Prenatal and Posthumous Nonexistence: Lucretius on the Harmlessness of Death[1]

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One of the most fascinating and continually debated arguments in the philosophical literature on the badness of death comes from the work of Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, circa 99-55 BCE), a philosopher and poet who lived in Ancient Rome for much of his life. His only extant work is the six book-long epic poem *De Derum Natura* (often translated *On the Nature of Things*), which is meant to instruct its audience in the ways of Epicureanism.[2] Named after Epicurus, who lived centuries earlier than Lucretius, Epicureanism is a school of thought with commitments that include (but are not limited to) a materialist view of the world (no supernatural or non-material entities exist), a hedonistic view of human well-being (pleasure is the only intrinsic good, and pain the only intrinsic bad), and the view that death is not bad for the one who dies. In support of this last component of the view, Lucretius introduces a new argument, which may be called the *Symmetry Argument*, which attempts to show that since we were not harmed by not existing *before* our lives began, so too we will not be harmed by not existing *after* our lives end.

This chapter will focus on Lucretius's famous Symmetry Argument. In the next section, I will say more about what exactly Epicureanism teaches about death — and why Epicureans thought it could not be bad. After that, I will provide the passage from Lucretius's epic poem that

[1] Special thanks to John Fischer for piquing my interest in Lucretius's Symmetry Argument and to Marcia Cyr for introducing me to the Jason Isbell song quoted in the penultimate section. Thanks also to Erin Dolgoy, Kimberly Hale, and Bruce Peabody for helpful comments on earlier versions of the chapter.

[2] I use the standard abbreviation *DRN* for *De Rerum Natura*, and throughout the chapter I will be using Martin Ferguson Smith's translation from 1969, revised and published by Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. in 2001.

includes his reasons for thinking that death cannot be bad and will show how Lucretius's passage has been regimented into the Symmetry Argument against the badness of death. Next, I will discuss the lasting influence of Lucretius's argument, summarizing some common ways of responding. Finally, I will turn to two other passages from Lucretius's poem, both of which suggest that it is actually good (both for us and for the world) that our lives come to an end, and I will conclude by considering the implications of Lucretius's thought for political policy.

The Epicurean View of Death

Most people believe (indeed, it seems a matter of common sense) that death is a bad thing for (or a harm to) the one who dies. Indeed, many people fear death more than anything and take it to be the greatest harm of all. Before proceeding, though, two clarifications are in order. First, for the purposes of this essay, I will assume the Epicurean view that, as material beings that will eventually break down, death is an *experiential blank*. Or, to put this another way, to be dead is to no longer exist.[3] Thus, by *death* I mean both the first moment of nonexistence and the subsequent period of nonexistence. This may be distinguished from the process of *dying*, which of course can be very painful and involve great suffering. Another point of clarification is that the philosophical issues considered here are concerned with the possibility of death's badness *for the one who dies* (i.e., the deceased), not for other people who continue to exist and may suffer as a result of the deceased's death.

[3] If we have non-physical souls that outlive our bodies, or if there is a bodily resurrection in the future, then perhaps some of the Epicurean challenges to the badness of death are misguided. For a discussion of this issue and the parallel puzzles that arise even assuming that heaven awaits the deceased, see Taylor W. Cyr, "A Puzzle About Death's Badness: Can Death Be Bad for the Paradise-Bound?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 80 (2016): 145-162.

Now, if death is understood in this somewhat confined way, how could it possibly be bad for the deceased? Of those who think that death can be bad, the nearly universal answer is that it is bad because it prevents (or at least *can* prevent) us from getting the goods of life. More precisely, according to this *deprivation approach*, death is bad for the deceased when it deprives her of goods that she would have had if she had not died at that moment.[4] For example, death can deprive a person of the chance to experience future pleasures, to develop and enjoy strong relationships, and to complete one's life projects. When death robs a person of such goods, it thereby harms her, according to the deprivation approach.

