Chapter Nine

Epicurus on Death and the Duration of Life

by Phillip Mitsis

Epicurus thinks that the chief source of our unhappiness, whether we realize it or not, is our fear of death. We commonly believe that death is "the most frightful of evils" (*Ad Men.* 125) and that there is nothing, at least under normal circumstances, that we have more reason to dread. Indeed most of us, he thinks, are driven by this fear to make desperate attempts to stave off our deaths, usually by engaging in troubling, though ultimately self-defeating, competitions for such things as power, prestige, and money. As a result, we find ourselves perpetually anxious and unhappy. Epicurus offers us a choice: either we give up the conventional belief that death is an evil, or we must relinquish all hope of achieving psychic tranquillity and hence happiness.[1] Since he takes it to be a safe assumption that all of us want to be happy, his main task becomes one of demonstrating that death holds no terrors, that it neither harms us nor in any way diminishes our happiness.

In light of this goal, Epicurus formulates two general strategies for eliminating our fears about death. One line of argument is meant to show that, in itself, death is not a state in which we can suffer harm. Since being dead is a condition without sensation, it cannot be painful. Therefore, if we accept the truth of hedonism,

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1. It should be remembered that in the context of Greek eudaimonism, happiness may include not only subjective states but also several objective requirements. See Annas 1987, pp. 5-21, for a subtle attempt to show how Epicurus accounts for such formal requirements as completeness and self-sufficiency in his theory of pleasure and εὐδαιμονία.

we have no grounds for fearing our future non-existence because it cannot possibly be a source of pain or harm to us. Clearly, many objections can be brought against this particular strand of Epicurus' argument. For instance, we might argue that even if the dead cannot feel pain, they or perhaps their interests still are vulnerable to harm in other ways.[2] Unless we already are committed to hedonism, Epicurus' argument will not be entirely convincing, since we may have compelling non-hedonic reasons for fearing the actual state of being dead.[3] None the less, most of us, I think, would be inclined to concede that his views about the condition of the dead at least merit serious consideration. It is difficult simply to dismiss out of court his claim that the state of being dead, in and of itself, conceals no special terrors.

Epicurus' other principal line of attack, however, has seemed to many to lack any justification whatsoever. And it is on this feature of his theory that I wish to concentrate. Epicurus makes the surprising claim that death in no way harms the living, that it neither interferes with nor diminishes what is ultimately valuable about life itself. Surely, we might want to object, it is reasonable to think that death can deprive us of the things that we value. It is precisely for this reason that we fear it. For instance, if I am a hedonist, my death will rob me of pleasurable states of consciousness or it will suddenly interrupt goals or projects that give me pleasure. Even if I have no hedonic reasons for fearing the state of being dead, I certainly seem to have cause for fearing or regretting the interruption and loss of what Lucretius calls 'life's rewards' (*praemia vitae*).

Notoriously, however, the Epicurean strongly denies that death in any way diminishes life's pleasures by cutting them short. To many, this has seemed merely perverse. David Furley, for example, dismisses this feature of Epicurus' theory as "dogma without argument" and denies that any surviving

2. See, for instance, Feinberg 1977, pp. 284-308; Partridge 1981, pp. 243-264; and Pitcher 1984, pp. 183-188.

3. Another way of attacking Epicurus' claim might be to bolster the ontological status of the dead by denying the claim that, strictly speaking, the dead are non-existent; for an example of this approach, see Silverstein 1980, pp. 401-423. For criticism of such attempts and an account based on the possibility of referring to the dead as "non-existent objects" see Yourgrau 1987, pp. 84-101.

Epicurean text offers a defense for this strongly counter-intuitive claim.[4] A related objection is raised by Cicero in *De Finibus* ii. Cicero complains that nothing, in fact, could be more at odds with Epicurus' own hedonism than the claim that death involves no loss or deprivation of hedonic goods (ii 87-88; cf. Plutarch, *Non posse* 1106bff.). If pleasurable states are what make us happy, Cicero insists, surely we will be happier if we can remain in these states longer. Thus, he wonders, how can death fail to be an evil for Epicureans, if it prevents them from being happy for a longer period of time?

