itself. Feldman is therefore reaching beyond his grasp by concluding that the subject is suffering any harm by living their comparatively worse life. The comparative account can *only* make value judgements in the context of the comparison.⁹¹

So, the subject must be genuinely content and unaware that their life is deficient compared to an unknowable alternative. This begs the question: where exactly is the harm? In pursuing an example of how someone could be harmed without experiencing it, Feldman appears to have completely abandoned the Epicurean perspective, despite his claim to the contrary.⁹² As has been established, the Epicurean concept of pleasure is simply a state without pain.⁹³ The above example rules out even the possibility of pain lest it be ruled as intrinsic. The subject does not experience any discontent or awareness of their life's comparative deficiency. Nor do they suffer from unfulfilled desires, as they do not know that they should wish for alternative circumstances. This example does not effectively illustrate that one can be harmed without experiencing it. In the attempt to do so, what has been described is a normal, content life. It would seem that the 'harm' would only come into effect when the individual is informed of what

⁹¹ Draper (1999), 389, is very assertive in making the argument that a comparatively worse situation does not entail it being *bad*. He states: "It would imply that I have suffered a terrible misfortune today in that I did not find Aladdin's lamp and hence have not been granted three wishes by an omnipotent genie". His point is that while finding the lamp would be better than not finding it, he is not currently suffering without it. Not finding it today also does not merit distress. Suits (2001), 69-72, is similarly unconvinced that 'comparatively worse' equates to 'harm', or that it warrants the conclusion that death is bad.

⁹² Feldman (1992), 157: "I have attempted to provide my answers within a fundamentally Epicurean framework".

⁹³ This is made explicit in *Kyria Doxa* 3, discussed above: "Όρος τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν ἡδονῶν ἢ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος ὑπεξάίρεσις. ὅπου δ' ἂν τὸ ἡδόμενον ἐνῆ, καθ' ὃν ἄ χρόνον ἦ, οὐκ ἔστι τὸ ἀλγοῦν ἢ τὸ λπούμενον ἢ τὸ συναμφότερον. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together. See also Cic. *Fin.* 1.37-9.

their life is missing; in which case, it is the awareness of a better possibility that causes the pain.⁹⁴

Perhaps the most significant issue with this example is that when the only kind of harm is comparative, *everything* could be considered harmful. Surely there is always the possibility of something being better than it is. One could ceaselessly fantasise about things being better than they are in actuality, and thus cause oneself pain as that better reality remains unattainable. Epicurus was well aware of this threat to happiness, and sought to encourage only desires that are natural, necessary, and attainable (Ep. *Men.* 127-8). The current reality could always be ‘deficient’ in some way compared to any number of alternatives. *Any* life would be harmful to the subject in this case. Warren also addresses this concern, and it is worth repeating:

If death can harm someone by marking their life deficient or revealing that it is deficient in comparison with another life they could have lived had they not died then, is it also true that while alive I am harmed because my life is deficient in comparison with another possible life I could be living (whether or not I have the slightest notion of the possibility of my living that other life)? Just a little thought could conjure up a huge variety of ways in which my life could be better than it is. The comparative harm approach, if left unrestricted, invites an enormous range of other lives in comparison with which my current life is better or worse and – in consequence – by which comparisons I seem to be being harmed and benefitted.

Warren (2004), 33

Warren calls for the addition of ‘limits of expectation’ to avoid the conclusion that not only is death *always* comparatively harmful, but so too is life. This particular attempt to identify a possible scenario in which death could be harmful has elicited the conclusion that death is *always* harmful.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ It might be argued that awareness would *reveal* the pain rather than cause it. However, because the supposed harm is purely comparative, there is no harm and therefore no pain when the comparison is not present.

⁹⁵ Warren (2004), 33.

It must be emphasised that the Deprivation Account is not intended to demonstrate that *all* death is harmful. Kaufman makes this very clear:

Death need not be a deprivation, however; hence death need not be an evil. The deprivation account is not committed to thinking that death is necessarily an evil. It all depends upon what would have happened had one not died when one did. The deprivation account purports to explain why death is bad, when death is bad. It is thus compatible with a particular death being bad – even one’s own death.

Kaufman (1999), 1

Warren’s appeal for limitation is therefore crucial for the validity of the Deprivation Account. Kaufman has argued that deprivation is limited by possibility, since a subject cannot be deprived of something that they were never able to have.⁹⁶ This, however, is entirely unsatisfactory. It remains to be seen what the limits of possibility are. Perhaps it is life expectancy. Anyone who lives beyond the life expectancy of, for instance, 80 years, is not deprived by death, but anyone who dies prior to this is? This is counterintuitive: there is no single point in an individual’s lifetime when life suddenly becomes less precious and is no longer considered a ‘loss’. Perhaps the ‘limits of possibility’ are instead determined on a case by case basis. If Jane is terminally ill and cannot possibly live beyond 20 years, then she is not deprived by death, yet 96-year-old John who dies in car accident is deprived? This must also be rejected: the inevitability of Jane’s death cannot make her death any less of a ‘loss’ than anyone else’s, because *everyone’s* death is inevitable. No-one can ‘expect’ to live any longer than they in fact do, and no-one can know how long they can expect to live until they are within death’s grasp.

⁹⁶ Kaufman (1999), 10-11. This kind of limitation does go some way to argue against scenarios such as that of the misfortune at not finding Aladdin’s lamp, as put forward by Draper (1999), 389, but it fails to get to the heart of the matter.

As it currently stands, the Deprivation Account is entirely too broad, inviting the notion that every life and every death is comparatively harmful. So far, the attempts at limiting what can be considered ‘deprivation’ are counterintuitive and fallacious. The burden remains on those who support the Deprivation Account to define these ‘limits of deprivation’ and identify how exactly death can cause ‘harm’ outside of an implausible comparative context. However, the Deprivation Account is not solely dedicated to proving the ‘evil’ of death; it is also offered as evidence of asymmetry, specifically to undermine the Symmetry Argument.

Accounting for Asymmetry

The Deprivation Account has been used to demonstrate and justify asymmetry between pre-natal and post-mortem existence. There is, however, some debate among those who support this argument as to the specific *cause* of the asymmetry. Nagel’s initial argument is founded on the notion that post-mortem non-existence constitutes a ‘loss’, where pre-natal non-existence does not. His claim is as follows:

This approach also provides a solution to the problem of temporal asymmetry, pointed out by Lucretius. He observed that no one finds it disturbing to contemplate the eternity preceding his own birth, and he took this to show that it must be irrational to fear death, since death is simply the mirror image of the prior abyss.⁹⁷ That is not true, however, and the difference between the two explains why it is reasonable to regard them differently. It is true that both the time before a man’s birth and the time after his death are times when he does not exist. But the time after his death is time of which his death deprives him. It is time in which, had he not died then, he would be alive.

Nagel (1979), 7

⁹⁷ Notice that Nagel is assuming here the interpretation of Warren’s ‘Version 2’ of Lucretius’ symmetry argument; that of present attitudes.

Nagel asserts that Lucretius' symmetry fails on account of a reasonable difference between pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence, which is that the latter deprives the deceased of life. However, the validity of this asymmetry has been questioned. If post-mortem non-existence deprives the individual of life, then is it possible that pre-natal non-existence is also a form of deprivation?

Nagel argues against this, attempting to reinforce the asymmetry by claiming that while it is possible for someone to die later than they do, it is impossible for one to be born earlier than they in fact are.⁹⁸ This line of thought has been interpreted in two ways. The first is that a person could only be *conceived* at a precise moment in time.⁹⁹ This is more of a biological approach, using the idea that a certain sperm will fertilise a certain egg at a certain time and this will produce a certain person. Any conception earlier or later than this specific time will result in the combination of a different sperm and egg. Our birth is therefore 'fixed' in time, while our death is not. The second interpretation is a matter of identity. This rests on the notion that one's experiences inform their identity from the moment of birth. Therefore, being born at a different time would result in different experiences and produce a different person. It is this interpretation which I believe to be Nagel's intention,¹⁰⁰ and with which I agree on the basis that it is in accordance with Epicurean notions of self-identity, as discussed above. If Nagel is correct in his

⁹⁸ Nagel (1979), 8.

⁹⁹ Rosenbaum (1989), 362, Johansson (2013), 53, and Mitsis (1988), 309 adopt this interpretation. This is examined and rejected by Kaufman (2011), 122-123, who maintains – very much in line with the Epicurean sense of self – that it is our biography and psychology that constitute who we are, rather than our genetic material.

¹⁰⁰ Nagel's phrasing is ambiguous enough to support either interpretation, but his subsequent statement that "Distinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings." leads me to favour the second interpretation, as it seems concerned with different life experiences. Kaufman (2011), 122-123, believes that Nagel was actually discussing birth in terms of gametes and genetic material. Kaufman's emphasis on the biographical and psychological constitution of an individual is therefore intended as an amendment to improve upon Nagel's original premise. While I am of the opinion that Nagel may have been considering the psychological implications, Kaufman's amendment removes the ambiguity, which greatly clarifies and strengthens the position.

argument that the time of one's birth is fixed, but not the time of one's death, then asymmetry is supported. Post-mortem non-existence can deprive the deceased of time that they otherwise may have been alive, while pre-natal non-existence does not. Kaufman favours this approach, arguing that it justifies the asymmetry of pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence:

Because possibility is a condition of deprivation – you cannot be deprived of things you cannot possibly have – and because a given biography or particular psychological continuum cannot possibly exist earlier than it in fact does, one cannot be deprived by prenatal nonexistence.

Kaufman (2011), 123

Brueckner and Fischer rather bluntly disagree with Nagel's assessment and Kaufman's amendment. They support the Deprivation Account, but they reject this explanation for asymmetry on the basis that they are unconvinced by such a 'controversial metaphysical claim' and see no reason why an individual could not have been born earlier or why the time of one's birth would be an essential property of that individual.¹⁰¹ They are not alone in this judgement. Johansson also finds Nagel's argument unsatisfactory, claiming that it is theoretically possible for one to be born earlier. Furthermore, even if it were impossible, this does not demonstrate that pre-natal non-existence does not deprive one of goods.¹⁰² This latter criticism can easily be dismissed, as the Deprivation Account clearly asserts that deprivation occurs only when the individual is deprived of something that they otherwise would have had. Therefore, if it *were* impossible for one to have been born earlier, they could not have experienced life sooner and thus could not have been deprived of life. These scholars' interpretation of Nagel's argument directly informs their resistance to the claim that one could not have been born earlier. Unlike Kaufman, they focus on the moment of birth in relation to a particular point in time, drawing the

¹⁰¹ Brueckner & Fischer (1986), 215.

¹⁰² Johansson (2013), 52-53.

conclusion that the two need not necessarily be related. However, they fail to consider the issue from the perspective of personal identity, which does indeed depend on a fixed time of birth.

Future-Oriented Bias

In their pursuit of a justification for asymmetry, Brueckner and Fischer nevertheless distance themselves from Nagel's fixed birth theory and turn towards Parfit, who offers the suggestion that we have a rational bias towards the future.¹⁰³ While Nagel argues that only post-mortem non-existence deprives the deceased (and therein lies the asymmetry), Parfit's model supports the notion that *both* past and future non-existence are forms of deprivation. We are simply more concerned about the future. This claim therefore serves to justify asymmetrical attitudes, rather than identify something inherently asymmetrical about the two states of non-existence. Parfit introduces the following scenario to demonstrate this bias:

I am in some hospital, to have some kind of surgery. Since this is completely safe, and always successful, I have no fears about the effects. The surgery may be brief, or it may take a long time. Because I have to cooperate with the surgeon, I cannot have anaesthetics. I have had this surgery once before, and I can remember how painful it is. Under a new policy, because the operation is so painful, patients are now afterwards made to forget it. Some drug removes their memories of the last few hours.

I have just woken up. I cannot remember going to sleep. I ask my nurse if it has been decided when my operation is to be, and how long it must take. She says that she knows the facts about both me and another patient, but she cannot remember which facts apply to whom. She can tell me only that the following is true. I may be the patient who had his operation yesterday. In that case, my operation was the longest ever performed, lasting ten hours. I may instead be the patient who is to have a short operation later today. It is either true that I did suffer for ten hours, or true that I shall suffer for one hour.

I ask the nurse to find out which is true. While she is away, it is clear to me which I prefer to be true. If I learn that the first is true, I shall be greatly relieved.

Parfit (1984), 165-6

¹⁰³ Parfit (1984), 165-166.

Parfit uses his example to demonstrate his argument that we naturally prefer pain to be in the past and pleasure to be in the future. This kind of inherent temporal bias may offer an objection to Lucretius' Symmetry Argument.

However, while Parfit's case offers an observation that favours the notion of an intuitive future bias, there is no indication that this asymmetrical attitude is necessary. If it is not necessary, then Lucretius' argument that we *ought* to have symmetrical attitudes remains unchallenged. As Warren illustrates, anyone who wishes to rely on the future bias as a counter argument to Lucretius' Symmetry would need to demonstrate either that our asymmetrical attitudes correspond to asymmetry inherent to past and future non-existence (in other words, that our attitudes are rational), or that our asymmetrical attitudes are fundamental to the human experience and are therefore inescapable, regardless of whether or not they are justified.¹⁰⁴

Parfit discusses some explanations to account for our bias towards the future. He is not expressly concerned with engaging in Epicurean debate.¹⁰⁵ Rather, his exploration of the potential reasons for the future-oriented bias is related more generally to attitudes towards time.

His first explanation concerns 'the direction of causation', which is the notion that our ability to influence the future (and not the past) explains the future bias.¹⁰⁶ This is an intuitively powerful idea; not only is the future accessible in a way that the past is not, but we can also actively influence it. Nevertheless, Parfit dismisses this explanation with the argument that this reasoning is inadequate, given that the future-oriented bias is still evident in situations when we are anticipating a future event over which we have no control. It also fails to distinguish between

¹⁰⁴ Warren (2004), 83-84.

¹⁰⁵ Parfit (1984), 175. However, when he does briefly direct his discussion towards Epicurean death philosophy, he argues that his identification of a future-oriented bias undermines the Epicurean assertion of symmetry.

¹⁰⁶ Parfit (1984), 168.

near and far future events, and thus offers no reason for a bias towards the near future.¹⁰⁷ However, bringing the issue directly into an Epicurean context, Warren points out that it is within our power to try and influence the circumstances surrounding our death (such as attempting to postpone it), whereas to alter circumstances of our birth is impossible.¹⁰⁸ This may lend some credence to the notion that a future-oriented bias is justified, as there is clear motivation for greater concern towards future non-existence. Yet, the ‘circumstances surrounding one’s death’ are not synonymous with ‘post-mortem non-existence’. While one may manipulate the circumstances of how one *dies*, the experience of *death* is beyond both experience and influence.

Parfit’s second potential explanation concerns ‘the passage of time’, which is the claim that the timing of an event is an essential property of that event.¹⁰⁹ As such, past and future non-existence differ due to the mere fact that the former has the characteristic of being in the past and the latter has the characteristic of being in the future. Without delving into the metaphysical implications of this claim, it is clear that it is not a complete explanation. While our attitudes differ towards past and future events, it seems far more plausible that this is owing to our subjective experience of time, rather than any inherent or independent quality of ‘pastness’ or ‘futureness’ attached to an event. Even if the timing of an event was an essential property, and events were different purely by virtue of being in the past or future, it seems that this difference would be largely inconsequential. Much in the same way that a reflection in a mirror displays a flipped image rather than an exact replica, the qualities of ‘pastness’ and ‘futureness’ may distinguish events, but they remain – if not identical – relevantly symmetrical.

¹⁰⁷ Parfit (1984), 168. See also Warren (2001b), 154-162.

¹⁰⁸ Warren (2004), 85.

¹⁰⁹ Parfit (1984), 177-178.