But while the deprivation approach may seem to be an element of common sense, there are several challenges to the view that death can be bad for the one who dies. Most of these challenges have originated from the Epicurean tradition and attempt to show that there is some confusion in taking death to be bad, since it involves no unpleasant experiences and once it has come the person is no longer around to be harmed by it.[5] Typically these Epicurean arguments aim not only to show that death is not bad but also that death is not to be feared (and so philosophizing about death can help the Epicurean to achieve a state of tranquility), but for the purposes of this chapter I will focus only on the issue of whether or not death is bad for (or can harm) the deceased, setting aside the question of whether it is rational to fear death. For our purposes, then, the Epicurean view on death is the view that death is never bad for the one who dies.

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[4] The *locus classicus* for the deprivation approach is Thomas Nagel's influential essay "Death," reprinted in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-10.

[5] For a discussion of several Epicurean arguments and some replies from proponents of the deprivation approach, see Taylor W. Cyr, "How Does Death Harm the Deceased?" in J. Davis (ed.), *Ethics at the End of Life: New Issues and Arguments* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Lucretius on Prenatal and Posthumous Nonexistence: The Symmetry Argument

Perhaps the most intriguing argument for the Epicurean view of death comes not from Epicurus himself but from Lucretius, his disciple. Here is the famous passage:

> Look back now and consider how the bygone ages of eternity that elapsed before our birth were nothing to us. Here, then, is a mirror in which nature shows us the time to come after our death. Do you see anything fearful in it? Do you perceive anything grim? Does it not appear more peaceful than the deepest sleep? (*DRN* 3.972-977)

Most of us take death to be bad, and it is not uncommon to see something fearful in it, even if we, like Lucretius, do not anticipate an unpleasant afterlife. Yet Lucretius points out that just as nonexistence comes after our death, so too nonexistence preceded our birth (or perhaps our conception — the exact moment we came into existence is not relevant). And these two periods of nonexistence, Lucretius says, are mirror images of one another, which is to say that they are alike in relevant respects. Since, as Lucretius's rhetorical questions at the end of the passage suggest, we do not regard our prenatal nonexistence as bad for us, so too we should not regard our posthumous nonexistence (i.e., our death) as bad either.

Less poetically, but more formally, we can state Lucretius's Symmetry Argument as follows:

(1) Prenatal nonexistence is not bad for the person who comes into existence;

(2) There is no relevant difference (with respect to badness) between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence (death);

(3) Thus, death is not bad for the one who dies.

The Symmetry Argument is, to use a technical term, a *valid* argument, which is to say that, necessarily, if the premises are true, then the conclusion is true too. In this sense, the conclusion

follows from the premises—the truth of the latter would guarantee the truth of the former. In order to deny the argument's conclusion, then, as proponents of the deprivation approach do, one would need to reject at least one of the argument's two premises. In the next section of the paper, I will survey a few recent responses to the argument. Before moving on, though, it is worth pausing to say a bit more about the two premises' initial plausibility.

I have already mentioned that Lucretius supports premise (1), that prenatal nonexistence is not bad for the person who comes into existence, by asking some rhetorical questions: Do you see anything fearful in your prenatal nonexistence? Do you perceive anything grim in that period of time? Does it not appear more peaceful than the deepest sleep? For most people, the obvious answer to all of these questions is *no*. Some people honestly wish that they had been born earlier, perhaps to be part of some historic event that preceded their actual birth, but I take it that no one feels a sense of dread or terror concerning the period of time before their birth. Even if some regard prenatal nonexistence as bad, almost no one thinks of it as bad in the way that death is (or to the same degree).

What can be said in defense of premise (2), that there is no relevant difference (with respect to badness) between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence (death)? First, one can point out that the two periods Both are periods of nonexistence. Both are periods of time during which, had you been alive, it would have been good for you (assuming happy circumstances). Second, since the only difference between the two periods of time is that one is *before* your life and the other *after*, one could challenge those who wish to deny the premise by asking: how could it make a difference (concerning badness) whether a period of time was *before* your life or *after* it? As we will see in the next section, the most common response to Lucretius's argument is to deny this premise and to attempt to meet this challenge.