Both of these charges are serious, but they seem especially damning when leveled at an ethical thinker whose stated aim is to eradicate our fear of death by rational argument. Thus, even if we adopt Martha Nussbaum's view of Epicurus' methods,[5] namely, that any given Epicurean argument is strictly instrumental to the overall goal of eliminating mental anguish, it is extremely hard to imagine why Epicureans thought that anyone could be persuaded by such a puzzling doctrine without further argument. Surely, even doctrines that are primarily therapeutic must have at least some initial plausibility or possible justification.

I want to begin by looking at an argument that, I think, may go some way towards providing support for Epicurus' claim. It is formulated by Lucretius as follows:

> 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.
> numquid ibi horribile apparet, num triste videtur
> quicquam, non omni somno securius exstat?
>
> (Look back again to see how the immense expanse
> of past time, before we are born, has been nothing to us.
> Nature shows us that it is the mirror-image of
> the time that is to come after we are dead. Is anything
> there terrifying, does anything there seem gloomy?
> Is it not more peaceful than any sleep?)
>
> *DRN* iii 972-977.

4. Furley 1986, p. 81.

5. Nussbaum 1986, pp. 31ff.

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. Yet, if there are no relevant distinctions between death and prenatal non-existence, this attitude is inconsistent and irrational. Lucretius argues that we are therefore constrained by reason itself to view our deaths with the same equanimity we summon up when contemplating our prenatal non-existence.

Before examining this argument in more detail, a word about its context may be in order since it is fairly easy to overlook its particular target.[6] At *DRN* iii 830, Lucretius begins his attack on the fear of death and in the next sixty-four lines gives a series of arguments designed to show that only those who actually exist are vulnerable to pain or harm. Twice, he defends this contention on the basis of a symmetry he perceives between death and prenatal non-existence. We felt nothing in the time before we were born; just so, we will feel nothing when we are dead (832-842). Similarly, even if we were to be reassembled after our deaths, we still would have no grounds for fearing death (843-861). Without unbroken causal connections between our memories, we can have no rational concern for future or past selves. Just as I now have no recollection or concern about past possible reassemblies of myself, no anguish should now touch me about possible future ones.[7] He concludes from these arguments that the state of death is in no way to be feared since we cannot be harmed when dead.

6. Furley, for instance, fails to discuss it nor is it included in the recent sourcebook of Long and Sedley (1987). Presumably this is because they take it to be yet another statement of *DRN* iii 832ff. where Lucretius argues that being dead is no more painful than not being born (cf. Long and Sedley 1987, p. 153). Sorabji (1983, p. 176) expresses doubts about the exact intent of this argument.

7. Here I pass over several difficult questions about the text and about whether 862-869 is the conclusion of the preceding argument or of the whole section. In typical Lucretian fashion, this passage may anticipate the argument at 972-977, since it also raises questions about our attitudes towards past and future. It is not exactly clear, however, whether at this point in the argument Lucretius wants us to draw any further inference than the one he repeats at 862-869, namely that one must exist if one is to be vulnerable to pain or to harm.

Beginning with line 894, Lucretius shifts directions and raises the question of whether death harms the living by interrupting and curtailing their pleasures.[8] He holds up for ridicule several common misconceptions about death and concludes with another symmetry argument (972-977, quoted above). His object here, however, unlike in the previous symmetry arguments, is to question the rational status of our attitudes towards our past and future non-existence. Moreover, he links this problem about our attitudes towards past and future to our views about the duration of our lives in general.[9] If we are unconcerned about the extent to which our lives reach into the past, it seems irrational for us to have any special concern about our lives extending into the future. The asymmetry in our attitudes towards past and future, Lucretius suggests, indicates that there is a corresponding difficulty with our ordinary views about the role that death plays in our lives. Although most of us fear death, in reality we have no special concern about our lives' duration in and of itself; if we did have, we would care just as deeply about our prenatal non-existence. Consequently, once we come to recognize that