The third potential explanation discussed by Parfit concerns evolution, claiming that a future-oriented bias has been naturally selected and ingrained in human psychology.¹¹⁰ This argument does not, however, indicate that asymmetrical attitudes are rationally justified, but simply that they are a product of the evolutionary process. Lucretius' Symmetry Argument does not need to bow before an evolutionary argument as – again – his claim that we *should* have symmetrical attitudes remains unchallenged.¹¹¹

The explanations for the bias are therefore left wanting.¹¹² It would seem that while it is easy to accept the presence of a future-oriented bias, establishing the reason for it – and even more importantly, *justification* for it – is a much more elusive task. Despite his conviction that the future bias is rational, Parfit actually adopts a rather Epicurean attitude and advocates against the bias in favour of the value of happiness:

I believe that we ought not to be biased towards the future. This belief does not beg the question about the rationality of this bias. On any plausible moral view, it would be better if we were all happier. This is the sense in which, if we could, we ought not to be biased towards the future. In giving us this bias, Evolution denies us the best attitude to death.

Parfit (1986), 177

Not only does Parfit here demonstrate his firm confidence in the presence of the future-oriented bias, he also seems sure that this bias influences present attitudes towards death.

However, there is one inescapable issue with extrapolating this claim from Parfit's original scenario. The example is expressly concerned with the experience of pain. It therefore

¹¹⁰ Parfit (1984), 186.

¹¹¹ One could attempt to skirt the issue of 'should' and argue instead that an evolutionary explanation highlights some inherent characteristic of humans. However, 'inherent' does not necessarily equate to 'essential'. The validity of the evolutionary explanation is also doubtful. See below (n.183) for a discussion of arguments concerning some potential evolutionary justifications for the fear of death more generally.

¹¹² For further criticism of these explanations as discussed by Parfit, see Warren (2004), 82-93.

cannot be analogous with death. Brueckner and Fischer identified this issue and sought to circumnavigate it by appealing specifically to attitudes towards pleasure, rather than pain. Dedicated to the Deprivation Account as they are, Brueckner and Fischer assert that the badness of death is not due to the experience of pain, but to the cessation of pleasure. They therefore offer an equivalent to Parfit's example that focuses on past and future experiences of pleasure:

Imagine that you are in some hospital to test a drug. The drug induces intense pleasure for an hour followed by amnesia. You awaken and ask the nurse about your situation. She says that either you tried the drug yesterday (and had an hour of pleasure) or you will try the drug tomorrow (and will have an hour of pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow. There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes to "experienced goods" which is parallel to the asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced bads: we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures.

Brueckner & Fischer (1986), 218-219

This new example supposedly demonstrates that we have asymmetrical attitudes towards past and future deprivation (resulting from non-existence) because we care more about future experiences of pleasure than those of the past. Brueckner and Fischer go on to provide another example in further support of their argument:

It is now 1985 and you will live eighty years in any case. Suppose you are given the following choice. Either you were born in 1915 and will die in 1995, or you were born in 1925 and will die in 2005. In each case, we will suppose, your life contains the same amount of pleasure and pain, distributed evenly through time. It is quite clear that you would prefer the second option – you want your good experiences in the future.

Brueckner and Fischer (1986), 219

This second scenario seeks to illustrate that we inherently favour the notion of extending our lives into the future rather than into the past. This has inspired much debate. When asked to give a preference between extending one's life into the past (thus being born earlier) or into the future (thus dying later), the latter option would clearly be the more popular choice. This is relatively

uncontroversial,¹¹³ but the explanation as to *why* this asymmetrical attitude is so pervasive is far less certain. Brueckner and Fischer assert that it is due to the inherent bias towards future experiences as established by Parfit. However, this conclusion has been widely criticised, and many alternative explanations have been offered which warrant further examination.

Early Birth vs. Late Death

The question of why we intuitively prefer the idea of extending our lives with a later death rather than an earlier birth has been widely contemplated. Brueckner and Fischer argue that we are biased towards future experiences, as discussed above, and even go so far as to claim that we are *indifferent* to past pleasures.¹¹⁴ This is quite simply untrue. As any Epicurean would no doubt agree, our past experiences, linked to us through our memories, form an integral part of our being and are often a source of great pleasure when recalled.¹¹⁵ They are valuable to us and our attitudes reflect that.

Feldman also questions Brueckner and Fischer's claim that pre-natal non-existence is not bad for us and elicits no concern because it deprives us of past pleasures, to which we are indifferent. Feldman examines three possible interpretations of their argument, but finds each of them unsatisfactory in their attempt to demonstrate when death is bad for the individual who dies.¹¹⁶ The primary flaw identified by Feldman is that knowledge of oneself and anticipation of one's future is necessary in order for any indifference or positive bias to apply. Feldman

¹¹³ Grover (1987), 730-731, briefly considers some attitudes that would result in a desire for an earlier birth rather than a later death, but these are very specific (and somewhat questionable) cases.

¹¹⁴ Brueckner & Fischer (1986), 219.

¹¹⁵ See Chp. 1 above.

¹¹⁶ Feldman (2011), 313-315.

introduces two examples to illustrate this point: an infant who has no conception of what his future may hold or of what death is, and a 20-year-old student who does not know that she is expected to live a very fulfilling life.¹¹⁷ In both cases, the sudden death of the subject is an undeniable tragedy. Yet, neither one of the subjects is aware that they are being deprived of something positive. In other words, they are indifferent to their future positive experiences because they cannot be aware of what these experiences would entail. Feldman therefore finds Brueckner and Fischer's argument lacking in its attempt to identify the badness of death with temporally asymmetrical attitudes, as these attitudes may not exist in ignorant subjects.

Feldman's criticism led Brueckner and Fischer to adapt their argument as follows:

Death deprives us of something it is rational for individuals to care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something it is not rational for individuals to care about.

When death is bad for an individual *X*, it is bad for *X* because it is rational for *X* to care about the fact that if *X* dies, *X* will be deprived of some pleasant experiences (though *X* may not know what experiences these will be) that *X* otherwise would have enjoyed (whereas prenatal nonexistence is not bad for an individual because, even though it deprives him or her of pleasant experiences, it is not rational for an individual to care about the fact that if he or she is born late he or she will be deprived of some pleasant experiences).

Brueckner & Fischer (2013), 787

This amendment appears to solve the issue raised by Feldman, as it asserts that one can still be deprived of that which will be pleasurable in the future, but of which one is presently ignorant or unable to conceptualise. However, it also warrants further objection. Just as the Deprivation Account is generally lacking in limitation, so too is this notion of what it is 'rational to care about'. Brueckner and Fischer define their notion of rationality as similar to 'propositional justification', which is to say that sufficient reason is their condition for rationality rather than

¹¹⁷ Feldman (2011), 313-314.

knowledge or comprehension.¹¹⁸ What constitutes ‘sufficient reason’ is frustratingly vague, and only goes partway in establishing how ‘rational’ or ‘reasonable’ cares are determined. Perhaps the rationality of a care is determined by a kind of general intuition or, conversely, it is determined by the individual subject on a case-by-case basis. In the case of the former, there is the risk that individuals who do not share the ‘general’ definition of rational concern are to be considered deprived of goods. In the case of the latter, Feldman’s issue has not been appropriately addressed. How can the individual determine what is rational for them to care about if they have neither knowledge nor conception of both those cares and one’s self *in relation* to those cares? Brueckner and Fischer seem to be advocating for the idea that if one ‘would’ care about something if they did know about it, then it is a reasonable and rational care for them to have. I argue that whether one ‘would’ care about something is contingent on their sense of self and their personal identity. What one ‘would’ care about is subjective, differs between individuals (and cultures), and is most certainly subject to change over the course of one’s life. Any attempt to determine what one would or should care about ‘if only they knew’ is presumptuous at best.

Similarly baffled by the statement that we are indifferent to past experiences of pleasure, Belshaw offers a slightly different critique of Brueckner and Fischer’s argument. He demonstrates that the hospital scenario put forward by Brueckner and Fischer suggests indifference only towards pleasures which are forgotten and from which our present concerns are insulated.¹¹⁹ Belshaw’s own attempt to explain asymmetrical attitudes towards past and future non-existence harkens back to Nagel’s notion that our identity is bound up with the timing of our birth. He believes, as I do, that within the Epicurean framework, the present version of one’s self

¹¹⁸ Brueckner and Fischer (2013), 788.

¹¹⁹ Belshaw (1993), 108.

is contingent on past experiences. Therefore, if the past were to be altered in any way, so too would one's identity. Belshaw claims that, given the choice between extending one's life by being born earlier or dying later, one is more likely to choose the latter because the past is 'set' in one's mind, and all that one has experienced in the past has led to one's present self. The future, however, is open, in the sense that additional time in the future may increase the chances of fulfilling one's desires as they currently apply to the present version of one's self. Belshaw summarises this argument quite simply:

My claim, then, is that the widespread asymmetrical attitude is contingent upon the similarly widespread attitude about the causal relevance of the past to the present structure of our psychological selves. And insofar as it is reasonable to have these beliefs, so it is reasonable to have the attitude.

Belshaw (1993), 112

This explanation for asymmetry is more emotionally resonant than that of Brueckner and Fischer and is more attuned to the Epicurean sense of self. It offers a fair justification for one's tendency to prefer the notion of extending one's life through a later death rather than an earlier birth. Belshaw's claim is also somewhat immune to Feldman's concern with Brueckner and Fischer's argument. Rather than relying on notions of temporally relative preferences – the idea that we care more about future than past pleasures – Belshaw asserts that our attitudes rely on the implicit assumption that the past cannot be altered. For Belshaw, then, it does not matter if a subject is anticipating any particular kind of future; regardless, it is the future alone that holds *possibility*, and therein lies the asymmetry.

In an attempt to defend their argument, Brueckner and Fischer respond to Belshaw's criticism that they have demonstrated indifference to past pleasure only if the pleasure has been forgotten or is inconsequential. They contend that it is precisely the inaccessibility of these

pleasures that make them relevant to the issue of death.¹²⁰ This qualification lessens the force of their controversial claim that we are indifferent to past pleasures. The emphasis is then placed on context; in the context of choosing between an isolated pleasure in the past (which does not impact the present) and an isolated pleasure in the future (which likewise does not impact the present), one is more likely to choose a future pleasure. The only difference between the two pleasures is temporal, so it supports the notion of a future-oriented bias and therefore of asymmetrical attitudes towards past and future deprivation. Despite this adaptation, Brueckner and Fischer's argument is still rather shallow. The claim that we are indifferent to past pleasures remains unconvincing; Parfit's original scenario and those subsequently offered by Brueckner and Fischer only indicate that a comparative value can be placed on past and future pleasures, not that past pleasures are themselves insignificant. Furthermore, the future-oriented bias serves more as a description of asymmetry than an explanation for *why* we hold such attitudes. The bias itself still requires either an explanation or a justification; preferably both. As Kaufman stated, Brueckner and Fischer have attempted to justify a bias by placing it in the context of a larger bias, claiming that our attitudes are rational simply because we have such attitudes, which is simply inadequate.¹²¹

Grover also weighs in on the asymmetry debate with an argument not dissimilar to Belshaw's.¹²² She brings attention to our first-person perspective, asserting that our desires at any given point in time are contingent on our *present* conception of self:

Consider a 24-year-old who is asked to state a preference between imminent death, early birth, and delayed death. A 24-year-old who has a positive attitude towards her life will almost certainly place in first position the delayed death alternative, for it is *only* on the delayed death alternative

¹²⁰ Brueckner & Fischer (1993), 329.

¹²¹ Kaufman (2011), 117.

¹²² Grover (1987), 728-731.

that present attachments, reflections, and ongoing plans do not have to be given up. On the early birth alternative ongoing activities would become past activities, and so the person would have nothing to look forward to. So while objectively there is nothing to choose between, in choosing between an early birth and delayed death, from the first person perspective of someone who is enjoying what she is doing, and wants to continue with these activities, there is all the difference in the world.

Grover (1987), 730

This assertion, like Belshaw's, carefully considers the role of one's self in determining why there is a tendency to prefer a later death compared to an earlier birth. One is more motivated to extend one's life into the future because the future is when one's *present* desires may be achieved.

This explanation is strengthened when considered in conjunction with Belshaw's claim that we naturally view the past as 'set'. The inaccessibility of the past, as well as the possibility of fulfilling one's present desires in the future, offers a convincing explanation for why we hold a future-oriented bias. Additionally, an argument inspired by Parfit's discussion of the 'direction of causation' may offer further insight. This principle states that we are biased towards the future because we have the power to influence the future. One of the failings of this argument is that there are some future events which we cannot affect; yet the bias appears to persist. However, there is no circumstance where the future is not perceived to affect *us*. Events in the future hold greater sway over our present selves because we understand that 'future' events will eventually become 'present' events. By contrast, past events will never become 'present' events. Our experience of time is linear, flowing like a river in one direction from the future, through the present, and then on to the past. We therefore expect to experience future events in the present at some point, while past events move on behind us. That is not to say, of course, that past events cannot influence us; on the contrary, as I have argued above, memories which allow us to relive and learn from past experiences are extremely powerful in informing our present 'selves'. But

we will never again experience a past event as we did when it was happening in the present. The river cannot flow backwards. This claim can fit neatly with the arguments by Belshaw and Grover to explain and justify the future-oriented bias as follows:

- I. Our perception of time is that it flows in one direction, like a river. Therefore,
- II. We believe that the past is fixed and inaccessible (Belshaw), and
- III. We believe that only in the future can our present goals and desires be realised (Grover).
- IV. Owing to our first-person perspective, we are motivated by our present desires (Grover).
- V. We believe that the future can impact our lives in a way that the past cannot, as the future will eventually become the present. Therefore,
- VI. We prefer pleasurable events to be in the future because we *will* experience them in the present, and
- VII. We prefer painful events to be in the past because we *will not* experience them in the present.

This combination of arguments permits the most appropriate explanation for the presence of a bias towards the future and a subsequent preference for a later death rather than an early birth. The future-oriented bias can be explained by the inherent assumption that future events will become present experiences, while past events will not.¹²³ When forced to decide between extending one's life into the past or into the future, we are more likely to choose the latter, owing to Belshaw's and Grover's respective assertions that we assume our present situations are contingent on the past being 'fixed', and that only the future holds the potential to satisfy the needs of our present selves. It is therefore both rational and justifiable that we hold asymmetrical attitudes towards past and future experiences.

¹²³ Of course, the future is not fixed, and an anticipated pleasurable event may not actually eventuate in the present. It may therefore seem fallacious to claim that a future pleasurable event 'will' be experienced. However, time marches ever ceaselessly onwards, and the future *will* come to pass, regardless of whether or not it is the future that we presently have in mind.

However, this is not the case with death. Death is, by definition, devoid of experience. In the absence of experienced phenomena, these biases and preferences that are evident within one's attitudes are no longer supported. The future-oriented bias does not justify or rationalise asymmetrical attitudes towards pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence because neither is experienced, regardless of whether it occurs in the past or in the future. The bias simply demonstrates a preference for pleasure to be in the future and pain to be in the past. There is no basis for temporal preference when the phenomenon involves neither pain nor pleasure. Likewise, the tendency to favour a later death over an early birth is not due to some kind of apathy towards pre-natal non-existence. Rather, our present selves are dependent on fixed past experiences and our current goals are contingent on the possibility of future experiences. Preferring to extend one's life into the future rather than into the past does not necessitate the view that death is harmful; or indeed, that one's attitude towards death factors into this preference at all.

The asymmetrical attitudes that we hold cannot extend beyond the limits of our experience. Therefore, while the future-oriented bias and the preference for a later death offer justification for asymmetrical attitudes, these attitudes are specific to experienced phenomena and do not justify asymmetrical attitudes towards pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence. This argument is supported by Glannon, who, unlike those who defend the Deprivation Account, concurs with the Epicurean stance that experience is a necessary condition of pleasure or pain:

Once we cease to exist as persons, as experiencing subjects, the temporal asymmetry between past and future dissolves, since the asymmetry itself is a function of a person's psychology.