Responses to the Symmetry Argument

In the philosophical literature on the badness of death, Lucretius's Symmetry Argument remains one of the strongest defenses of the Epicurean view that death is not bad for the one who dies, and it has become more and more widely discussed in the last half-century, especially in the last decade or so.[6] Although the most common response to Lucretius's Symmetry Argument is to deny premise (2), that there is no relevant difference (with respect to badness) between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence (death), some have rejected premise (1), that prenatal nonexistence is not bad for the person who comes into existence, instead.[7] Rejecting premise (1) requires "biting the bullet" and accepting what many take to be a counterintuitive view, namely that prenatal nonexistence is bad for the person who comes into existence. In my own estimation, this result is more implausible than the acceptance of the Symmetry Argument's conclusion, namely the Epicurean view that death is not bad for the one who died, and so I see the denial of premise (2) as the only plausible response to Lucretius and defense of the deprivation approach.

To deny premise (2) of the Symmetry Argument, we would need to find some feature of posthumous nonexistence that is not shared by prenatal nonexistence (or *vice versa*), *and* that feature must plausibly make a difference with respect to badness. I will discuss two distinct ways

[6] The resurgence of interest can be traced to Nagel, "Death." For a more recent summary of the argument, see Roy Sorensen, "The Symmetry Problem." In B. Bradley, F. Feldman, and J. Johansson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). And for various discussion, see Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?" *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986): 213-221, 219; Fred Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death," *The Philosophical Review* 100 (1991): 205-227; John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Frederick Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 1-19.

[7] For example, see Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death." There, Feldman says: "There are, after all, two ways in which we can rectify the apparently irrational emotional asymmetry. On the one hand, we can follow Lucretius and cease viewing early death as a bad thing for [the deceased]. On the other hand, we can at least try to start viewing late birth as a bad thing. My suggestion is that in the present case, the latter course would be preferable," 223.

of doing this that have become popular in recent years. The first is to argue that, since it is *not possible* to be born earlier, and since it *is* possible for a person to die later, death is bad while prenatal nonexistence is not. The second type of response points to an asymmetry in our attitudes toward the past and the future; while we do not regard past deprivations of goods as bad for us, we do regard future deprivations of good as bad for us (and, as we will see, perhaps this is a rational preference pattern). I will take up these two responses in order.

In his seminal essay, "Death," Thomas Nagel suggests that only death (and not prenatal nonexistence) deprives us of something:

> 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…But we cannot say that the time prior to a man's birth is time in which he would have lived had he been born not then but earlier. For aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he *could* not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else. Therefore the time prior to his birth is not time in which his subsequent birth prevents him from living.[8]

On this suggestion, death is bad because it deprives the deceased of goods, but prenatal nonexistence does not deprive a person of goods since earlier existence would have been existence enjoyed by a *different* person. Nagel seems to be relying on a strict version of what is called the "essentiality of origins" thesis, according to which the time that one came into existence is essential to that person (and so beginning to exist at a different time would inevitably result in a different person). But this is a controversial thesis, and here is a case that strongly

[8] Nagel, "Death," 7-8.

inclines me to reject it: suppose that a fertilized egg is frozen, stored for several years (perhaps decades), and then thawed; for the person who develops, it was possible for her to be born earlier, since the thawing process could have started earlier.[9] But if the strict essentiality of origins thesis is false, then it is unclear why one should think it impossible to be born earlier than we are.

Still, you might think that, had you been born significantly earlier, your life would have unfolded remarkably differently than it actually did, and perhaps this makes the idea of being born earlier seem not as attractive as prolonging death. In other words, maybe it is false that it is impossible for us to have been born earlier, but it remains true that it is not possible for us to be born earlier than we actually were *in the sense that we care about*. This development of Nagel's suggestion is defended in most detail by Frederik Kaufman.[10]

Kaufman begins by distinguishing between two senses of the term *person*. In the "thin" sense of the term, *person* refers to the metaphysical essence of a human being, whatever that turns out to be — perhaps it is an immaterial soul, perhaps it is a human being's body (or some part of the body, such as the brain), or perhaps it is something else. In any case, we can distinguish whatever is essential to a person (the person's *essence*) from a person's subjective sense of self, which includes such psychological features as memories, values, character traits, and so on. We often use the term *person* to pick out a psychological profile (as when we say of someone that "they aren't the same person anymore"), and Kaufman calls this the "thick" sense of the term. These two senses of the term can come apart not only in such mundane cases as when someone's character changes over time but also in more extreme cases, like when a person

[9] This case is presented in Fischer, *Our Stories*, 65-66.
[10] Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence."

develops Alzheimer's Disease. When a person has lost much of what made them *them*, we rightly feel torn between saying that they are and are not the same person anymore.