8. In her response, Striker argues that Epicurean arguments are meant to allay only the fear of mortality, not the fear of premature death. As she notes, however, it is puzzling to find the former and not the latter fear described as a constant source of disturbance in our lives. Moreover, I would argue that Lucretius' opening vignette at iii 894ff. clearly describes a case of premature death. In this passage, death interrupts the domestic joys of someone in the prime of life. The references to small children and being a *praesidium* (cf. ii 643) for one's family clearly indicate that Lucretius is thinking of a sudden, premature death. This is reinforced by the strong Homeric echoes in this passage which conjure up images of Hector (cf. *Iliad* vi 450-465). Similarly, at iii 1085, Lucretius argues that the length of our lives is at the mercy of fortune. Again, he recognizes the possibility of premature death, without, however, suggesting that it offers any grounds for fear (cf. *Ad Men.* 126ff., *DRN* iii 1078). Striker is no doubt right that Epicureans are concerned with alleviating our fear of mortality. But these passages show that they also are engaged in the more difficult project of eliminating the fear of premature death.

9. Lucretius' first arguments about the loss of *praemia vitae* (900-903, 916-930) repeat his earlier claim that in order for there to be a loss, there must be a subject for that loss. The arguments that follow, however, depend on claims about the completeness and duration of pleasure (935ff., 952ff.) as well its natural limits (964ff.). Although Lucretius does not set these connections out very explicitly, my contention is that the symmetry argument at 972-977 helps to defend these latter claims by showing that we have no grounds for caring about the duration of our lives *per se*.

we do not actually value the duration of our lives *per se*, we will have made a crucial step towards attaching no importance to their length (cf. *Ad Men.* 126.3-5). The sharp rebukes uttered by Nature herself at *DRN* iii 931ff. make this same point. It is irrational to cling to life in the belief that a longer life is in any way preferable. Death may shorten our lives, but it cannot harm or diminish them in ways that should concern us.

Moreover, if we can restructure our ordinary beliefs in the required way, we will come to see the truth of another puzzling Epicurean claim. Although there is no surviving text of Epicurus which puts the symmetry argument to this particular use (or indeed, mentions problems of symmetry at all), Lucretius' argument, I would argue, provides additional support for Epicurus' problematic assertion at *KD* 19 that "[i]nfinite time and finite time contain equal pleasure, if one measures the limits of pleasure by reason." If we have no rational grounds for valuing the length of our lives, Epicurus' corresponding claim about the unimportance of duration in assessing the overall pleasantness of our lives can begin to appear less implausible.[10] Thus, I think it is wrong to charge Epicureans with failing to give any defense at all of their doctrine that life can in no way be diminished by death. We still need to raise questions, however, about how compelling their defense actually is.

At this point, it might be helpful to look at some questions about the overall form of the symmetry argument that recently have been raised by Thomas Nagel. Nagel claims that Lucretius' argument is faulty because we cannot talk meaningfully about the lost possibilities of our prenatal non-existence. For Nagel, although it is logically possible for the very same person to die either earlier or later, it is logically impossible for that same person to have been born earlier or later. This is because "[d]istinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to common conclusion from diverse beginnings."[11] This being the case, he argues, the symmetry argument rests on an incoherent notion of personal identity. "[A]nyone born substantially earlier than he was

10. See below pp. 312ff. for further discussion of this interpretation of *KD* 19.
11. Nagel 1979, p. 8.

would have been someone else. Therefore the time prior to his birth is not time in which his subsequent birth prevents him from living. His birth, when it occurs, does not entail the loss to him of any life whatever."[12] Conversely, death deprives us of time in which we would have been alive; therefore, it is not just the mirror-image of prenatal non-existence.