In the light of this psychology, it is irrational to care now about the goods of which we allegedly will be deprived by death. For it is rational to be concerned about the pleasure and pain, the happiness and suffering, that we actually experience as persons. Yet we cannot experience anything after we die. Thus we cannot experience any deprivation of goods after we die. Epicurus and Lucretius would not deny that we have a bias toward the future, provided that it is the lived future, between the present and the event of death, that is at issue. What they do deny is that it is

rational to be concerned about or have a bias toward the future that obtains after death. This period cannot affect us, qua experiencing subjects, because we do not exist at that time.

Glannon (1994), 238

It is evident that one's acceptance of these asymmetrical attitudes does not compel one to concede that the Deprivation Account has any merit. The Deprivation Account relies on the notion that one can be harmed by something that they do not experience. If one rejects this notion – as they must, within the Epicurean framework – then the Deprivation Account is simply unacceptable.

Concluding Remarks

The Deprivation Account has certainly offered a compelling challenge to Lucretius' Symmetry Argument. However, it is found to be unsatisfactory, as it fails to account for the 'badness' of death. The attempts to establish asymmetry – either on the basis of a future-oriented bias or the notion that the past is fixed in some way – are insightful, but they are limited to one's lived experience. Thus far, there has been no successful validation of asymmetry between pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence. Whether or not one is convinced by the Deprivation Account is ultimately dependent on the perception of whether experience is necessary for harm. The Epicurean framework strongly indicates that experience *is* necessary, and Lucretius' initial rebuttal of the Deprivation Account stands strong. The Deprivation Account and its subsequent arguments concerning the perception of time are not without controversy, even if one does support the notion that one can be harmed without experiencing it. The wealth of debate among scholars of Epicureanism is evidence of this.

Despite the multitude of clashing opinions in the symmetry debate, the evidence from Lucretius himself makes it very clear that the Symmetry Argument has a singular intention. It is designed to demonstrate that pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence are relevantly identical while they are in effect. Warren's 'Version 1' interpretation is by far the most likely, and it remains undefeated by those supporting the Deprivation Account. Therefore, the Symmetry Argument builds on Epicurus' argument that there is nothing to fear about being dead. It does not propose any assurance against the fear of mortality, as many have presumed.

However, this is not to say that Lucretius offers no defence against the fear of mortality, simply that this defence is not encapsulated by the Symmetry Argument. Rather, the Symmetry Argument is one component of a network of arguments that form a holistic Epicurean approach to understanding life and death. Epicurean philosophy advocates an entire lifestyle geared towards maximising pleasure during one's finite existence. This cannot be encompassed by a single Symmetry Argument. Further examination of the Epicurean texts will illustrate that multiple strands of death-related anxiety are addressed by the Epicureans in their commitment to eradicate the fear of death.

III. Fighting Fear: A Holistic Approach

The Epicureans have thus far successfully addressed the fears of being dead and of dying. However, two crucial death-related concerns remain: the fear of mortality and the fear of premature death. Each of these fears presents a very different challenge for the Epicureans. Neither is preoccupied with pain or the state of being dead, but rather the *prospect* of death. It is therefore of paramount importance that the Epicureans are able to address each of these fears, as they pose a serious threat to one's ἀταραξία and εὐδαιμονία.

I will first examine the arguments against the fear of mortality. The Symmetry Argument was criticised for not encompassing this concern. However, it will quickly become apparent that this fear is not overlooked by the Epicureans. The discussion surrounding the fear of mortality also brings to light a potential issue regarding consistency, namely that the arguments against fearing death rely on recalled and anticipated pleasures, which appears to be at odds with hedonism. I will seek to defend the Epicureans from both ancient and modern critics who accuse them of such inherent contradiction. I will then turn to the arguments against the fear of premature death. These arguments are embedded within Epicurean hedonist doctrine and they broadly seek to demonstrate that the quality of one's life is not determined by its length. Three key claims are identified: that pleasure is independent of time, that a 'complete' life is likewise irrespective of temporal duration, and that endless time (immortality) is inherently undesirable. I will conclude that the Epicurean cure for the fears of mortality and premature death is to embrace the holistic Epicurean way of life.

The Fear of Mortality

The fear that one is going to die, or the fear of mortality, is distinct from both the fear of being dead and the fear of the process of dying. It is fear in response to the inevitable prospect of one's death. While one may remain entirely untroubled by the imminence of death and dying, armed with the knowledge that neither of these occurrences will cause any harm, one may still consider one's own mortality with trepidation. Being disturbed by the finite nature and uncertain length of one's own existence is therefore a genuine threat to one's happiness. Indeed, it may represent an even greater danger than the fears of death and dying, which are dispelled comparatively easily by removing the possibility of pain. As has been demonstrated, the Symmetry Argument is not designed to confront the fear of mortality. If this was all that was to offer, then critics would be correct in identifying the absence of an argument against the fear of mortality as a yawning gap in the Epicurean attempt to eradicate death-related anxiety. However, a wider examination of Epicurean texts beyond Lucretius' Symmetry Argument will demonstrate that the fear of mortality is indeed both acknowledged and addressed within Epicurean ethical theory.

Addressing the Fear of Future Non-Being

In pursuit of an Epicurean argument against the fear of mortality, both Warren and Furley steer our attention towards Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecus*, in which he expounds his ethical theory.¹²⁴

The following passage is of particular relevance:

ὥστε μάταιος ὁ λέγων δεδιέναι τὸν θάνατον οὐχ ὅτι λυπήσει παρών, ἀλλ' ὅτι λυπεῖ μέλλον. ὁ γὰρ παρὸν οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖ, προσδοκώμενον κενῶς λυπεῖ.

¹²⁴ Warren (2004), 100-105. Furley (1986), 75.

Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation.

Ep. Men. 125

This passage is very explicitly concerned with present attitudes. Warren appeals to this passage as somewhat of a ‘missing link’ between his two versions of the Symmetry Argument. Version 1 demonstrates that both pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence are symmetrical in terms of *experience*. Conversely, Version 2 states that our *present attitudes* towards pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence are symmetrical. As has been established, Lucretius’ Symmetry Argument sought to demonstrate Version 1, while advocating for the adoption of Version 2. That is, because the experience of non-existence is the same before birth and after death (Version 1), we *ought* to presently have the same lack of concern for post-mortem non-existence as we do for pre-natal non-existence (Version 2). Version 1 can therefore be used as a premise for Version 2. Warren is able to demonstrate that this is precisely the intention of Epicurus, by deriving the following principle from the above passage:

Whatever causes no pain when present, causes only empty distress when anticipated.

Warren (2004), 101

Warren also calls attention to the closeness between the two verb-and-participle phrases *λοπήσει παρών* (present pain) and *λυπεῖ μέλλον* (anticipated pain), which, he suggests, is designed to carefully erode the distinction between the two. Transitioning between the two phrases is purely a matter of tense: the verb must change between present and future, and the participle must

change from ‘present’ to ‘anticipated’.¹²⁵ This serves to reinforce Epicurus’ message that the only difference is timing, and that any fear for a future event which will not cause pain when present is based on false understanding. Warren then lays out the full argument against fearing mortality, using his principle to bridge the gap between Versions 1 and 2:¹²⁶

Version 1:	Our post-mortem non-existence will be nothing to us after our death.
Ep. <i>Men.</i> 125:	Whatever causes no pain when present, causes only empty distress when anticipated.
Therefore:	Since death causes no pain when present, it causes only empty distress when anticipated (and empty distress is no real distress at all).
Conclusion (Version 2):	Looking forward from within a lifetime, our post-mortem non-existence is nothing to us.

This is an elegant solution to the issue that Lucretius’ Symmetry Argument does not offer any consolation for the anticipatory fear of death. The Symmetry Argument is simply intended to offer persuasive force to the central claim that death cannot harm the one who dies. The Epicureans also posit generally that it is foolish to fear presently that which will not cause any harm in the future. These two principles work together to illustrate the Epicurean attitude to mortality: because death will not cause harm, there is no reason to fear it now. When the Symmetry Argument is viewed as one argument amongst many in a holistic ethical framework, it becomes apparent that the Epicureans were not neglecting the fear of mortality.

Furley also recognises the significance of Epicurus’ attitude towards unnecessary anticipatory fear. However, rather than using it in conjunction with Lucretius’ Symmetry Argument, Furley understands it as one of the key premises in Epicurus’ original argument that

¹²⁵ Warren (2004), 102.

¹²⁶ Warren (2004), 103.

‘death is nothing to us’. He lays out the structure of the argument as follows, drawing solely from Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoecus*:

- I. Nothing is good or bad for a man except what stimulates his feelings (of pleasure or pain).
- II. The dead feel nothing.
- III. Hence nothing is good or bad for one who is dead.
- IV. Hence his state of being dead is not (good or) bad for one who is dead.
- V. But if a thing is not bad when it is present, there is no rational ground, at any previous time, for fear of its future presence.
- VI. Hence no living person has any rational ground for fear of his future state of being dead.

Furley’s presentation of Epicurus’ argument clearly situates any death-related fear in the present, thereby counteracting both the fear of death and the fear of mortality simultaneously.¹²⁷ This supports Warren’s demonstration that the Epicureans did indeed strive to relieve the fear of mortality, despite this not being encapsulated by Lucretius’ Symmetry Argument. However, unlike Warren, Furley does not use this principle to supplement the Symmetry Argument. Rather, he presents it simply as a claim that is made by Epicurus and demonstrates that Lucretius did in fact echo this himself in his own writings.

Furley focuses on a small section of Book III in *De Rerum Natura*, between the two key passages in which Lucretius develops his Symmetry Argument (*D.R.N* 3.832-842; 3.972-975). After reiterating that our ‘selves’ comprise both body and soul (*D.R.N* 3.843-6), Lucretius explores the notion that, given the infinity of time, our specific configuration of atoms has in the past and will again in the future be reassembled exactly as it is now. Yet, this has no impact on us, due to the interruption of memory and therefore self. Lucretius then states the following:¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Nussbaum (1994), 201-202, presents a very similar construction of Epicurus’ argument. Cf. Warren (2004), 41.

¹²⁸ This passage was also discussed in Chapter I as evidence for the crucial role that memory plays in the Epicurean sense of ‘self’.

nec, si materiem nostrum collegerit aestas
post obitum rursimque redegerit ut sita nunc est,
atque iterum nobis fuerint data lumina vitae,
pertineat quicquam tamen ad nos id quoque factum,
interrupta semel cum sit repetentia nostri.
et nunc nil ad nos de nobis attinet, ante
qui fuimus, neque iam de illis nos adficit angor.
nam cum respicias immensi temporis omne
praeteritum spatium, tum motus materiai
multimodi quam sint, facile hoc adcredere possis,
semina saepe in eodem, ut nunc sunt, ordine posta
nec memori tamen id quimus reprehendere mente;
inter enim iectast vitai pausa.

Even if time should gather together our matter after death and bring it back again as it is now placed, and if once more the light of life should be given to us, yet it would not matter one bit to us that even this had been done, when the recollection of ourselves has been broken asunder. And even now we are not concerned about any self which we have been before, nor does any anguish about it now touch us. For when you look back upon all the past expanse of measureless time, and think how various are the motions of matter, you may easily come to believe that these same seeds of which now we consist have been often before placed in the same arrangement they now are in. And yet we cannot call that back by memory; for in between has been cast a stoppage of life.

D.R.N. 3.847-859

Using this passage, Furley attributes to Lucretius another argument that derives symmetry, which explicitly concerns present attitudes rather than the experience of non-existence.¹²⁹ Lucretius introduces the idea that we ought not to be concerned about future existences (characterised by the reassembly of the atoms which constitute our present body and soul) because we will have no memory of any time prior to such a future existence.¹³⁰ He reinforces this by pointing out the fact that we cannot presently recall past existences, and thus they cause us no distress when we look

¹²⁹ Furley (1986), 77.

¹³⁰ Lucretius' exploration of past and future lives is hypothetical. The belief in reincarnation is entirely incompatible with the Epicurean outlook on life and death. The interruption of memory is crucial here: when our atoms inevitably reassemble, they create an identical likeness of 'us', but 'we' do not come back into existence. It is likely that Lucretius' use of the pronouns *nostrum*, *nobis*, *nos*, and *nostrum* in this passage is to demonstrate that the reassembly of 'our' atomic configuration does not affect the present 'us' in any way. See Chapter I for an examination of the Epicurean conception of 'self'.

back (*respicias*). While this passage creates symmetry between past and future existences, it is the *non-existence* (the dissolution of our atomic composition) between potential lives that is the focal point of any distress. This passage therefore does what Lucretius' 'mirror analogy' (*D.R.N.* 3.972-975) appears to do but does not: establish symmetry between present attitudes towards past and future non-existence. The methodology here seems to be similar to that of the Symmetry Argument. The construction of a parallel is designed to provide additional persuasive support for a pre-established principle. In the case of the Symmetry Argument, this principle was that 'death is nothing to us', whereas this particular passage reinforces the claim that it is irrational to fear non-existence during one's life. Furley's conclusion is simply that this provides evidence for Lucretius' concern for present attitudes towards fearing death, as this is not found in the Symmetry Argument.¹³¹ He makes no assessment of how this passage may counter the fear of mortality. However, it seems clear that Furley's interpretation of this passage demonstrates that, just as the fear of being dead is deemed to be irrational within the Epicurean ethical framework, so too is fearing *now* that one is going to die.

Furley and Warren have each identified arguments embedded in Epicurean ethical theory that are aimed at countering the fear of mortality. The arguments build on the key doctrine that 'death is nothing to us'. The Symmetry Argument supports this claim and serves to undermine fears concerned with the potential pain of being dead and of the dying process. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Epicurean arguments are not intended to function by themselves. In particular, the Symmetry Argument is not designed to encapsulate the entire Epicurean stance against fearing death. Rather, each argument is one part of a whole. Thus far, the fears of being

¹³¹ Furley (1986), 77.

dead, of dying, and of mortality are all clearly addressed when the Epicurean arguments are viewed holistically.

This holistic approach is very effective, but it must be absolutely watertight if it is going to succeed. Each argument is reliant on underlying principles, so any apparent contradiction within the Epicurean approach could cause the entire philosophy to collapse. The above arguments against the fear of death have been met with the accusation that they are inconsistent with Epicurean hedonism, as they rely on accepting the validity of pleasure and pain that is temporally removed from present experience.¹³² The Epicureans must therefore demonstrate that their hedonist principles are compatible with their arguments against fearing death. To do so, they must justify the role of temporally distant pains and pleasures in their hedonist framework; that is, pains and pleasures that are recalled or anticipated.

Recollection and Anticipation

While the Symmetry Argument focuses on the fear of being dead, by addressing the experience of non-existence (or rather, lack thereof), the Epicureans also have clear arguments that address the *anticipatory* concern of mortality. They were therefore far from oblivious to concerns outside of one's present experience. However, a potentially damaging issue for Epicurus' holistic ethical framework is the questionable validity of pleasure or pain that is temporally distant from present experience. In other words, there is the concern that any pleasurable feeling resulting from anticipation or recollection is not a 'true' experienced pleasure. If this were the case, the

¹³² Specifically, the argument against the fear of dying (and advice on how to overcome pain generally) rests on the strength of recalled pleasure. In turn, the arguments against the fear of mortality are reliant on adopting anticipatory feelings in the present (i.e. the absence of pain in the future means an absence of fear in the present). Recalled and anticipatory feelings *must* be considered 'real' in the present for these arguments to maintain cogency.

Epicurean position would be weakened owing to inconsistencies between their arguments against death and their basic hedonist principles.

Cicero was a notable ancient objector to Epicurean hedonism on these grounds.¹³³ He was very dismissive of Epicurus' claim to have overcome the physical pain of his dying days by recalling pleasurable memories (D.L. 10.22). The implication of Cicero's criticism is that Epicurus' reassurances against the evil of death are actually undermined by his hedonism:

Audi, ne longe abeam, moriens quid dicat Epicurus, ut intellegas facta eius cum dictis discrepare: 'Epicurus Hermarcho S. cum ageremus', inquit, 'vitae beatum et eundem supremum diem, scribebamus haec. Tanti aderant vesicae et torminum morbi ut nihil ad eorum magnitudinem posset accedere.' Miserum hominem! Si dolor summum malum est, dici aliter non potest. Sed audiamus ipsum. 'Compensabatur', inquit, 'tamen cum his omnibus animi laetitia quae capiebam memoria rationum inventorumque nostrorum.'