Now, because a person in the thin sense could have had a very different subjective sense of self, while it is true that a person in the *thin* sense could have been born earlier—contrary to Nagel's suggestion—being born substantially earlier would nevertheless plausibly result in a different person in the *thick* sense. And this, Kaufman argues, allows for a response to Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. The goods that we are concerned about when we talk about death's badness are the goods that we, psychological profiles included, will be deprived of. But prenatal nonexistence would not deprive us (holding fixed our psychological profiles) of any goods, for any goods we would have enjoyed had we come into existence earlier would have been enjoyed by different persons in the thick sense. So, while it is true that, with respect to persons in the *thin* sense, prenatal and posthumous nonexistence are symmetrical, when it comes to persons in the *thick* sense, the asymmetry fades. And since it is persons in the thick sense that we care about, Kaufman thinks, we should reject premise (2) of Lucretius's Symmetry Argument, the premise that there is no relevant difference (with respect to badness) between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence (death).

Kaufman's proposal is a very plausible development of Nagel's initial suggestion, and it avoids the objection concerning the strict essentiality of origins thesis that rendered Nagel's view problematic. The challenge for Kaufman's view, though, is to defend the claim that it is persons in the *thick* sense that we care about. Some counterevidence comes from those of us who imagine things going differently for us in ways that would have drastically changed our subjective senses of self, resulting in different thick persons, and yet we regret that things did not go that way instead of how they actually went. Many people wish that they had been born to

wealthier parents, or that they had been raised in a more civilized century, even though these differences would inevitably shape a person so differently that they would be a different person in the thick sense.[11] If these wishes are reasonable, even if only in some cases, then Kaufman needs to explain why wishing for goods one would have had if born earlier would be relevantly different, or else Lucretius's symmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence looms large.

Let us turn now to the second type of response to premise (2) of Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. Again, the basic idea is that we have a preference for future goods over past goods, and thus we regard future deprivations as bad for us without regarding past deprivations as bad.[12] This idea has been developed in most detail by Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer. Originally, they argued that "[d]eath deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent."[13] To support this claim, they introduce the following thought experiment:

> 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.[14]

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[11] These examples are from Fischer, *Our Stories*, 70.

[12] Interestingly, Nagel admits in a footnote that he is not convinced by the first type of reply and says the following: "I suspect that [a response to the Symmetry Argument] requires a general treatment of the difference between past and future in our attitudes toward our own lives. Our attitudes toward past and future pain are very different, for example. Derek Parfit's writings on this topic have revealed its difficulty to me" (Nagel, "Death," 9).

[13] Brueckner and Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?"

[14] *Ibid*., 218-219. This example is inspired by some of Parfit's examples from Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

Brueckner and Fischer's example suggests that we have asymmetric attitudes toward past and future goods (such as pleasures). This example, therefore, also explains why we have asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence: given our current place in time, prenatal nonexistence deprives us of *past* goods, whereas death deprives us of *future* goods. If these are our actual attitudes, then it is no surprise that we tend to reject premise (2) of Lucretius's Symmetry Argument, since the temporal location of the relevant periods of nonexistence makes a difference to what we regard as bad.

This approach to responding to the Symmetry Argument has recently generated a substantial discussion in the literature, and I personally find it a very attractive and plausible route to take. That said, a challenge for this approach is to say why our actual preference patterns are rational to have. It is open to Epicureans like Lucretius to agree with Brueckner and Fischer about our having asymmetric attitudes toward the past and the future, but Lucretius would maintain that this is an *irrational* preference pattern, given his view that prenatal and posthumous nonexistence are not relevantly different. In more recent work, Fischer and Brueckner have started to address this problem, claiming that our actual preference patterns are rational.[15] If they are right about this, then it seems there is a relevant difference between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence and thus that premise (2) of Lucretitus's Symmetry Argument is false.

Is It Good that We Are Not Immortal?