Nagel's claim, I think, relies on something like Kripke's view about the metaphysical necessity of origins[13] and the way that subsequent possible lives branch off from these origins. Yet, even if the time of someone's birth is an essential property of that person, it still remains the case that we can come to know it only empirically.[14] Consequently, although it may be true that Frege, for instance, has the essential property of being born on November 8, 1848, this is not a proposition about Frege that we can know a priori.[15] Once we grant that there can be this kind of epistemic contingency about origins, however, Lucretius' argument

12. *Ibid.*

13. A.L. Brueckner and J.M. Fischer (1986, pp. 214-215) deny Nagel's claim that it is logically impossible for the very same person to have been born substantially earlier that he actually was. I agree that there is no *logical* impossibility here. It is probably better, though, to interpret Nagel's claim as one that concerns *metaphysical* impossibility. Even though we could imagine being born earlier, this will not count as establishing a *bona fide* possibility. We might imagine, for example, heat being something other than mean kinetic energy; but in every world where there is heat, it is mean kinetic energy and vice versa.

In this same context, Derek Parfit objects that we can regret something that is a logical impossibility. "When they learned that the square root of two was not a rational number, the Pythagoreans regretted this. We can therefore regret truths even when it is logically impossible that these truths be false" (1984, p. 175). This observation may be true, but it is somewhat beside the point, since Nagel (and Lucretius) are not questioning whether it is logically possible to regret prenatal losses, but whether it is rational to do so.

14. Another tactic might be to challenge Nagel's claim about what counts as an essential property of a person. Stephen Rosenbaum (1986, p. 222), for instance, argues that if the time of one's actual birth is an essential property of a person, then the actual time of that person's death should also be counted as an essential property. "If *we* could not have been born earlier (because if "we" had been, "we" would have been someone else, then "we" could not have died later and still have been us)." Cf. Tichy 1983, pp. 232-241.

15. This example is adapted from Perret 1987, pp. 57ff.; see Perret for further discussion of Nagel's appeal to essentialism in this argument.

still awaits an answer. Take the following example.[16] Suppose that I believe that I am thirty years old. For as long as I can remember, my birthdays have been celebrated year by year in the ordinary way, I registered to vote at the appropriate age, and so forth. In short, I have all the usual kinds of evidence for my belief that I am thirty. I now suddenly find out, however, that when I was adopted, the adoption agency somehow made a mistake in its record keeping. I am actually one year younger. Clearly, using Nagel's test for personal identity, I am still the same person. No metaphysical debate need arise about that. But we still can ask the Epicurean question about my attitude towards my past and my future non-existence. In a sense, I suddenly have lost a year out of my past life and have gained a year of prenatal non-existence. Should that lost year be a source of regret to me? And would that regret be equal to the regret that I would feel upon learning that I was going to die a year earlier? Would it indeed be equal to the regret I would feel if I learned that I was going to die even a few weeks earlier?

In each of these cases, we most likely would be inclined to be moved more by the thought of future than of past losses. And it is precisely this bias toward the future that the Epicurean finds irrational. Conversely, if I were to discover that I really am a year older, should that be a reason for rejoicing, inasmuch as I have managed to survive for an extra year? If I were concerned simply about the duration of my life, I ought to be just as happy in this case as I would be on learning that I was being miraculously granted another year of life. But here again, all things being equal, our attitudes are likely to be asymmetrical. On discovering that we are actually a year older, most of us would not feel thankful because we have managed to cheat death of an extra year; rather, reckoning that we now are just that much closer to death, we are more likely to think that we have been robbed of one year of our alotted time. Again, however,

16. Even if Nagel's argument provides one possible explanation of why we have asymmetric attitudes, it still fails to account sufficiently for these attitudes as they actually are held. It is just not the case that people are more concerned about death because it has different metaphysical features. My example is meant to show that asymmetrical attitudes can remain in cases where identity and the necessity of origins are no longer at issue.

Epicureans would argue that this lack of symmetry in our attitudes is irrational; and I think that their case is a powerful one, even though it may conflict with many of our initial intuitions about such examples.

In order to see the force of the Epicurean claim, it will be useful to turn to a recent argument of Derek Parfit. Parfit not only tries to defend the rationality of our bias towards the future, he also argues that such a bias is deeply ingrained in the very structures of practical reasoning and of personal identity. Thus, even if our ordinary asymmetric attitudes towards the past and future are in fact bad for us (something which he is willing to concede to the Epicurean), he argues that they are nonetheless completely rational.