But I must not digress too far. Let me repeat the dying words of Epicurus, to prove to you the discrepancy between his practice and his principles: 'Epicurus to Hermarchus, greeting. I write these words,' he says, 'on the happiest, and the last, day of my life. I am suffering from diseases of the bladder and intestines, which are of the utmost possible severity.' Unhappy creature! If pain is the Chief Evil, that is the only thing to be said. But let us hear his own words. 'Yet all my sufferings,' he continues, 'are counterbalanced by the joy which I derive from remembering my theories and discoveries.'

Cic. *Fin.* 2.96

Epicurus' death scene showcases the primary Epicurean defence against fearing the pain of dying, which is the notion that mental pleasure can override physical pain, and that one can generate mental pleasure through recollection. Cicero clearly judges this to be impractical, claiming that since Epicurus is in pain, and pain is the ultimate evil according to hedonism, the only reasonable conclusion (from an Epicurean standpoint)¹³⁴ is that Epicurus is in a rather

¹³³ Cicero's anti-hedonist arguments, especially in *De Finibus*, are examined in detail by Morel (2016), 77-95 and Warren (2016), 41-76. See also Inwood (1990), 143-164.

¹³⁴ Cicero's own position is stoic, which considers strength of mind that endures pain as no evil at all.

lamentable situation. Certainly, it seems a stretch to argue that the mere memory of a positive experience could overpower considerable physical pain.

The dubious nature of recalled pleasure also throws into doubt the validity of pleasure felt in anticipation of some positive experience. If the thing that is generating the feeling of pleasure has not actually happened yet, it may be that the feeling of pleasure is ‘empty’ or ‘false’. Even more damning would be if that which is generating pleasure does not actually happen as anticipated. In that case, the feeling of pleasure would be groundless in retrospect, and the pain of disappointment may result. Cicero also highlights this issue, again demonstrating what he deems to be an inconsistency: in this case between the Epicurean argument that ‘death is nothing to us’ (either when it happens or in anticipation) and the practice of writing wills:

Quaero etiam quid sit quod cum dissolutione, id est morte, sensus omnis exstinguatur, et cum reliqui nihil sit omnino quod pertineat ad nos, tam accurate tamque diligenter caveat et sanciat ‘ut Amynomachus et Timocrates, heredes sui, de Hermarchi sententia dent quod satis sit ad diem agendum natalem suum quotannis mense Gamelione, itemque omnibus mensibus vicesimo die lunae dent ad eorum epulas qui una secum philosophati sint, ut et sui et Metrodori memoria colatur.’

What I want to know is this: if all sensation is annihilated by dissolution, that is, by death, and if nothing whatever that can affect us remains, why is it that he makes such precise and careful provision and stipulation ‘that his heirs, Amynochus and Timocrates, shall after consultation with Hermarchus assign a sufficient sum to celebrate his birthday every year in the month of Gamelion, and also on the twentieth day of every month shall assign a sum for a banquet to his fellow students in philosophy, in order to keep alive the memory of himself and of Metrodorus’?

Cic. *Fin.* 2.101

Cicero’s account of Epicurus’ will echoes that which is preserved by Diogenes Laertius (D.L. 10.16-21).¹³⁵ Cicero takes issue with Epicurus’ decision to leave a will as it conveys a concern

¹³⁵ Diogenes’ preservation is generally agreed to be genuine; see Warren (2004), 162-163. Epicurus’ will details his instructions for his personal property, the running of his philosophical school, his funeral arrangements, and the manumission of several slaves.

for post-mortem affairs despite Epicurus' claim that one completely ceases to exist after death. Epicurus' argument against the fear of mortality seems to be working against him here: why be concerned about something now if it cannot impact you when it occurs?

There is some debate in modern scholarship concerning the validity of Cicero's criticism. Warren is notably insistent that Cicero is correct in his assertion that the act of writing wills is simply inconsistent with Epicurus' central ethical theory.¹³⁶ Warren frames a will as an insurance against potential post-mortem harm, which betrays a concern for one's well-being after death.¹³⁷ This concern cannot be held in conjunction with a genuine belief that 'death is nothing to us'. Warren considers and quickly dismisses a defence of writing wills by Callahan:

The vast majority of us are greatly comforted now to know that after our deaths the law can be used to contribute to the good of the persons and the causes we care about. If maintaining this fiction of harm and wrong to the dead in our legal institutions is the most effective way of securing this comfort...then keeping them is exceedingly well justified.

Callahan 1987, 352

Callahan's argument seeks to shift the concern from post-mortem affairs to present affairs: he asserts that we write wills in order to secure comfort in the present, and thus the benefit of the will is ante-mortem rather than post-mortem. This does not satisfy Warren, who rightly maintains that this does not resolve the inconsistency between writing wills and the belief that it is irrational to fear that in the future which cannot hurt when it occurs. If one is genuinely convinced that one cannot exist post-mortem, then there is no rational reason for any concern in the present.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Warren (2004), 163-199. See also Warren (2001c).

¹³⁷ Warren (2004), 168-169.

¹³⁸ Warren (2004), 170-172.

Warren claims that there are two possible ways in which one could justify Epicurean will-writing, which are worth quoting in full:

1. He can try to find some sense in which the Epicurean can take present pleasure in contemplating positive post-mortem events which does not suggest that he can also be adversely affected by negative post-mortem events.
2. He can try to argue that the pleasures promoted by a will, although not the testator's own, provide sufficient justification for an Epicurean will-writer.

Warren 2004, 173-174

Warren rejects both of these options. He denies the former on the grounds that while it may justify *contemplating* the future, it does not justify *writing* a will in order to actively influence the future. Contemplation may induce a valid pleasurable experience in the present, but writing the will is still contradictory to the sincere belief that one cannot be impacted by the enactment of said will. To put it another way, if the contemplation of caring for one's loved ones after death is pleasant, then contemplation is all that is necessary. Writing a will does not add anything to that pleasurable experience, because the enactment of the will occurs after one is beyond the capability of experiencing pleasure.¹³⁹ Warren also denies the latter option, for the simple reason that such an altruistic motivation is incompatible with the inherently egoistic nature of Epicurean hedonism.¹⁴⁰ One final defence of Epicurean will-making that Warren considers is cultural context. He suggests that Epicurus' will is not determined by his philosophy, but rather by Athenian property and inheritance law which would impact the existence of his philosophical school after his death.¹⁴¹ Why this would be considered a rational justification for post-mortem concern (while providing for loved ones isn't) is unclear. Warren's argument has thus far been

¹³⁹ Warren (2004), 174-177.

¹⁴⁰ Warren (2004), 180-186. He does, however, acknowledge the evidence for Epicurean advocacy for some seemingly altruistic acts, such as dying for a friend (D.L. 10.120).

¹⁴¹ Warren (2004), 191.

that Epicurus would have no reason to care about the living world after his own death, since he will not be part of it. The security of his philosophical school would surely also be inconsequential to Epicurus, according to this understanding.

At first glance, Cicero's criticisms – around which Warren builds a robust case against Epicurean will-making – appear to genuinely undermine the cogency of the Epicurean arguments. However, it is entirely possible for an Epicurean to demonstrate that their hedonism is constructed specifically to allow for feelings of pleasure and pain outside of present experience without compromising any of their established arguments against the fear of death. Furthermore, contrary to Warren's argument, the Epicurean model of friendship allows for concern of loved ones beyond strict egoism, meaning that an Epicurean can legitimately act to preserve the interests of loved ones after their own death.

It must never be forgotten that the Epicureans' ethical theory rests entirely on their physical theory. This dictates that the nature of the world is atomic, and that *everything* is physically composed of atoms (Ep. *Hdt.* 40-41). Sensation is thereby the only truly reliable measure of phenomena, meaning that if something is felt, then it must be 'true' (Ep. *Hdt.* 31-32; *Kyria Doxa* 23). Epicurean philosophy therefore does not allow for 'false' pleasures, because any sensation of pleasure must be a physical and indisputable experience.¹⁴² To recall a pleasurable occurrence is to re-experience it quite literally.¹⁴³ Likewise, any pleasure that is felt in anticipation of something good is a genuine feeling in the moment, regardless of when that something is actually realised. Even if that something never happened, it could not invalidate the

¹⁴² Even a feeling of pleasure resulting from something entirely hypothetical, such as a daydream, would be a physical and genuine feeling. However, an Epicurean might advise that one avoids daydreaming lest it lead to disappointment or idleness.

¹⁴³ Interestingly, this is not at odds with modern thinking on the subject: when we recall memories, we reactivate particular neurological pathways and release corresponding chemicals to incite an emotional response. In this sense, recalling a memory is a very physical process and produces very real emotional reactions.

anticipatory pleasure, as that is felt at the *prospect* of the thing, while the *occurrence* of the thing would generate a novel and different feeling of pleasure (and if it did not occur, a new feeling of pain).¹⁴⁴

This foundational physical theory allows the Epicureans not only to accept temporally distant pleasures, but also to advocate for them when appropriate. Epicurus promoted forgoing short-term pleasure that might ultimately lead to pain, as well as choosing to endure pain that would eventuate in pleasure:¹⁴⁵

ταύτην γὰρ ἀγαθὸν πρῶτον καὶ συγγενικὸν ἐγνωμεν, καὶ ἀπὸ ταύτης καταρχόμεθα πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτην κατανατῶμεν ὡς κανόνι τῷ πάθει πᾶν ἀγαθὸν κρίνοντες. καὶ ἐπεὶ πρῶτον ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο καὶ σύμφυτον, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ οὐ πᾶσαν ἡδονὴν αἰρούμεθα, ἀλλ' ἔστιν ὅτε πολλὰς ἡδονὰς ὑπερβαίνομεν, ὅταν πλεῖον ἡμῖν τὸ δυσχερὲς ἐκ τούτων ἔπηται· καὶ πολλὰς ἀλγηδόνας ἡδονῶν κρείττους νομίζομεν, ἐπειδὴν μείζων ἡμῖν ἡδονὴ παρακολουθῆ πολὺν χρόνον ὑπομείνασι τὰς ἀλγηδόνας. Πᾶσα οὖν ἡδονὴ διὰ τὸ φύσιν ἔχειν οἰκείαν ἀγαθόν, οὐ πᾶσα κακόν, οὐ πᾶσα δὲ ἀεὶ φευκτὴ πεφυκυῖα.

Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing. And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but oftentimes pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And oftentimes we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure. While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure is choiceworthy, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned.

Ep. Men. 129

Epicurus' particular brand of hedonism is evidently not limited to the 'here and now' as some other forms of hedonism are.¹⁴⁶ It is entirely possible and indeed rational to draw feelings of

¹⁴⁴ Naturally, if an anticipated pleasurable experience did not occur, one would feel disappointed, but this would not eliminate the earlier feeling of anticipatory pleasure. The Epicurean defence against this kind of disappointment is of course to be very selective of one's desires in the first place, so as to minimise the possibility of disappointment. It is paramount that an Epicurean plans their life such that they are not at the mercy of avoidable pains.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *Sent. Vat.* 73.

¹⁴⁶ For instance, the Cyrenaics are known to prioritise present pleasures (D.L. 2.66). See Warren (2001b) for a comparison between Epicurean and Cyrenaic hedonism, esp. 164-169.

pleasure from memory or from future possibility. As such, the act of planning for something to occur in the future which presently gives one pleasure is completely reasonable. The term ‘plan’ is key here: one must use reasonable evidence to evaluate the likelihood of future possibilities and act to ensure the best outcome.

Of course, as Warren has emphasised, it would be irrational to plan (in terms of both contemplation and action) for a time in one’s future when one will not exist, even if the act of planning is itself pleasurable. However, this is *only* the case if the beneficiary of such a plan is perceived to be oneself.¹⁴⁷ In the case of a will, those who benefit from it are loved ones, who are understood to persist after one’s own death. Warren is dubious of any motivation that purely concerns the well-being of other people and not oneself, owing to Epicurean hedonism. He argues that a genuinely altruistic act cannot be reconciled with a system in which one’s own pleasure is the *τέλος* of every action.¹⁴⁸ However, a model of other-regarding behaviour proposed by Algra demonstrates that Epicurean hedonism is not as strictly egoistic as interpreted by Warren. While Warren presents a dichotomy between the two discrete options of ‘egoism’ and ‘altruism’, Algra offers something of a middle ground, which he dubs the model of ‘social appropriation’. It can be summed up as follows:

It involved the notion that others – or at least *some* others – are regarded as belonging to *us*, that their wishes and interests, and their happiness and pain, are regarded as our *own*. According to this model of ‘social appropriation’, certain forms of interpersonal relations – family relations, but also what we would call friendship or love, i.e. roughly the kinds of relations covered by the Greek noun *philia* – develop in such a way that the parties involved come to regard those they love no longer as individuals whose interests can be weighed off against, or be treated as instrumental to, one’s own: they rather look upon these others as fellow members of a community, as belonging to, or even part of, their own life: hence people rejoice in their friends’ joy and

¹⁴⁷ Post-mortem concerns that are entirely related to oneself, such as the wellbeing of one’s corpse, are completely irrational for the Epicureans. Philodemus argues against such concerns throughout his treatise *On Death*.

¹⁴⁸ This apparent tension in Epicurean ethics has been widely discussed in modern scholarship, particularly in terms of the value of friendship. See Annas (1993), Armstrong (1997), Cooper (1999), O’Keefe (2001b), White (2002), and Woolf (2004). For a discussion of other-regarding behaviour in the context of education, see McConnell (2015).

grieve with their friends' grief. One might say that, from the morally relevant perspective, in such relations the boundary between the self and the other gets blurred.

Algra 2003, 268-269

Algra's model essentially expands the sense of self to include those whom one loves. He develops this argument from an analysis of Epicurean texts on friendship,¹⁴⁹ which suggest that while the early stages of friendship rest on a model of reciprocity, the relationship develops further with the model of social appropriation.¹⁵⁰ The well-being and interests of loved ones become entangled with one's own. Acting to ensure the well-being of a loved one is therefore not a subordination of one's own interests, and as such, is not incompatible with hedonism.

This model of social appropriation provides key justification for Epicurean will-writing. As Callahan initially suggested, the time at which the will-writer experiences pleasure is in the present, during the *writing* of the will. This is an anticipatory pleasure at the reasonable expectation of loved ones being cared for after the will-writer's own death. The anticipatory pleasure is 'real' in the sense that it is a physical sensation that is exclusive to the present act of writing the will. The perceived subject of the pleasure resulting from the *enactment* of the will is the loved ones of the deceased. The will-writer is acting in their *own* interest and affording *themselves* pleasure by planning for the benefit of loved ones whose well-being is intimately bound up with their own, while fully aware that this benefit will not impact themselves in the

¹⁴⁹ Such as: *Sent. Vat.* 61; *Kyria Doxa* 39; *Cic. Fin.* 1.67; D.L. 10.120. See especially *Sent. Vat.* 23 (translation by Inwood & Gerson, 1994): πᾶσα φιλία δι' ἑαυτὴν ἀρετή, ἀρχὴν δὲ εἴληφεν ἀπὸ τῆς ὠφελείας; Every friendship is worth choosing for its own sake, though it takes its origin from the benefits [it confers on us]. This translation uses Usener's emendation of ἀίρετή for ἀρετή, which Inwood & Gerson (1994), 37, regard as all but certain, although this is contended by Brown (2002), 68-69.

¹⁵⁰ Algra (2003), 281-282.

future at all.¹⁵¹ Evidently, writing a will is an act that promotes one's own pleasure before one dies, while greatly reducing any anxiety concerning the well-being of loved ones after one's own death.