[15] John Martin Fischer and Anthony Brueckner, Prenatal and Posthumous Non-Existence: A Reply to Johansson," *Journal of Ethics* 18 (2014), 1-9. There, they explain: "Although we originally put our point in terms of what we took to be people's actual preference patterns, we should have put it in terms of the rationality of such patterns of preference" (3). See also Fischer and Brueckner, "The Evil of Death and the Lucretian Symmetry: A Reply to Feldman," *Philosophical Studies* 163 (2012): 783–789.

In his widely discussed essay "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," Bernard Williams says that his subject is "what a good thing it is that we are not [immortal]." On Williams's view, while most deaths come too early and are bad for the deceased, we should not think that it would always be better to go on living. Indeed, he thinks that an immortal life would necessarily be unattractive for beings like us. While Williams has been called an "immortality curmudgeon" (and I am inclined to agree that Williams was unduly pessimistic about the prospects of living forever) there are, to be sure, difficult theoretical and practical problems for the view that immortality is desirable.[16] Interestingly, about two millennia before Williams's diatribe on immortality, Lucretius provided two interesting arguments against the goodness of living forever. Even if the Symmetry Argument is ultimately unsuccessful, then — and, as we have seen, the debate remains alive and well—Lucretius's epic poem contains two further arguments against regarding death as an evil.

The first argument focuses on the badness of living forever *for the immortal person herself*. Here is how Lucretius puts the point: "If your past life has been a boon…why, you fool, do you not retire from the feast of life like a satisfied guest and with equanimity resign yourself to undisturbed rest?"[17] As Martha Nussbaum interprets this passage, Lucretius is making an argument—which we might call the *Banquet Argument*—and it "urges us to realize that life is like a banquet: it has a structure in time that reaches a natural and appropriate termination; its value cannot be prolonged far beyond that, without spoiling the value that preceded."[18]

Critics may regard Lucretius's analogy between life and a banquet as failing to take into account that, unlike a meal (even a meal with various courses), life contains a varied range of

[16] For a thorough discussion and critique of Williams's argument, see Fischer, *Our Stories*, chapter 6.
[17] DRN 3.935-939.
[18] Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 203.

activities, and we are able to toggle between them in a way that makes each interesting even if we encounter it multiple times. But Lucretius seems aware of this difference and takes himself to be making a point about the need for an ending to provide necessary structure and constraints on a valuable life. This sentiment is echoed in Jason Isbell's recent song "If We Were Vampires":

> If we were vampires and death was a joke
>
> We'd go out on the sidewalk and smoke
>
> And laugh at all the lovers and their plans
>
> I wouldn't feel the need to hold your hand
>
> Maybe time running out is a gift
>
> I'll work hard 'til the end of my shift
>
> And give you every second I can find
>
> And hope it isn't me who's left behind…

To put the point less poetically, the value of many aspects of our lives (perhaps the most meaningful ones, such as our deepest relationships) depends on the ultimate end of those things. Contemporary philosophers (as well as the creators of the NBC comedy series *The Good Place*) have picked up on this line of thought, arguing (among other things) that knowing an end is coming is necessary to have the motivation required to engage with what we find valuable in life.[19] Optimists about the desirability of immortality cannot avoid tackling these difficult theoretical issues.

[19] See, for example, Todd May, *Death* (Stocksfield, U.K.: Acumen Publishing, 2009) and Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, chapter 6. For an excellent critical discussion, see John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, "Immortality and Boredom," *Journal of Ethics* 18 (2014): 353-372.

But discussion of living forever also gives rise to practical questions, and Lucretius's second further argument against regarding death as an evil raises one such practical question. Just before the famous Symmetry Argument passage, Lucretius says:

> The old is ever ousted and superseded by the new, and one thing must be repaired from others. No one is consigned to the black abyss of Tartarus: everyone's component matter is needed to enable succeeding generations to grow—generations which, when they have completed their term of life, are all destined to follow you. The fate in store for you has already befallen past generations and will befall future generations no less surely. Thus one thing will never cease to rise out of another: life is granted to no one for permanent ownership, to all on lease.[20]

The concern raised by this *Population Argument*, as Nussbaum calls it, is about the badness of immortality primarily *for future populations* (though it would eventually be bad for oneself too, if one were immortal).[21] Lucretius's point is that there is only so much matter to go around, and so each of us must pass on in order to leave some material (the material of which we were made when we were alive) for future generations. Even without accepting all of Lucretius's assumptions, we might worry that any way we construe an immortal life, it is going to be unpleasant.