Parfit's argument depends to a great extent on a series of examples which are meant to show that although we often are completely unmoved by our past suffering, we are by no means indifferent to the prospect of our future suffering. Therefore, if it is rational to have asymmetric attitudes to past and future pleasures and pains, there is no reason, he argues, why we should not have analogous attitudes towards our past and future non-existence. It is worth quoting one of his examples in full to show the intuitive attractions of this claim.

> I am in some hospital, to have some kind of surgery. This kind of surgery is completely safe and always successful. Since I know this, I have no fears about the effects. The surgery may be brief, or it may instead take a long time. Because I have to co-operate 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 me and another patient, but that she cannot remember which facts apply to whom. She can tell me that 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. If I learn that the first is true, I shall be greatly relieved.[17]

This example poses a challenge to the Epicurean for several reasons. First of all, it calls into question the possibility of a hedonism which, like Epicurus', depends on temporal neutrality in the evaluation of pleasures and pains. For Epicurus, the hedonic value, for example, of health and ἀταραξία are not diminished or increased by their temporal proximity. Therefore, he thinks that we can suspend questions of timing in our judgments about the hedonic value of these particular states.[18] Returning to Parfit's example, however, if I am really committed to temporal neutrality in evaluating pleasures and pains, I should be more greatly distressed when I discover that I am the patient who suffered for ten hours in the past. I ought to much prefer the lesser evil (overall) of one hour of future suffering. But this hardly seems intuitively plausible. In such cases, timing seems to play a key role. But if we are persuaded by this particular example, a whole range of other asymmetrical attitudes might seem to follow in its wake.

Yet, however much of an obstacle such an example might present for Epicurus' general hedonic theory, it fails, I think, to prove that it is rational to take a correspondingly asymmetrical

17. Parfit 1984, pp. 165-166. Cf. Nozick 1981, pp. 744-745. For discussion see Perret 1987, pp. 61-62, and Brueckner and Fischer 1986, pp. 216-218. In what follows, I am greatly indebted to Brueckner' and Fischer's initial criticism of Parfit; their own arguments for a bias in favor of the future, however, are flawed (see below, note 33).

18. Parfit's example requires that we make our choice from a subjective perspective and that we rely on a particular conception of time (i.e. we must take ourselves to be moving forward from a particular moment in the present). Compare the following alternatives, however:

(a) a life with many satisfactions, but with fewer satisfactions in our final few years

(b) a life with fewer satisfactions overall, but with more satisfactions in our final few years.

Clearly, we would choose (a) and our choice involves our ability to take an objective perspective on our lives as a whole and to view our lives as discrete, static units in time.

attitude towards death.[19] To see why this is the case, we must remember Epicurean strictures against treating death as a kind of felt experience (cf. *DRN* iii 876ff.). Once we cease talking about conscious experiences, it becomes less clear that we have asymmetrical attitudes towards the past and future.

For instance, suppose that sometime in my life I am going to have a secret admirer, but that I am never going to be aware of it. Suppose as well that the effects of this admiration are totally harmless and that my general view of secret admiration is that it is a very minor, but none the less pleasant, good.[20] It would be extremely implausible to claim that with respect to such a non-consciously experienced good, I should have any particular bias in favor of its future occurrence. This type of good seems to be temporally neutral: all things being equal, it can make no particular difference to me whether this admiration occurs during my school years, middle age, or when I am in a nursing home. And given the choice of ten such episodes of secret admiration in my past as opposed to one in my future, I no doubt would choose the greater number; I would prefer the greater number even if they all were to occur in my past.

The same holds, I think, in the case of particular harms or losses which we do not consciously experience.[21] Suppose, for instance, that at some point during my life the person that I take to be my closest friend will secretly hate me, though I will never be aware of it. This hatred has no outward consequences (i.e. it will not make me suspicious about future friendships) nor can I alter the fact that it is going to happen. In this case, we again fail to get any asymmetry between past and future, since there seems to be no particular reason why I should wish to have this type of harm happen to me in the past instead of in the future. Nor, of course, would I want such a harm to befall me ten times in the past rather than once in the future.