Writing a will may also contribute to the well-being of loved ones (and therefore oneself) in the present, before one's death, as it may be considered an act of generosity. It would provide a demonstration of friendship and care towards one's loved ones before death.¹⁵² Epicurus was hailed for his generous character, both generally in terms of his motivation for philosophical teaching and specifically in relation to his will (D.L. 10.9-11). Generously bequeathing one's possessions to others would also illustrate a healthy detachment from material worth. Indeed, Philodemus wrote that leaving a will is evidence of commitment to the Epicurean claim that 'death is nothing to us':

ἀλλ' εἰκόασι διὰ τὸ φιλόζῳον
ἐκ τοῦ πεφρικέναι τὸν θάνατον, οὐ
διὰ τὸ βιοῦν ἡδεως, καὶ τὰς ἐπιβολὰς
τὰς ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἐξωθεῖν, εἶθ' ὅταν ἐναρ-
γῆς αὐτοῦ γένηται θεωρία, παράδο-
ξος αὐτοῖς ὑποπίπτει, παρ' ἣν αἰτίαν
οὐδὲ διαθήκας ὑπομένοντες γράφουσ-
θαι περικατάληπτοι γίνονται καὶ δι-
ξυμοφοεῖν ἀναγκάζονται

But because of an attachment to life that results from being frightened of death, not because they live pleasantly, they seem even to banish applications of the mind to it; then when observation of it becomes distinct, it comes to them as a paradoxical thing, for which reason, being unable to bear even to write a will, they are overtaken and surrounded, and are forced to bear a double burden of misfortune.

Phil. *De Morte*. 39.6-14.

¹⁵¹ This remains the case even if a deceased individual's will is not executed according to their instructions. This would not impact the deceased because they no longer exist. It is also not necessary for someone to witness the result of their positive action in order for them to feel pleasure. The pleasure that is felt by the individual themselves is not through the act of *executing* the will, but the act of *creating* the will before their death.

¹⁵² Assuming, of course, that one shares the details of one's will with those to whom it pertains.

Cicero's criticism that writing a will is inconsistent with the Epicurean claim that 'death is nothing to us' therefore does not hold up to scrutiny. Warren's additional concern that altruism and hedonism are incompatible in the Epicurean framework is assuaged by examining interpersonal relationships beyond the overly reductive dichotomy between 'egoism' and 'altruism'. The act of writing a will is compatible with the Epicurean values of pleasure and friendship. It is a presently pleasurable action to undertake which does not rely on a post-mortem subject.

Epicurean hedonism is fundamentally tied into their arguments against fearing death. Far from undermining the claim that 'death is nothing to us', the frugal and temporally independent nature of Epicurean pleasure is designed to reduce the pain of death-related anxiety and increase the ease of living a pleasant life. This becomes ever more apparent when examining the final major hurdle for Epicurean death therapy: the fear of dying prematurely. Having effectively combatted the fear of dying painfully, the fear of non-existence, and the fear of mortality, the Epicureans must address the concern that death may cut one's life short, in order to successfully eradicate death anxiety.

The Fear of Premature Death

The fear of premature death creates an altogether different challenge for the Epicureans. This is the fear that one is going to die 'too soon', resulting in life being 'cut short'. It is therefore preoccupied with the shape and content of one's life rather than the nature of one's death. As with the fear of mortality, this fear is entirely distinct from any concern about death being harmful.

We have seen that the Epicurean strategy for eliminating the fears of death, dying, and mortality commences with targeting the underlying ‘false belief’ that informs the fear, and this case is no different. In order to address the fear of premature death, the Epicureans attempt to alter the preconception of what constitutes a ‘complete’ life. In essence, they seek to dissociate the duration of time from any notion of pleasure or fulfilment, with the conclusion that a life cannot be ‘cut short’ if the measure of a good life is independent of temporal duration. The Epicureans argue that more time does not allow for greater pleasure, that a ‘complete’ life is not determined by the length of a life, and that infinite time would in fact be undesirable. Each of these arguments will be examined in turn.

Time and the Maximisation of Pleasure

Epicurus is very explicit in his claim that greater time does not equate to greater pleasure. This seems to be a rather strange assertion for one so committed to hedonism. One would assume that a hedonist would prefer to experience pleasure for a longer amount of time than for a shorter amount of time. However, this assumption implies that value is dependent on time, and Epicurus rejects this concept:

<ὁ δὲ σοφὸς οὔτε παραιτεῖται τὸ ζῆν> οὔτε φοβεῖται τὸ μὴ ζῆν· οὔτε γὰρ αὐτῷ προσίσταται τὸ ζῆν οὔτε δοξάζεται κακὸν εἶναι τι τὸ μὴ ζῆν. ὥσπερ δὲ τὸ σιτίον οὐ τὸ πλεῖστον πάντως ἀλλὰ τὸ ἥδιστον αἰρεῖται, οὕτω καὶ χρόνον οὐ τὸν μήκιστον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἥδιστον καρπίζειται.

The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offence to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest.

D.L. 10.126

For the Epicureans, it is the pleasantness of the time that determines the value of that time, as opposed to the amount of time that determines the value of the pleasure. The analogy of choosing a greater quality of food over a greater quantity emphasises the point that the fulfilment of one's life (and one's stomach) is achieved through a greater degree of pleasure rather than time. The length of one's life is therefore far less significant in comparison to how pleasurable it is.

The obvious objection to this argument is that a larger amount of time – while not itself a measure of value – would nevertheless afford one the opportunity and the potential for more pleasure. It would act as a means to an end, the end being the most pleasure possible in one lifetime. A shorter amount of time would appear to limit the chance for obtaining pleasure, and it is most likely that one would choose a longer pleasant life over a shorter pleasant life. This concern is voiced by Cicero:

At enim, quemadmodum tute dicebas, negat Epicurus ne diurnitatem quidem temporis ad beate vivendum aliquid afferre, nec minorem voluptatem percipi in brevitate temporis quam si illa sit sempiterna. Haec dicuntur inconstantissime. Cum enim summum bonum in voluptate ponat, negat infinito tempore aetatis voluptatem fieri maiorem quam finite atque modico...qui autem voluptate vitam effici beatam putabit, qui sibi is conveniet si negabit voluptatem crescere longinquitate?

It may be rejoined that Epicurus, as you yourself were saying, maintains that long duration cannot add anything to happiness, and that as much pleasure is enjoyed in a brief span of time as if pleasure were everlasting. In this he is grossly inconsistent. He places the Chief Good in pleasure, and yet he says that no greater pleasure would result from a lifetime of endless duration than from a limited and moderate period...But if one thinks that happiness is produced by pleasure, how can he consistently deny that pleasure is increased by duration?

Cic. *Fin.* 2.87-88

A response to this can be found in the Epicurean definition of pleasure. Of the two types of pleasure that are recognised by the Epicureans, *katastematic* (καταστηματικός) is the superior. *Katastematic* pleasure refers to the state of having one's desires fulfilled, while the other type of

pleasure, *kinetic* (κίνησις), refers to the active process of fulfilling one's desires (D.L. 10.136).¹⁵³ The achievement of *katastematic* pleasure is to experience *ataraxia* (ἀταραξία) and *aponia* (ἀπονία), that is, to be without want of anything and to be devoid of any pain, both of the mind and of the body. Epicurus' third *Kyria Doxa* states that there can be no higher pleasure than this.¹⁵⁴

Ὅρος τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν ἡδονῶν ἢ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος ὑπεξαίρεσις, ὅπου δ' ἂν τὸ ἡδόμενον ἐνῆ, καθ' ὃν ἂν χρόνον ἦ, οὐκ ἔστι τὸ ἀλγοῦν ἢ τὸ λυπούμενον ἢ τὸ συναμφοτέρον.

The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

D.L. 10.139

While pleasure may vary in nature, it cannot be increased beyond this state of painless tranquillity. Cicero further objects that it is inconsistent to claim that pain can increase while pleasure cannot,¹⁵⁵ but this criticism also fails in light of the Epicurean understanding of pleasure. *Katastematic* pleasure is not the opposite of pain, but rather the absence of it.¹⁵⁶ As such, more time would not amplify the amount of pleasure that one can experience.¹⁵⁷ In other words, the Epicurean definition of absolute pleasure cannot accumulate and is not subject to temporal duration.¹⁵⁸ Rosenbaum frames this in a most useful way: because *katastematic* pleasure is the

¹⁵³ See Chapter I.

¹⁵⁴ This is also mentioned by Cicero in *Fin.* 1.63: *neque maiorem voluptatem ex infinito tempore aetatis percipi posse quam ex hoc percipiatur quod videamus esse finitum*; '[He says that] no greater pleasure could be derived from a life of infinite duration than is actually afforded by this existence which we know to be finite.'

¹⁵⁵ Cic. *Fin.* 2.88.

¹⁵⁶ See also Rosenbaum (1990), 27-32.

¹⁵⁷ It also appears to be the case that more *experience* will also not increase pleasure (although it would create variety). This raises the concern that, once the greatest pleasure has been achieved, there is no longer any point in living. However, the Epicureans did not advocate for suicide, claiming that the wise man does not fear or seek death (*Ep. Men.* 126), and that anyone who finds reason for committing suicide is small-minded (*Sent. Vat.* 38). For modern discussions of suicide in Epicureanism see Cooper (1999), 515-541, and Englert (1994), 67-96.

¹⁵⁸ Lucretius does include a simile of a soul acting like a leaking vessel (*D.R.N.* 3.1003-1010), suggesting that one could store up past pleasures. This does not necessarily imply the accumulation of pleasure but rather supports the

greatest that one can experience, and this can be achieved in a very short span of time, then a shorter amount of time is all that is *required* in order to live the best life possible. Once happiness is achieved, it cannot be a reasonable motivation for wishing to extend one's life.¹⁵⁹ While *kinetic* pleasure offers variation, it cannot produce greater pleasure than the absence of pain. It is certainly positive to experience, but not necessary to pursue. Therefore, while death could shorten your life, it would not be able to rob you of any potential pleasure that you otherwise would have experienced, because the height of potential pleasure has already been experienced with the achievement of *ataraxia*.¹⁶⁰ Death could only limit the *kinetic* pleasure that one could experience, but this is secondary to *katastematic* pleasure and is not required for *ataraxia*.

This independent relationship between pleasure and time is also reiterated in *Kyriai Doxai* 19 and 20:¹⁶¹

ὁ ἄπειρος χρόνος ἴσην ἔχει τὴν ἡδονὴν καὶ ὁ πεπερασμένος, εἴαν τις αὐτῆς τὰ πέρατα καταμετρήσῃ τῷ λογισμῷ.

argument that complete happiness is akin to 'fullness', and a leaky vessel can never be properly filled. See Görler (1997), 193-207.

¹⁵⁹ Rosenbaum (1990), 26.

¹⁶⁰ See Philodemus *De Morte* 38.14-19 (translation by Henry): [ὁ δὲ νοῦν ἔχων, ἀπειληφῶς ὁ δύναται πᾶν περιποιῆσαι τ]ὸ πρὸς εὐδαίμονα βίον αὐταρκες, εὐθὺς ἤδη τὸ λοιπὸν ἐντεταφιασμένος περιπατεῖ κα[ὶ] τὴν μίαν ἡμέραν ὡς αἰῶνα κερδα[ί]νει; But the sensible man, having received that which can secure the whole of what is sufficient for a happy life, immediately then for the rest (of his life) goes about laid for burial, and he profits by one day as (he would) by eternity. See also Sanders (2011), 225.

¹⁶¹ Philodemus echoes these exact sentiments in his *De Morte* 3.32 (translation by Henry): ἐπιχεώμ[εθα... εἰρημένοιξ Διὸς σωτήρ[ος ὡς] τῆ[ν αὐτὴν ἡ]δονὴν ὁ ποσὸς χρόνος τῷ ἀ-πείρωι] παρασκευάζειν πέφυκεν ὅτ[αν τις αὐ]τῆς καταλάβη< > τοὺς ὅπους, τὸ [δὲ σύγκρι]μα τὸ σάρκινον εὐθὺς ἀπολα[-βεῖν ταῦτ]ὸ μέγεθος τῆς ἡδονῆς ὅπε[ρ...] ἄπειρος χρόνος περιεποίη[σε]; 'Let us drink in honour of Zeus the Saviour over [what has been demolished, as] a certain extent of time is by nature such as to provide the [same] pleasure as [infinite time, when one] comprehends its limits, and the fleshy [compound] (is by nature such as) [to] receive immediately [the same] magnitude of pleasure as infinite time [itself(?)] secures.' Cf. *Sent. Vat.* 26.

Unlimited time and limited time afford an equal amount of pleasure, if we measure the limits of that pleasure by reason.

Kyria Doxa 19

ἡ μὲν σὰρξ ἀπέλαβε τὰ πέρατα τῆς ἡδονῆς ἄπειρα καὶ ἄπειρος αὐτὴν χρόνος παρεσκεύασεν· ἡ δὲ διάνοια τοῦ τῆς σαρκὸς τέλους καὶ πέρατος λαβοῦσα τὸν ἐπιλογισμὸν καὶ τοὺς ὑπὲρ τοῦ αἰῶνος φόβους ἐκλύσασα τὸν παντελῆ βίον παρεσκεύασε, καὶ οὐθὲν ἔτι τοῦ ἀείρου χρόνου προσεδεήθη· <οὐ> μὴν ἀλλ' οὔτε ἔφυγε τὴν ἡδονὴν οὐθ' ἠνίκα τὴν ἐξαγωγὴν ἐκ τοῦ ζῆν τὰ πράγματα παρεσκεύαζεν, ὡς ἐλλείπουσά τι τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου κατέστρεψεν.

The flesh receives as unlimited the limits of pleasure; and to provide it requires unlimited time. But the mind, grasping in thought what the end and limit of the flesh is, and banishing the terrors of futurity, procures a complete and perfect life, and has no longer any need of unlimited time. Nevertheless it does not shun pleasure, and even in the hour of death, when ushered out of existence by circumstances, the mind does not lack enjoyment of the best life.

Kyria Doxa 20

These two maxims not only attempt to demonstrate that pleasure is not dependent on temporal duration, but also to establish the role of proper reasoning in this process. The appeal to reason urges the budding Epicurean to abandon their false belief and preconception that more time will equate to greater pleasure. Separating the concepts of pleasure and time is not intuitive, as Cicero illustrated, and yet it is essential to accept in order to remove the fear of dying prematurely. This is typical of the Epicurean intellectualist approach, and it highlights the necessity of examining these arguments from within the Epicurean framework, as the arguments are built on such foundations.

Furley, while ultimately unconvinced by what he dubs ‘dogma without argument’, offers the useful analogy of health for understanding *katastematic* pleasure.¹⁶² Perfect health benefits one’s experience of life and is therefore desirable. However, one’s level of health has a limit:

¹⁶² Furley (1986), 81. This analogy is also explored by Rosenbaum (1990), 26-27.

once it is ‘full’, it cannot accumulate beyond this point. While one would surely wish to sustain full health during one’s lifetime, insofar as one is able, it would be peculiar to wish to extend one’s life in order to experience ‘more’ health.¹⁶³ One could also view full health as a ‘default’ state. That is, health is only diminished when something negative is introduced which compromises it, such as an illness or a poor diet. Full health could be defined as the complete absence of ailment, much in the same way that absolute pleasure is defined by the Epicureans as the complete absence of pain or distress. This analogy is apt, especially in light of the philosophical goal to improve the health of one’s mind and soul.¹⁶⁴ An Epicurean sage who is able to maintain stable *ataraxia* will live a life most pleasurable.¹⁶⁵

An appropriate understanding of Epicurean pleasure illustrates that temporal duration is not integral to living a happy life.¹⁶⁶ This dissociation between pleasure and time serves as the keystone for the Epicurean arguments designed to counter the fear of premature death. With this principle securely established, the notion of what constitutes a ‘complete’ life can be challenged in order to abolish the concern that one will die with one’s life still incomplete.

¹⁶³ Furley (1986), 82.

¹⁶⁴ According to Porphyry, *Ad Marc.* 31 (translation by Inwood & Gerson, 99): Epicurus wrote, ‘Empty is the argument of the philosopher by which no human disease is healed; for just as there is no benefit in medicine if it does not drive out bodily diseases, so there is no benefit in philosophy if it does not drive out the disease of the soul’.