Of course, many people who desire immortality do not agree with Lucretius's views that human beings are exclusively material beings and that they cannot survive bodily death. On many religious views, life continues after death, and the afterlife is such that our present conditions are either repaired or superseded by means of some supernatural act. This would

[20] DRN 3.964-971.
[21] Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 203.

certainly avoid the population problem that Lucretius has in mind, and so the Population Argument does not help to support the thesis that immortality would necessarily be unattractive.

Implications for Political Policy

Lucretius's practical concerns about what immortality, or even life-extension, would require are pertinent and pressing issues when thinking about political policy. If technology permitted us to slow down the aging process significantly—extending life by a hundred years or more, say—or to "cure" our mortality altogether, we would immediately face difficult questions about how to deal with an increased demand on finite resources, who (and how many people) would be eligible for life-extension, and what impact life extension would have on extant social institutions like that of marriage. Lucretius does not himself take up these questions, but he nevertheless laid the foundation for asking them.

Building on Lucretius's Population Argument in her more recent work, Nussbaum considers three possible scenarios involving immortality: "(a) Only one person becomes immortal; (b) a relatively small group of people becomes immortal; or (c) everyone becomes immortal."[22] As Nussbaum discusses, none of these possibilities is without troubling political ramifications. Supposing that immortality resulted from some innovative technology, options (a) and (b) raise questions of fairness: on what basis would it be just for only one person, or only one select group, to become immortal (and thus to require far more resources, in total, than mortal citizens). It is easy to imagine this technology being controlled by the wealthy, or whatever group is in power (a scenario portrayed in the Netflix series *Altered Carbon*). Even apart from determining how to fairly distribute the technology, one might worry that it would be an injustice

[22] Martha Nussbaum, "The Damage of Death: Incomplete Arguments and False Consolations." In J. S. Taylor (ed.), *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41.

simply for some but not all members of society to possess immortality. In other words, even if it was just a matter of luck that some members of society had this incredible benefit, it might seem like a benefit that it would be unfair for those who have it to keep, given the radical inequality that would result from their possession of it.

Finally, option (c) is the scenario that Lucretius seemed to have in mind. If no one ever dies, and new people continue coming into existence, eventually we will reach a state of overpopulation—one that is good for no one. The threat of overpopulation is a political problem that we currently face even apart from anyone being immortal, so the continued growth in global population without anyone dying would appear an unmitigated disaster. An alternative would be that everyone is immortal and yet no one is permitted to have any more children. Besides the ethical issues involved in enforcing a "no-child policy," this scenario may be bad for other reasons. As Nussbaum says, this scenario "lacks all sorts of valuable activities connected with relations among the generations, and it also lacks a distinctive type of freedom to which we currently attach considerable importance."[23] In order to avoid this unpleasant state of affairs, "one thing must be repaired from others," as Lucretius says, which is to say that some of us must pass on in order to leave room for others. To long for more would not only be a sort of avarice but would also be to undermine one's own reason for wanting more.

So, even if Lucretius does not establish the curmudgeonly conclusion that living forever would necessarily be unpleasant, Lucretius's Population Argument raises important questions about the political implications of seeking to greatly extend our lives. And if his Symmetry Argument is successful and thus death is not bad for the deceased, this too would raise significant questions about political policy, much of which seems to presuppose that death is a

[23] Nussbaum, "The Damage of Death," 42.

major evil that should be prevented even at great cost. While some philosophers are convinced by the Symmetry Argument, the Epicurean view remains a minority report, and I do not foresee that enough of us will be convinced by such arguments that we would come to think a radical change to political policy is necessary. Even so, the Symmetry Argument remains one of the most interesting topics in the philosophical literature on death, and the debates about that argument as well as Lucretius's other arguments are not only alive and well but are in fact flourishing, despite being two thousand years old.

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