19. As Perret (1987, p. 61) notices, the most that Parfit's argument shows is that asymmetrical attitudes towards past and future non-existence are *as reasonable* as asymmetrical attitudes to past and future pleasures and pains. He suggests that such attitudes may perhaps be better described as non-rational. Cf. Sorabji 1983, p. 178.

20. We might have doubts, of course, about whether such things, if unexperienced, even count as goods.

21. For further discussion, see Brueckner and Fischer 1986, pp. 216-218.

It often is argued that death is analogous to such non-consciously experienced harms as betrayal and deception.[22] Nagel, for instance, claims that these kinds of non-consciously experienced harms are "irreducibly relational" in so far as "they are features of the relations between a person...and circumstances which may not coincide with him either in space or in time."[23] In this view, although those subject to misfortune can be located in a succession of times and places, the same cannot be said of the evil that happens to them. Yet, even if we grant that such harms are irreducibly relational, an extremely awkward result awaits the defender of asymmetry.[24] As we have seen, unexperienced harms can be temporally neutral in a way that consciously experienced harms are not. It therefore seems entirely reasonable to maintain symmetrical attitudes towards their past and future occurrence. But if non-existence is strictly analogous to such non-consciously experienced harms, it follows that we should maintain equally symmetrical attitudes towards our past and future non-existence.

22. Cf. Williams 1973, pp. 88ff. 23. Nagel 1979, p. 7.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7. In defense of his claim that death is analogous to other unexperienced misfortunes, Nagel offers the case of a normal, rational adult who is reduced by a brain injury to the state of a contented infant. This "infant" has no conscious awareness of the fact that he has suffered great harm to his rational faculties. Nagel's example is supposed to demonstrate two things. First, it shows why a strictly subjective conception of happiness based on mere contentment does not capture central intuitions about happiness. (This much Epicurus might agree with, although it is often alleged that the Epicurean conception of happiness is prey to the same sort of objection. Epicurus, however, regularly argues that agents' subjective satisfactions are not strictly correlated with their objective interests and that happiness requires the fulfillment of objective interests.) But once the force of these objectivist considerations is conceded, there are competing explanations for our intuitions. Nagel argues that we can best understand the harm involved by appealing to the preferences that the person would have had. Smith would have preferred to remain a normal adult, and the gap between his preferences and his present state indicates the extent of the harm that has befallen him. However, we also can explain the harm without invoking possible persons or possible desires. We might argue that being in a reduced mental state is bad *simpliciter*, regardless of an agent's preferences. It just is less pleasurable, valuable, etc., to be in a mental condition which, for instance, leaves one completely vulnerable to others. Given Epicurus' view of happiness (i.e. that some states are better than others, regardless of an agent' preferences), I am inclined to think that he can resist Nagel's account of such harms in terms of the frustration of a possible person's possible preferences; he, unlike Nagel, can therefore also avoid attributing desires and wishes to the dead.

Perhaps, though, one might want to object at this point that the analogy between death and other unexperienced harms is in some way fundamentally misleading. I might not care when a particular unexperienced harm (like a friend's secret hatred) befalls me, because my life still goes on and I have the possibility of enjoying many other goods. Death, however, affords no such possibilities; it completely eliminates any possibility of future enjoyment.[25] It is arguably for this very reason that death is to be feared. Again, however, such an objection lacks cogency because, by itself, it fails to justify any asymmetry in our attitudes. Prenatal non-existence also affords no such possibilities of enjoyment, but its lost possibilities do not commonly concern us.[26] Thus, it remains unclear how such an attempt to differentiate more local harms from the more radical effects of death can justify any asymmetry in our attitudes.