¹⁶⁵ Feldman (1992), 147, is therefore once again overlooking the Epicurean framework when he describes hedonism as an equation comprised of adding pleasure and subtracting pain in order to determine the quality of one’s life: ‘If hedonism is true, then the value of a life for a person is determined in this way: first consider how much pleasure the person experienced throughout her life. Add it up. Then consider how much pain the person experienced through her life. Add it up. Then subtract the pain from the pleasure. The hedonic value of the life is the result.’

¹⁶⁶ See also Mitsis (1988), 321 and Rosenbaum (1990), 22-27.

A Complete Life

The fear of premature death diverts focus away from the nature of death to the quality of one's life. Epicurus has established that the maximisation of pleasure is not reliant on a certain length of time, thus addressing any concern related to the duration of one's life. A key remaining issue is that one's life will be incomplete when one dies. This question of completeness is very much bound up with the question of what comprises a fundamentally 'human' life.

It is initially tempting to think that the completeness of one's life is dependent on time, and that one would be satisfied that one's life is complete if one manages to live to a ripe old age. However, the immediately apparent issue with this assumption is that fulfilment does not simply occur with the passing of time, but rather with the realisation of goals and satisfaction of desires. These goals and desires also do not simply vanish once one has reached a certain age. It is for this reason that 'completeness' should be considered in terms of 'fulfilment' as opposed to 'being finished'. 'Finished' suggests that there is nothing more that one would wish to do. 'Fulfilled', however, alludes to a sense of wholeness and satisfaction, with the impression that one has lived as best as one could, in accordance with one's own values.¹⁶⁷

The Epicureans lay out their values very explicitly, advocating for the careful selection of one's own desires so as to avoid unwarranted frustration. Desires which are both natural and necessary – such as food, shelter, and companionship – are preferred as these are the desires which the body and mind require in order to be happy (Ep. *Men.* 127-8). Anything beyond this simple requirement is superfluous and sometimes dangerous, as it may lend itself to

¹⁶⁷ Cf. the justification offered by Nussbaum (1994), 15 n.5, for her translation of the philosophical term εὐδαιμονία: 'Eudaimonia is often rendered "happiness": but this is misleading, since it misses the emphasis on *activity*, and on completeness of life, that is (as Aristotle cogently argues) present in the ordinary use of the Greek term, and wrongly suggests that what is at issue must be a state or feeling of satisfaction...I shall therefore usually either transliterate the term or use the cumbersome "human flourishing".'

disappointment.¹⁶⁸ Epicurus follows his explanation of natural and necessary desires with an emphasis on the connection between the pursuit of appropriate desires and the quality of one's life:

Τούτων γὰρ ἀπλανῆς θεωρία πᾶσαν αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγὴν ἐπανάγειν οἶδεν ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ σώματος ὑγίαιαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀταραξίαν, ἐπεὶ τοῦτο τοῦ μακαρίως ζῆν ἐστὶ τέλος. τούτου γὰρ χάριν πάντα πράττομεν, ὅπως μήτε ἀλγῶμεν μήτε ταρβῶμεν· ὅταν δ' ἅπαξ τοῦτο περὶ ἡμᾶς γένηται, λύεται πᾶς ὁ τῆς ψυχῆς χειμῶν, οὐκ ἔχοντος τοῦ ζῆν βαδίζειν ὡς πρὸς ἐνδέον τι καὶ ζητεῖν ἕτερον ὅ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος ἀγαθὸν συμπληρωθήσεται.

He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquillity of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a blessed life. For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, once we have attained this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled.

Ep. *Men.* 128

Epicurus makes it clear that the framing of one's desires has a significant impact on one's ability to satisfy such desires and reach a state of happiness, which is the ultimate motivation behind any action.¹⁶⁹ If one is experiencing any frustration or disappointment as a result of unfulfilled desires, then one should first examine the desire and determine its worth. For an Epicurean, the 'fulfilment' of one's life is therefore based on living in accordance with these frugal hedonist values and directing all of one's energy towards attaining freedom from pain and fear, rather than merely living for a certain length of time.

Lucretius supports this emphasis on 'natural' value and Epicurus' attempt to dissociate pleasure and temporal duration with his 'Speech of Nature' (*D.R.N.* 3.931-977). Lucretius supposes that if Nature were given a voice, she would admonish those who balk at death and

¹⁶⁸ Any form of luxury or ambition is classed as both unnatural and unnecessary, as it is likely that the desire will never actually be satisfied. See Chapter I.

¹⁶⁹ See also Philodemus *De Morte* 14.2-14.14 (translation by Henry), in which he emphasises the attainability of the goal of tranquillity, as opposed to the perpetually unattainable goal of something like knowledge.

wish to extend their lives. Lucretius' choice to speak in the voice of Nature gives the impression that what is deemed 'natural' (in this instance, a natural lifespan) is right and proper, much in the same way that Epicurus emphasises the inherent primacy of natural desires. As Reinhardt points out, Nature's tone is one of impatience and self-evidence, peppered with curt, direct questions,¹⁷⁰ implying that any attempt to go against Nature is foolhardy at best and hubristic at worst:

quid tibi tanto operest, mortalis, quod nimis aegris
luctibus indulges? quid mortem congemis ac fles?
nam si grata fuit tibi vita anteacta priorque
et non omnia pertusum congesta quasi in vas
commoda perfluxere atque ingrata interiere,
cur non ut plenus vitae conviva recedis
aequo animoque capis securam, stulte, quietem?

What ails you so, O mortal, to indulge overmuch in sickly lamentations? Why do you groan aloud and weep at death? For if your former life now past has been to your liking, if it is not true that all your blessings have been gathered as it were into a riddled jar, and have run through and been lost without gratification, why not, like a banqueter fed full of life, withdraw with contentment and rest in peace, you fool?

D.R.N. 3.933-939

This passage uses another feasting analogy, which conveys Epicurus' message that quality is superior to quantity. However, the main force of this analogy is the notion that it is *greedy* to wish for more life than is given. If one's life has been a good one, then one should depart with gratitude and contentment.

This is followed by the argument that, conversely, if one's life has held nothing but misery and there is no possibility of improving it, then death ought to be considered a relief (*D.R.N.* 3.940-943).¹⁷¹ Each argument therefore leads to the same conclusion regarding one's

¹⁷⁰ Reinhardt (2002), 295-6.

¹⁷¹ Epicurus elsewhere makes clear that it is possible to pursue philosophy and achieve ἀταραξία at any age (Ep. Men. 122), suggesting that this argument is designed by Lucretius to persuade his reader of a false dichotomy (that either one's life was good or it was bad) wherein the only appropriate response to death is passive acceptance. While

attitude towards death. The end of one's life should not be disputed, regardless of how positive or negative one's life has been before this point. Nature's speech then seeks to tackle the fear of premature death more directly:

nam tibi praeterea quod machiner inveniamque,
quod placeat, nil est: eadem sunt omnia semper.
si tibi non annis corpus iam marcet et artus
confecti languent, eadem tamen omnia restant,
omnia si pergas vivendo vincere saecla,
atque etiam potius, si numquam sis moriturus.

For there is nothing else I can devise and invent to please you: everything is always the same. If your body is not already withering with years and your limbs worn out and languid, yet everything remains the same, even if you shall go on to outlive all generations, and even more if you should be destined never to die.

D.R.N. 3.944-949

This argument is reminiscent of Epicurus' claim that while pleasure may vary, it cannot increase with time. Nature claims here that even if someone were to die young, they would not be robbed of anything that they would have experienced had they died when they were older.¹⁷² That is not to say that the young have experienced *everything* that life has to offer. Rather, there is the same opportunity for the greatest degree of pleasure all throughout one's lifetime. Nature is similarly dismissive of the lamentations of the elderly in the face of death:

grandior hic vero si iam seniorque queratur
atque obitum lamentetur miser amplius aequo,
non merito inclamet magis et voce increpet acri?
"aufer abhinc lacrimas, balatro, et compesce querellas!
omnia perfunctus vitae praemia marces;
sed quia semper aves quod abest, praesentia temnis,

the standard reading of *finem vitae facere* (*D.R.N.* 3.943) is a recommendation for the unfortunate man to end his life via suicide, Reinhardt (2002), 299, briefly acknowledges an alternate reading as a recommendation to *accept* one's death in the future, which is appealing in its consistency with Epicurean attitudes towards suicide, but is not necessarily a more accurate translation.

¹⁷² Philodemus, *De Morte* 12.7 (translation by Henry), also claims that the man who has died young is not to be pitied if he has lived well. Sanders (2011), 226, adds to the translation of this passage the sentiment that it is 'folly' to fear untimely death due to the hope that greater time will afford greater pleasure.

imperfecta tibi elapsast ingrataque vita,
et nec opinanti mors ad caput adstitit ante
quam satur ac plenus possis discedere rerum.
nunc aliena tua tamen aetate omnia mitte
aequo animoque agedum iam concede: necessest.”

But if in this regard some older man, well stricken in years, should make complaint, wretchedly bewailing his death more than he ought, would she [Nature] not have reason to cry more loudly still and to upbraid bitter words? “Away, away with your tears, ruffian, check your lamentations! All life’s prizes you have enjoyed and now you wither. But because you always crave what you have not, and contemn what you have, life has slipped by for you incomplete and ungratifying, and death stands by your head unexpected, before you can retire gluttoned and full of the feast. But now in any case dismiss all that does not befit you age, and with equanimity, come now, yield to your years: thus it must be.”

D.R.N. 3.952-962

Like the young, the elderly are depicted as entitled and greedy when they are lamenting the end of their lives. The message is that, regardless of age, one should neither expect nor wish for a longer life than is lived, for that would not be in accordance with the natural order. Lucretius immediately follows Nature’s speech with a reminder that this natural order relies on a cycle of formation and dissolution, owing to the atomic constitution of matter. In order for new things to come into existence, that which currently exists must cease to be:

cedit enim rerum novitate extrusa vetustas
semper, et ex aliis aliud reparare necessest:
nec quisquam in barathrum nec Tartara deditur atra:
materies opus est ut crescant postera saecla;
quae tamen omnia te vita perfuncta sequentur;
nec minus ergo ante haec quam tu cecidere, cadentque.
sic aliud ex alio numquam desistet oriri
vitaque mancipio nulli datur, omnibus usu.

For the old order always passes, thrust out by the new, and one thing has to be made afresh from others; but no one is delivered into the pit of black Tartarus: matter is wanted, that coming generations may grow; and yet they all, when their life is done, will follow you, and so, no less than you, these generations have passed away before now, and will continue to pass away. So one thing will never cease to arise from another, and no man possesses life in freehold – all as tenants.

D.R.N. 3.964-971

Lucretius' reiteration of this natural cycle of being explains why it is 'greedy' to wish for an extension of life: for one to live longer than one's natural lifespan is to overstay one's welcome. Life is continuously being recycled through the reassembly of atomic compounds, meaning that one's life is not entirely one's own,¹⁷³ and will always be finite. If it were infinite, there would be no change and no new life. A dual argument is therefore presented: one ought to attune one's attitude to the facts of nature, and one's wish for immortality would actually have negative consequences for life itself.

Using the voice of Nature, Lucretius has asserted that no one has the right to live longer than is 'natural', whether one is fortunate, unfortunate, young, or old. Instead of lamenting one's impending death, one ought to graciously remove oneself from the 'banquet' (*conviva*) that is life. However, this analogy exposes the concern that a banquet, like a 'natural' lifespan, consists of a certain structure. The parts that collectively form the whole must themselves be completed in order for the experience to reach its conclusion. Nussbaum identifies this issue, arguing that the banquet analogy weakens Lucretius' assertion that a life cannot be cut short:

This argument tells us that life, like a meal, has, or is, a temporally unfolding structure...we can see that it also supports the judgement that death can come too soon and, in effect, almost always does. For it almost always cuts short, before the point of repletion and satiety, the temporally extended process of living a human life that seems to be admitted, within the argument, to be a good thing. If one dies prematurely – for example, before reaching the main course – this will be the worst sort of death; for it will make fruitless those “courses” in the meal whose primary function was to prepare appetite and palate for the main course.

Nussbaum (1994), 211

¹⁷³ This echoes Ep. *Men.* 127: Μνημονευτέον δὲ ὡς τὸ μέλλον οὔτε ἡμέτερον οὔτε πάντως οὐχ ἡμέτερον, ἴνα μήτε πάντως προσμένωμεν ὡς ἐσόμενον μήτε ἀπελπίζωμεν ὡς πάντως οὐκ ἐσόμενον; We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come. Cf. *Sent. Vat.* 14.

Two significant components of Nussbaum's interpretation are that death will almost always be premature, and that a premature death undermines the value of life before that point. Both of these claims are unduly pessimistic and at odds with the Epicurean framework. Any concession that a death *could* be premature inevitably allows for the possibility that *all* deaths are premature. When value is dependent on temporal duration, the 'point of repletion and satiety' is indeterminate and elusive. There is no specific age or life chapter at which one's life is deemed to be complete, meaning that almost every life could be considered cut short by death, as Nussbaum states. Clearly, this is a belief that would cause distress in anyone contemplating their own mortality, hence the Epicurean imperative to remove this as a threat. Nussbaum also claims that a premature death makes 'fruitless' the courses that precede 'the main course'. This translates to the concern that death will frustrate one's life goals and therefore invalidate any progress made towards those goals during one's lifetime.¹⁷⁴ The implication of this rather grim outlook is that, because almost everyone is going to die 'prematurely', there is the constant threat that one's current actions are pointless because they may not be completed before one's death. This suggests that the 'point' of one's actions is simply to be completed, which is a judgement that lends itself to disappointment, given that every mortal is going to die sometime.¹⁷⁵ The Epicureans dodge this concern with their definition of pleasure as a state of being rather than an end point (Ep. *Men.* 128; 139), as well as their advocacy for fulfilling only those desires which are deemed to be 'natural and necessary' (D.L. 10.127-8). The purpose of an Epicurean's actions

¹⁷⁴ This fear is also expressed by Rorty (1983), 177: 'The drama will continue without their participation, and perhaps none the worse for that. What turns such sorrow into fear is that thought that all our efforts to live well, our attentions and dedications were for nothing, that our joys and generousities, pains and stoic resolutions were all in vain.'

¹⁷⁵ Nussbaum (1994), 211, goes on to say: 'One would have eaten differently had one known the main course was not going to arrive', meaning that one would have lived differently had one known that one's life was about to end. While this is certainly true, it is also the case that death is inevitable, and that it is always the case that one's life is going to end – the question is simply when. An Epicurean could justifiably argue that proper appreciation of life should therefore not begin *only* when one's death becomes imminent but should have been present all along.

is to derive pleasure, and that pleasure is not dependent on satisfying some goal or ambition. Therefore, no action is ever in vain if it is pleasurable.¹⁷⁶

Nussbaum's interpretation relies on reading the analogy '*ut plenus vitae conviva recedis*' as withdrawing from the banquet as a satisfied guest *does*; that is, at the natural conclusion of the banquet. This clearly leaves open the possibility that one could be forced to depart before the banquet is complete. Reinhardt, however, has offered an alternative interpretation that does not fall into the trap of implying that a life can be terminated prematurely, or that a departure before the 'main course' compromises the completeness of one's life. Reinhardt suggests that '*ut plenus vitae conviva recedis*' may be understood as an invitation to withdraw from the banquet at any time, as one would *if they were* a satisfied guest – regardless of how far through the feast they actually happened to be.¹⁷⁷ This reading shifts the emphasis to one of internal attitude rather than external circumstance, which is far more in tune with the rest of Nature's speech, as well as the general tone of Epicurean therapeutic advice.¹⁷⁸ Nature's Speech therefore reiterates that the Epicurean notion of a 'complete' life is entirely independent of both temporal duration and the conclusion of one's actions. This serves to reduce anxiety that one's life will be cut short or that one's actions will prove to have been in vain.