If this account of our attitudes towards things that we do not directly experience (whether good or not) is correct, it lends credence to the Epicurean claim that we are more concerned about

25. The case for asymmetry appears to be much stronger, however, in examples such as Nagel's brain injured adult. Whereas more local unexperienced harms, such as betrayal and deception, may be temporally neutral, more catastrophic harms might seem to generate an asymmetry. If I must suffer an irreversible brain injury, I might hope that it would occur as far in the future as possible; or I might not care as much about a past brain injury (assuming that I have now recovered) as I would about the prospects of future injury. Nagel's example raises several problems, however. Unlike the case of more local harms, it is no longer clear in his example that we are talking about the very same person before and after the injury. The force of Nagel's analogies are weakened, however, unless the very same person persists through the various misfortunes he describes. If the brain injury in this example is merely a redescription of death, i.e. the original "person" no longer survives, the Epicurean can presumably argue that, as with death, any asymmetries in our attitudes depend on wrongly thinking that the same person survives (cf. *DRN* iii 881), and therefore treating it as a case of felt experience.

26. Furley (1986, p. 90) argues that the fear of death is the "fear that there are no more possibilities," that our desires and intentions have no possibility of satisfaction. Prenatal non-existence, however, is also a state without possibilities and in which desires have no possibility of being satisfied. Thus, we need a further justification of any asymmetry in our attitudes towards such past and future states. Cf. Yourgrau 1987, p. 100, for the claim that asymmetrical attitudes must be justified not on the basis of future possibilities, but on the basis of "mere futurity itself, coupled with the fact that we live in the direction of the future." Yourgrau's claim, it should be noted, depends on a particular view of time, i.e. McTaggart's A-series.

our future non-existence because we wrongly assimilate death, which we do not experience, to the kinds of pleasures and pains that we do experience.

It might be objected that the analogies offered so far fail to capture something more fundamental about practical reasoning and human action, namely, that we make plans, engage in long-term projects, and strive actively to shape our futures. Harms and benefits which are not consciously experienced are generally beyond our control. If we were merely passive creatures, passively responding to life's circumstances and never attempting to engage in the kinds of forward-looking projects we associate with, say, Aristotle's σπουδαῖος, we might have no particular bias towards the future. At any given point in our lives, "we could enjoy looking either backward or forward to our whole lives."[27] We might, that is, take an objective, temporally neutral view of our entire existence. As we approach death, we would react much like Epicurus on his deathbed (*DL* 10.22; *U* 138): we might have nothing pleasurable in our lives still to look forward to;[28] but we would have everything in our lives to look backward to.[29] For less passive agents, however, it might be claimed that the case is very different. Such individuals find value in exerting control over their futures and in engaging in projects that can have consequences long after they are gone. They might routinely cultivate desires even about states of affairs that occur after their deaths.[30] None the less, they can exert no control over their past. Thus, we might argue that it is the direction of time and causality itself that justifies such agents taking asymmetrical attitudes towards their past and future non-existence. Death, on the one hand, robs them of this valued ability of exerting control over their futures; but their past is nothing over which they could possibly ever exercise control. Consequently, death may interrupt and affect their overall

27. Parfit 1984, p. 177.

28. It is interesting to compare Williams' reliance on a similar criterion to show why immortality would be intolerable; he finds little value in repeating or looking back at past pleasures, activities, etc. Cf. *DRN* iii 944ff.

29. Cf. Parfit 1984, p. 176, for this formulation and further discussion.

30. Cf. Wiggins 1979, pp. 419-421. Cf. Luper-Foy 1987, pp. 233-252, for an interesting, if somewhat strident, attack on the Epicurean claim that we can achieve happiness without such unconditional desires.

life-plans in the way that prenatal non-existence fails to. They might have good reasons, therefore, for regretting the prospect of death, while being totally indifferent to prenatal non-existence.

There are several things to notice about this objection. First, the Epicurean can argue that even if happiness and desire require this kind of active, forward-looking engagement,[31] there is still no justification for having any special concern with future non-existence. If death robs us of time in which we could be busily engaging in various projects, prenatal non-existence does so as well. For instance, if I had been born in 1952 instead of in 1953, I would have had an extra year in which I could have been actively engaged with the world, planning long-term projects. The direction of time and causality is not necessarily called into question by Lucretius' symmetry argument.[32] What is called into question is our lack of concern about these earlier lost possibilities for action. Nor can we justify any asymmetry in our attitudes by claiming that death can interrupt activites that we value, while prenatal non-existence cannot. Prenatal non-existence can affect our future possibilities for acting no less than death can; and it is not clear why our attitudes in such cases should be any different from our attitudes about having our projects interrupted by death.[33] Correspondingly, if an

31. This assumption, of course, relies on controversial claims about the contents of happiness and the scope of desires that the Epicurean might want to dispute anyway.