A similar but distinct concern regarding the completeness of one's life is that one will not get the opportunity to experience a 'full' human life before one's death. Striker brings this to the

¹⁷⁶ Take, for instance, the act of tending a garden. If one enjoys the act of gardening, and one finds pleasure in the thought that they are working towards producing food in that garden, then those actions are not pointless even if one will no longer be alive when it comes time to harvest, because the actions themselves were enjoyed. Nussbaum (1994) 192-238, repeatedly discusses the diminished value of an activity that is 'cut short' by death. By doing so, she is overlooking the value that is found in the process of doing the action, and – quite contrary to the Epicurean approach – focusing entirely on the value of the finished product.

¹⁷⁷ Reinhardt (2002), 296-7.

¹⁷⁸ By arguing that happiness is independent of time, it appears that the Epicureans stress the responsibility of the individual in creating the circumstances for their own happiness. Self-sufficiency seems to be crucial in the Epicurean model, so as to maintain a feeling of tranquillity throughout the turbulence of everyday life.

fore with her ‘Operatic Analogy’, which likens one’s life trajectory to the performance of an opera and raises the issue of what constitutes a fundamentally ‘human’ life:

The eighteen year old who wants to continue living is like someone who has watched the first act of an opera and is justifiably annoyed if the performance breaks off at this point. He is angry, not because he had thought he was going to spend three hours instead of only one, but because he wanted to see the entire opera, not just a part of it.

Striker (1988), 325

Striker’s analogy is intuitively powerful because it rightly dismisses the length of one’s life as only incidentally relevant and identifies the arc of one’s life as the true source of concern. The length of the opera is largely arbitrary, as the purpose of attending is to experience a complete narrative. Anything short of this is a disappointment.¹⁷⁹ This understanding is comparable to Nussbaum’s interpretation of Lucretius’ banquet analogy in that the notion of a complete life is reliant on the fulfilment of a certain structure of ‘stages’. The ‘first course’, the ‘first act’, and ‘childhood development’ may all be equated and deemed insufficient in isolation. One must experience every ‘stage’ in order to qualify for a complete life. The difference between Nussbaum’s and Striker’s approaches is the former’s emphasis on the satisfaction of goals as opposed to the latter’s emphasis on the fulfilment of criteria.¹⁸⁰

Striker is careful to clarify that her analogy is only generally intended to reflect human experience. Unlike an opera, there can be no exact point that marks the completeness of a human

¹⁷⁹ While Striker herself does not address this (stressing the general nature of the analogy), it may be assumed that an appropriate ‘life narrative’ would be determined on an individual basis, lest it be wrongly assumed that there is only one kind of complete life. It would be absurd to claim that any given person’s life could only be complete if they experienced the life stage of parenthood, for instance. Rosenbaum (1990), 34-35, touches on the relative nature of one’s life arc and aspirations in his criticism of Striker’s argument.

¹⁸⁰ This very slight difference is expressed in Nussbaum’s concern with how ‘fruitful’ the earlier stages of life are in relation to its duration, while Striker’s notion of completion is reliant on the passive experience of a certain life structure. It may be inferred from this that Nussbaum views complete as ‘being fulfilled’ while Striker views complete as ‘being finished’.

life. The essence of the analogy, Striker argues, is the *expectation* of certain life stages.¹⁸¹ This reliance on intuitive expectation undermines Striker's argument, as it is fundamentally incompatible with the Epicurean perspective. Lucretius' Speech of Nature berates those who expect more life precisely because no one is entitled to it (*D.R.N.* 3.971). Epicurus states this even more explicitly:

Μνημονευτέον δὲ ὡς τὸ μέλλον οὔτε ἡμέτερον οὔτε πάντως οὐχ ἡμέτερον, ἵνα μήτε πάντως προσμένωμεν ὡς ἐσόμενον μήτε ἀπελπίζωμεν ὡς πάντως οὐκ ἐσόμενον.

We must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.

Ep. *Men.* 127

By claiming that the future does not belong to us, Epicurus is attempting to undermine any sense of entitlement towards one's life. He implies that having expectations about one's life that are largely outside of one's control may lead to disappointment. He therefore advocates for its avoidance, much in the same way that he does in the case of ambition, owing to its tendency to be self-perpetuating and therefore frustrating. Striker may be absolutely correct in her argument that an individual may fear that their life may be incomplete if they do not experience their expected life trajectory, but an Epicurean would be able to dodge that fear by removing the underlying expectation. Striker's analogy therefore does not adequately refute the Epicurean position when considered from within the Epicurean framework.

There is some understandable hesitation in embracing such an Epicurean approach to life. By attempting to erase expectations, ambitions, and any desire that exceeds survival and simple comfort, there is concern that the Epicureans are *too* frugal and thereby compromise some

¹⁸¹ Striker (1988), 326.

aspects of what it means to be human.¹⁸² It is evident that the Epicurean notion of a ‘complete’ life is independent of both temporal duration and the achievement of certain goals or life stages. While this may be at odds with some widely-held preconceptions, there is no suggestion of inconsistency within the Epicurean framework, or of any indication that this system of belief would be an impossible undertaking if accepted fully.¹⁸³ The Epicurean conception of a fulfilled and complete life is reliant on the consistent pursuit of natural and necessary desires which will contribute to a state of ongoing mental and bodily tranquillity. This idea is summed up nicely by Rosenbaum:

The Epicurean idea would be this: There is no goal or type of goal, the objective achievement of which is necessary for a person to live a complete life. The requirement that a person achieve such goals in order to have a complete life would be, for Epicurus, an abstract, unjustifiable, and anxiety-producing cultural imposition on human thriving.

Rosenbaum (1990), 36

¹⁸² For instance, Santayana (1922), 33, describes Epicurus as ‘hating life’ and ‘recommending a sort of pleasure which has no excitement and no risk about it.’

¹⁸³ There is some discussion surrounding the evolutionary function of fearing death, and thus its role in a ‘complete’ and ‘fundamentally human’ life. Rorty (1983), 180-182, argues that fearing death is an instinctive survival mechanic and attributes to it a motivational function. Fischer (2006), 198, applies this evolutionary approach to one of his contributions to the Symmetry Debate, identifying a ‘clear survival benefit to creatures who care especially about the future’, and extrapolates some justification for asymmetrical attitudes towards the past and future. This seems to build on Parfit’s (1984), 186, passing assumption that temporal biases are the result of evolution. However, while it is undisputed that *pain* serves as a reactionary function that dissuades organisms from interacting with that which is harmful, *fear* plays a preparatory role in an organism faced with a potentially harmful situation (in that physiological arousal prepares one for fight or flight). Fear, therefore, certainly serves a purpose, but when fear is experienced without previous experience of a particular stimulus (such as death), it is the result of generalisation, meaning that it is not necessarily rational and may be unlearned. Furthermore, the popular view in the field of evolutionary psychology is that there is little to support the claim that fearing death is essential for survival, reproduction, and therefore natural selection. As has been pointed out by Jong and Halberstadt (2016), 85, ‘a lack of fear of death would have to lead directly to life-harming behaviour in order for some kind of natural selection and evolutionary pathway to occur,’ and this is far from certain. Kirkpatrick and Navarrete (2006), 288-290, also state that the notion of a ‘survival instinct’ predates the field of evolutionary psychology, and the evidence actually suggests that an individual survival instinct would not be favoured by the evolutionary process as it may contradict the goal of ensuring the survival (and therefore replication) of an entire gene pool. As such, from an evolutionary standpoint, the fear of death would likely not serve a fundamental purpose and would not be integral to a ‘complete’ life.

Such a life cannot be ‘cut off’ by death, and there is no need to fear the nullification of goals and ambitions.

Thus far, the Epicureans have tempered the fear of premature death by illustrating that temporal duration does not inform one’s degree of pleasure or fulfilment of a ‘complete’ life. Nor is the achievement of certain goals or story arc necessary for one’s life to be deemed whole and ready for conclusion. Therefore, one need not be concerned that one will die ‘too soon’, or that death will rob one of a fulfilling life. One further argument to be deployed by the Epicureans is that immortality, or everlasting life, will not grant any further happiness than our own mortal existence.

The Undesirability of Immortality

The Epicurean belief that the achievement of a complete and pleasurable life is not dependent on temporal duration has been clearly established. An extended or even infinite amount of time is unnecessary in the pursuit of ἀταραξία. Indeed, the ceaseless prolongation of one’s life may actually cause more harm than good. There has been some discussion surrounding the desirability of eternal life, with many concluding that it would eventually become intolerable.¹⁸⁴ Epicurus himself hints at such a viewpoint by suggesting that a key component to enjoying life is not to extend it, but to avoid any desire to extend it:

ὄθεν γνῶσις ὀρθὴ τοῦ μηθὲν εἶναι πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὸν θάνατον ἀπολαυστὸν ποιεῖ τὸ τῆς ζωῆς θηντόν,
οὐκ ἄπειρον προστιθεῖσα χρόνον, ἀλλὰ τὸν τῆς ἀθανασίας ἀφελομένη πόθον.

¹⁸⁴ See for instance: May (2009), 60-63; Nussbaum (1994), 227-232; Kagan (2012), 243; Cave (2012), 74-75; Scheffler (2013), 83-110.

So a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding infinite time but by removing the desire for immortality.

Ep. Men. 124

This emphasis on the importance of a ‘correct understanding’ is a reassertion of the ideal intellectualist approach, and is of course built on Epicurean atomic theory, which rejects the possibility of immortality. Yet, there seems to be an exception to this rule. The immortal gods still occupy a space in Epicurean ethics, despite the threat of inconsistency with atomic theory (*Ep. Men.* 123). The gods are lauded as ideals to emulate, which gives the impression that immortality would *not* be perceived as essentially negative to the Epicureans.

The precise Epicurean attitude towards immortality is therefore rather unclear. Epicurus has suggested that we ought to remove desire for immortality. Indeed, arguing that infinite life would be a fundamentally negative experience would certainly be a powerful addition to Epicurus’ arguments against fearing premature death. The ongoing modern debate centres on whether or not immortality would necessarily become boring, and thus diminish the pleasures that would motivate one to keep on living. This debate can therefore be evaluated using the perspective of an Epicurean hedonist: if immortal life would eliminate the possibility of immortal pleasure, then immortality must be viewed as inherently negative.

A significant contribution to the discussion surrounding the desirability of immortality was made by Bernard Williams. Using as a case study the Karel Čapek play, *‘The Makropulos Affair’*, Williams argues that an immortal life would eventually become boring and meaningless to the extent that it would be unliveable.¹⁸⁵ The play tells the story of a woman named ‘EM’

¹⁸⁵ Williams (1973), 82-100. It must be noted that while Williams does bring Lucretius into his discussion of immortality, he is not approaching this topic with an Epicurean mind-set. Nevertheless, his contribution to the

(originally she is named Elina Makropulos, followed by a number of aliases, all with the initials 'EM'). She is given an elixir of life by her father in order to prolong her existence. During the play, she is 342 years old. Her story concludes with her declining to take the elixir again and electing to die, as her life has descended into pure tedium and has lost all meaning.¹⁸⁶ From this case, Williams extrapolates what was later dubbed the 'Necessary Boredom Thesis', which argues that immortality would inevitably become boring, owing to limitations in what one person can experience:

Her [EM's] trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

Williams (1973), 90.

Williams is quite convinced that experiences are limited and would therefore eventually start to repeat, at which point they would become monotonous. This makes an intuitive kind of sense; even an activity that one enjoys very much can become unpleasant in too great a quantity or if repeated too frequently. However, Williams goes one step further by claiming that boredom would have to be 'unthinkable' in order for immortality to be attractive.¹⁸⁷ His exact reasoning for this is unclear.¹⁸⁸ The possibility of boredom is certainly not unique to an immortal life, and it could very reasonably be argued that it is one of many emotions that are encompassed by a healthy, balanced mortal life. Boredom may drive one to seek out new experiences, or signal that

debate is highly relevant in how it has shaped scholarly opinions on the value of immortality, and in how it can assist in forming an understanding of the Epicurean position.

¹⁸⁶ The formula for the elixir is subsequently destroyed by a young woman, despite protests from some 'older men'.

¹⁸⁷ Williams (1973), 96.

¹⁸⁸ Fischer (1994), 261, also makes this objection.

one ought to change how one spends one's time. It may be unpleasant, but it is not without value.¹⁸⁹ If, however, boredom was the *only* (or even predominant) emotion that one could feel – and one was unable to seek new experiences or change one's circumstances so as to alleviate the boredom – then immortality would be a dreary prospect indeed. The threat of some boredom does not decrease the desirability of immortality, but the threat of overwhelming or ceaseless boredom certainly does. An Epicurean would likely take a similar approach. Their goal is to maximise pleasure, in accordance with their definition of pleasure as the absence of pain. Unless an immortal life was expected to be inescapably boring to the point of causing mental anguish, then it is likely that immortality would not be viewed as inherently negative.

Williams also raises an intriguing point regarding consistency of self: he supposes that, while EM would be somewhat shaped by her experiences, she would essentially retain her character, which suggests a limitation not only in the variety of experiences she could live through, but also a limitation in how she could possibly react to those experiences. This consistency would no doubt exacerbate the alleged monotony. However, this claim does rely on an unjustifiably static conception of self. Owing to an endless number of experiences, it seems almost inevitable that an individual would change considerably over the course of an immortal lifespan, probably even to the extent that a younger version of themselves would barely recognise them.¹⁹⁰ This is not necessarily negative, nor is it sufficient reason to believe that immortality would be negative. The Epicurean sense of self is, as established, informed by the accumulation of experience and reinforced by self-reflection.¹⁹¹ Williams' limited identity

¹⁸⁹ The notion that something could be unpleasant but useful seems at first to be at odds with Epicurean hedonism. However, the Epicureans made it clear that proper reasoning must be applied in their pursuit of pleasure, and a short-term pain that eventuates in pleasure may occasionally be appropriate (*Ep. Men.* 129). See also Chp. 2.

¹⁹⁰ Fischer (1994), 267-268, also rejects Williams' limited identity condition.

¹⁹¹ See Chp. 1.

condition is inconsistent with this aspect of Epicurean theory, which again suggests that an Epicurean would not share Williams' concern that immortality must be painfully boring.

Williams' argument rests heavily on intuition, leading to some resistance from those, such as Fischer, who reject the notion that boredom is *necessarily* inevitable:

In general, single-minded and unbalanced pursuit of any single kind of activity will be unattractive. But of course from the fact that one's life will be *unending* it does not follow that it must be *unitary* or *unbalanced*.

Fischer (1994), 261.

Fischer makes a distinction between two different kinds of pleasure: 'self-exhausting' and 'repeatable', both of which are relative to particular individuals. He argues that, with appropriate temporal distribution, repeatable pleasures would not become tiresome, but would be an endless source of pleasure that would stave off any life-consuming boredom. Building on this argument, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin claim that it is absurd to believe that some experiences would lose value simply because they are not 'new' experiences. They cite examples such as friendship and sex, which, even with repeated experience, continue to provide pleasure and – crucially – variation of such pleasure. One friendship is never exactly like another, meaning that even if an individual experienced thousands of friendships, there is no reason to believe that they would become tedious.¹⁹²

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin then introduce a very useful distinction between two different kinds of boredom, both of which they attempt to argue would not impact an immortal individual: 'content-boredom', which refers to a lack of desire for anything that compels one to continue living, and 'motivational-boredom', which refers to a lack of energy to pursue any

¹⁹² Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 355-360.

desires.¹⁹³ Against the former, they argue that repeatable pleasures and varied experiences would thwart the issue. In all likelihood, an Epicurean would broadly agree with this, as long as the pleasure resulted from the fulfilment of natural or necessary desire. A combination of repeated and varied pleasures would assist in maintaining the tranquil state of *ataraxia* by ensuring the continuation of *katastematic* pleasure (being without need) and adding some *kinetic* pleasure (variation). The latter notion of ‘motivational-boredom’ is trickier to address and immediately provides more compelling support for the undesirability of immortality. It suggests that even if there are an infinite number of experiences for a single individual, that single individual may not be equipped with sufficient energy to fill an eternity with such experiences. ‘Motivational-boredom’ could explain why someone might tire of something like friendship (which Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin believe to be inconceivable): even with the knowledge that each new friendship could bring great (and varied) fulfilment, one may lack the drive to go through the motions of forming a new friendship, if one had spent thousands of years doing just that, time and time again. By way of explaining ‘motivation-boredom’, both May and Nussbaum suggest that the availability of an endless amount of time would eliminate time constraints that would motivate an individual to act on desires.¹⁹⁴ Without any drive to do something *now* and with the knowledge that something can always be done later, it is conceivable that an immortal individual would lose motivation and develop some degree of listlessness.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin’s response to this is curious. Rather than attempting to argue that time constraints are not necessarily related to motivation, they argue that an immortal person actually *would* still be subject to time constraints. They do this in two ways. Firstly, they argue that external phenomena are still subject to temporal decay, even if the immortal individual is not.

¹⁹³ Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 361.

¹⁹⁴ May (2009). 60-63; Nussbaum (1994), 229.

They offer the example of a desire to visit the Pyramids of Giza; since the pyramids will someday be eroded and lost, there is a time constraint (albeit a very distant one). They also suggest that there are certain time-sensitive life events, such as your child's first steps, which cannot 'always be done later'.¹⁹⁵ Secondly, they argue that an immortal person such as EM *will* eventually die, and is therefore still bound by time constraints. They identify EM as 'medically immortal' rather than 'truly immortal', meaning that while she is ageless and immune to death by natural causes, she is not unable to be killed. If she fell off a cliff or were shot, she would die.¹⁹⁶

This argument raises some significant issues. Even with the inevitability of a 'medically immortal' individual's death, their lifespan may still be tediously long. Their death would also likely be sudden, if it is only a spontaneous accident or deliberate act that could kill them. Therefore, at any given time, they could reasonably assume that they have a vast amount of time ahead of them. The notion of some far-off sudden death would not be sufficient to introduce a motivational time-constraint. Compare, for instance, to the difference in attitude between a 20-year-old and an 80-year-old, or between a healthy person and one who is terminally ill. In both cases, the latter would likely be more aware of the finite amount of time ahead of them, because death is at a much closer proximity. An additional issue with this argument is that their approach cannot fully apply to a 'truly immortal' individual who is invulnerable to death, or even a particularly lucky 'medically immortal' individual who happens to never die.¹⁹⁷ Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin even concede at the very beginning of their argument that a truly infinite lifespan may induce a disinterest in life:

¹⁹⁵ Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 367-368.

¹⁹⁶ Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 363-366.

¹⁹⁷ Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 368-370. They consider a lucky 'medically immortal' person as a category in their own right, dubbed a 'robust immortal'.

But it just seems implausible to us, and upon reflection, it can even seem remarkably pessimistic, to suppose that *anyone* in EM's circumstances would have lost all categorical desires and thus all interest in life. It is certainly an interesting thesis about *infinitely* long human life, or even a human life that extended for millennia or more; but three hundred years (or a bit more) just seem like too few to necessarily result in a complete loss of projects that could provide (or ground) reasons to continue to live (or to want to continue to live)! Moreover, it is not clear that *every* person who might be in EM's circumstances would suffer from her loss of interest in life.

Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 355.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin make it clear with this statement that their arguments are directly addressing the specific situation of EM. Their admission that boredom may be applicable in an infinite or extremely long life somewhat undermines their later claims that 'truly immortal' individuals would not be 'motivation-bored', although their core argument only maintains that boredom would not *necessarily* take hold.

This counterargument to 'motivational-boredom' that is introduced by Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin is therefore inadequate. However, an Epicurean can easily dismiss the threat of 'motivational-boredom'. Where Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin attempted to impose motivational time-constraints on an immortal individual, the Epicureans can invoke their already well-established principle that pleasure is simply not dependent on time. The presence of a time-constraint would not provide any additional motivation for an Epicurean. Rather, it is pleasure alone that ought to motivate action (informed by appropriate reason, of course). The length of one's life is also inconsequential, as it does not dictate how pleasurable that life is. Yet again, it would seem that the Epicureans need not perceive immortality to be negative.

The Necessary Boredom Thesis has merit, although modern discussion remains divisive. It is immediately apparent that an unfavourable view of immortality would be a useful tool in the Epicurean fight against the fear of premature death. The Epicureans have demonstrated that both

pleasure and a complete life are not dependent on time. The argument that immortality would cause life to lose all meaning would serve the Epicureans well, and support Epicurus' claim that 'a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable' (Ep. *Men.* 124).

Nevertheless, the Necessary Boredom Thesis is clearly incompatible with Epicurean hedonism. An Epicurean reaches the height of pleasure when all pain is removed (*ἀταραξία* and *ἄπονία*) and appropriate desires are satisfied (*katastematic* pleasure). Neither 'content-boredom' nor 'motivational-boredom' would be an issue for an Epicurean who has achieved *katastematic* pleasure and is in a state of passive tranquillity. Motivation and value are driven by pleasure rather than time and any variation provided by *kinetic* pleasure is welcome but ultimately unnecessary. Therefore, as long as an Epicurean's basic needs are met and they are without mental or physical pain, they are as happy as they could possibly be. It must be concluded that immortality would not be inherently negative to an Epicurean. Yet, Epicurus still tells us *not* to desire immortal life.

It is evidently not the state of immortality itself that is negative to the Epicureans. Rather, it is the *desire* for immortality that causes pain. Because we mortals are indeed mere mortals, immortality is not possible for us.¹⁹⁸ Any genuine desire for immortality would inevitably lead to disappointment and mental anguish. The Epicureans have established that the maximisation of pleasure and the achievement of a 'complete' life are not dependent on time. The length of one's life – whether it is fleeting or eternal – does not determine whether it is good or bad. The Epicureans do not argue that immortality is inherently worse than mortality, as it is sufficient for

¹⁹⁸ Practically speaking; outside of philosophical musings or the possibility of technology extending the human lifespan far into the future.

them to demonstrate that it is simply unnecessary and impossible, which they do so successfully. Once this ‘correct understanding’ is embraced, a budding Epicurean can abandon any unfulfillable yearning for immortality and focus instead on enjoying the mortality that they have.

The one persistent problem with this account of the Epicurean attitude towards immortality is the presence of the immortal gods. Divine worship played an important role in Epicurean ethics, yet the very existence of the gods seems to contradict a central tenet of atomic theory: that all atomic compounds are eventually dissolved (D.L. 10.42):

πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη, μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε· πᾶν δὲ τὸ φυλάττειν αὐτοῦ δυνάμενον τὴν μετ’ ἀφθαρσίας μακαριότητα περὶ αὐτοῦ δόξαζε. Θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν. ἐναργῆς δὲ ἐστὶν αὐτῶν ἡ γνῶσις· οἴους δ’ αὐτοὺς <οἱ> πολλοὶ νομίζουσιν, οὐκ εἰσὶν· οὐ γὰρ φυλάττουσιν αὐτοὺς οἴους νοοῦσιν.

First, believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed,¹⁹⁹ according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, thou shalt not affirm of him aught that is foreign to his immortality or that agrees not with blessedness, but shalt believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them.

Ep. *Men.* 123

Long and Sedley have offered a potential solution to this contradiction: they suggest that the Epicurean conception of the gods is that they are not corporeal beings. Rather, they are ‘streams of images’ that are conceived of by individuals as paradigms of each person’s ethical ideal.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Long & Sedley (1987), 140, translate ἄφθαρτον as ‘imperishable’ rather than ‘immortal’, which is perhaps more fitting given the context of atomic theory.

²⁰⁰ Long & Sedley (1987), 144-147. Sedley (2011), 29-30, defends this ‘idealist’ position against the opposing ‘realist’ theory that the gods were actually conceived of as corporeal beings. Obbink (1989), 201-202, argues in favour of the ‘idealist’ account, while Konstan (2011), 53-71, asserts the ‘realist’ account, using evidence from Lucretius (*D.R.N.* 3.800-23) that suggests the gods are able to replenish lost matter (and thus do not decay) and are composed of such fine material that they are impervious to damage by other atoms (and thus cannot be harmed). As Long (2019), 72, states, both the ‘idealist’ and the ‘realist’ readings attribute a life of endless duration to the Epicurean gods.

This is in line with a criticism by Cicero that Epicurus attempts to avoid saying that the gods are atomic compounds (as atomic compounds must be perishable), and thus attributes to the gods a ‘quasi-body’ (Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.71).²⁰¹ According to this interpretation, the gods are imperishable and blessed simply because they are conceived to be. As concepts, they are preserved by us, making them everlasting and invulnerable to natural wear and tear.

The gods are vehemently described as immortal and blessed. They live in constant pleasure, and as such, they represent an ideal that an Epicurean sought to emulate:

Ταῦτα οὖν καὶ νυκτὸς πρὸς τε τὸν ὅμοιον σεαυτῷ, καὶ οὐδέποτε οὔθ’ ὕπαρ οὔτ’ ὄναρ διαταραχθήσῃ, ζήσεις δὲ ὡς θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποις. Οὐθὲν γὰρ ἔοικε θνητῷ ζῶντι ζῶν ἀνθρώπος ἐν ἀθανάτοις ἀγαθοῖς.

Exercise thyself in these and kindred precepts day and night, both by thyself and with him who is like unto thee; then never, either in waking or in dream, wilt thou be disturbed, but wilt live as a god among men. For man loses all semblance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings.

Ep. *Men.* 135

However, this begs the question: how can a mortal rival the happiness of the gods and become ‘godlike’ if immortality is unattainable? Immortality and indestructability cannot be prerequisites to happiness; if this were the case, even the most dedicated Epicurean could never achieve this goal. It is clear that the emulation should not be of the gods’ state of being, but rather their *attitude*. Death cannot touch the gods and so they are entirely unmoved by it. This is exactly the view that is shared by the steadfast Epicurean: ‘when we are, death is not’ (Ep. *Men.* 125). Becoming ‘godlike’ is therefore an entirely attainable goal. Warren argues along similar lines:²⁰²

²⁰¹ Konstan (2011), 57-58 uses Cicero’s talk of ‘quasi-flesh’ and ‘quasi-blood’ as evidence for his ‘realist’ theory that the Epicurean gods are corporeal but are made of incredibly fine material such that other atoms can simply pass through them.

²⁰² See also Long (2019), 70-71.

There are gods. Epicurus is a god, and is honoured as such, as anyone will be who similarly attains the correct Epicurean view of the world. Being ‘mortal’ is no obstacle to complete happiness, nor, therefore, to the divinity which this complete happiness constitutes...The goodness of a life is a matter to be decided on a hedonic scale which rejects the influence of duration. Thus the gap between god and mortal in terms of *eudaimonia* is reduced by denying the relevance of sheer mortality. If to be immortal is to live without thinking death relevant at all to one’s life, then the Epicurean sage is indeed ‘immortal’. Death is ‘nothing to him’.

Warren (2000), 260-261

One must simply embrace the Epicurean way of life, eradicate false beliefs and replace them with ‘correct understanding’. An Epicurean can transcend their mortal state by being unconcerned by their mortality.²⁰³ Thus, immortality in the sense of everlasting life is framed as a state of being that is inconsequential to one’s happiness in a bid to mitigate the dangerous desire for the impossible.

The Epicureans remove the desire for immortality, not by claiming that it is inherently worse than mortality, but by demonstrating that it is unnecessary in one’s pursuit of godlike happiness. This argument, together with the assertion that both pleasure and a ‘complete’ life are independent of temporal duration, are designed to persuade the budding Epicurean that there is no threat of life being ‘cut short’ by death. Life can be lived fully and blissfully in a finite amount of time. One therefore need not be afraid of dying prematurely.

Concluding Remarks

Both the fear of mortality and the fear of premature death present genuine threats to one’s mental wellbeing. Each fear is therefore carefully addressed as part of the broader Epicurean mission to

²⁰³ Long & Sedley (1987), 148, offer the alternative suggestion that an Epicurean sage can become ‘godlike’ in the more abstract sense that they themselves take on ‘the divine role of perpetual ethical models for future generations.’

alleviate death-related anxieties. The Epicurean arguments against these fears are intricately woven together in a holistic ethical framework.

The Symmetry Argument was met with significant criticism for not addressing the fear of mortality. Yet, with a wider examination of the Epicurean texts, it is clear that the fear of mortality was recognised and addressed. The simple claim that one need not presently fear that which will not cause harm in the future supplements the Symmetry Argument and the central doctrine that ‘death is nothing to us’. The fear of mortality, or that one is going to die, is thereby neatly dismissed. Furthermore, this is achieved without any contradiction to Epicurus’ hedonist foundation, which has been shown to clearly accommodate recalled and anticipated pleasures.

The arguments against the fear of premature death also revolve around the Epicurean conception of pleasure. Epicurus divorces the concept of pleasure from that of temporal duration, claiming that the greatest pleasure can be achieved in a limited time span. A pleasurable, fulfilled, and ‘complete’ life is therefore entirely independent of time. An endless existence, while not perceived as inherently negative, will not grant any more pleasure than a finite existence. Death – whenever it comes – will not diminish one’s potential for living a happy life and therefore cannot cut a life short.

The remedy against the fears of mortality and premature death is to be found in adopting the Epicurean way of life. The correct understanding of pleasure, desire, and fulfilment will arm the budding Epicurean with all the tools necessary to eradicate any creeping anxieties related to death and dying.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to examine the arguments put forward by the Epicureans in their attempt to eradicate the fear of death. In order to do so, the Epicurean theories of atomism and hedonism needed to first be understood, as these are the two pillars upon which their entire philosophy stands. Bound up with these two theories is the fundamental claim that ‘death is nothing to us’. Upon death, our atomic souls dissipate, resulting in the absence of both pain and self. We care nothing of death, for we *are* nothing in death.

Of course, the fear of death is not a single, isolated fear. There are multiple strands of anxiety that are encompassed by this broader concern. The Epicureans recognised this, as evidenced by the network of arguments built around their ethical goal of removing fear, which constitutes the very heart of their philosophical venture. Four discrete categories of death-related fear are identified and addressed by the Epicureans: the fear of being dead, the fear of dying, the fear of mortality, and the fear of premature death. The argument against the first of these fears is clearly encompassed by the claim that ‘death is nothing to us’. As we become nothing upon death, death can in no way harm us. The fear of dying, meanwhile, can be reduced to a fear of pain. The Epicureans claim that physical discomfort can be overcome by mental pleasure, and Epicurus himself demonstrates how this principle can be employed to alleviate the pain of dying. The arguments against the fears of mortality and premature death are less distinct but are nevertheless incorporated into Epicurean doctrine. The former is found in the Epicurean belief that a future occurrence ought not to be feared if it will cause no harm. The latter assertion is especially dependent on hedonism. The Epicureans argue that a life cannot be ‘cut short’ or end ‘too soon’, because temporal duration does not dictate the degree of pleasure or completeness in

an individual's life. Epicurus maintains that one will be more able to enjoy mortal life once the impossible and damaging desire for immortality is abated.

The Epicurean goal of eradicating death-related anxiety, and particularly their claim that death cannot cause harm, has incited no small amount of criticism. Lucretius' Symmetry Argument, which has been shown to serve as persuasive support for Epicurus' claim that 'death is nothing to us', has been met with counter-arguments and allegations of asymmetry. Many critics of Epicureanism favour the Deprivation Account, which contends that death causes harm by depriving an individual of the pleasures of life. After careful evaluation, I find the Deprivation Account and the assorted attempts at proving asymmetry to be invariably flawed and insufficient in their attempt to both illustrate the 'evil' of death and undermine the Symmetry Argument. I believe that the majority of critics fail to examine these Epicurean arguments from within the Epicurean framework. Their arguments are lobbied externally, betraying a lack of commitment to the underlying Epicurean principles of atomism and hedonism; principles that would be deeply engrained in the mind and outlook of an Epicurean sage. The Epicurean arguments require these foundations to succeed, and with the security of these foundations, they cannot fail.

I am convinced that the Epicureans accomplished their goal of eradicating death anxiety, in accordance with their intellectualist perspective. They have soundly demonstrated that there are no grounds for the rational fear of death within their philosophy. The Epicureans promoted no less than a holistic way of life: they found utmost happiness in the absence of pain, and uniquely embraced mortality, thus freeing themselves from the anxieties of death and dying.

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