32. Confusion arises here, I think, because it is easy to move between different conceptions of time in interpreting this particular objection to the symmetry argument. It is tempting to think that in these examples we must imagine ourselves moving temporally and causally backwards from some fixed point in the present. Thus, we might think that the symmetry argument requires us to violate common notions of felt time and causality. However, even if we view time as always flowing forward, i.e. as in McTaggart's A-series, all that the example requires is that our lives begin at some time prior to our actual births and that we then proceed in an ordinary, future-directed way. If time is viewed as being static, as in the B-series, the justification of symmetries between past and future becomes much easier. Epicurus' conception of time, which I think is closer to McTaggart's B-series, may help motivate the symmetry argument.

33. Moreover, what we value about certain completed projects may be temporally neutral. Just because I have finished learning a language in the past, it does not mean that I value it less than I would if I were learning it now or about to learn it in the future. (This is not true of activities and experiences which are especially appropriate to certain ages, however, since presumably such activities are

activity we currently value is interrupted, it might not have been interrupted if the facts about our prenatal non-existence had been different. To go back to the earlier example in which I am mistaken about my age. Suppose, for instance, that my major goal in life is to compose an opera before I am the age of thirty. My thirtieth birthday is in a week and as I rush to finish the last act, I see that I never will be able to finish it in time. Then I discover, as before, that I am really twenty-nine. I am overjoyed, I have an extra year to put the finishing touches on my work. This fact about my prenatal non-existence clearly affects the completion of my goal. Had I discovered that I was really thirty-one, my reaction, no doubt, would have been quite different. Thus, I might plausibly contend that facts about my prior non-existence can affect my present and future projects every bit as much as death does.

So far, I have discussed some reasons for thinking that the asymmetries in our attitudes towards death and prenatal non-existence are unjustified and that they are based on a variety of confusions. It might be objected, however, that for the Epicurean a defense of symmetry is liable to backfire in the long run. If I am horrified at the prospect that I will no longer exist at some point in the future, perhaps I should be equally horrified at the thought that there were times in the past when I did not exist.[34] If what I really care about is just being around in order to experience things for longer periods of time, those times when I am not around should give me equal opportunities for regret. Lucretius' argument, rather than being therapeutically calming, might seem to greatly increase our chances for mental anguish. This is because, in and of itself, the symmetry argu-

more valuable when undertaken at the appropriate time; hence asymmetrical attitudes in such cases would be justified). The importance of many of our projects is not dependent on the fact that we are engaged in them at present. Thus, facts about our prenatal non-existence can easily affect our ability to complete projects, especially if what we value about them is temporally neutral. Brueckner and Fischer (1986, pp. 218ff.) argue that we have asymmetric attitudes towards past and future experienced goods and that death is an evil because it deprives us of future experienced goods. This claim is questionable as it stands, however, since it fails to account for a whole range of experienced goods that are temporally neutral.

34. Cf. Sorabji 1983, pp. 176-177, for examples of such fears.

ment is strictly neutral about whether our non-existence is really a bad thing or not. It derives its initial force from the fact that, rightly or wrongly, many of us are able to look on our prenatal non-existence with complete equanimity. No doubt, we might benefit from learning how to summon up this same equanimity when contemplating our future non-existence; hence, Lucretius' argument could be the source of a very helpful therapeutic technique. We still need to ask, however, why the Epicurean is confident that once we notice this asymmetry in our common attitudes, we will be certain to revise them in the required way. In other words, what guarantees that we will continue to remain undisturbed by our past non-existence, once we have seen that it is exactly like death?

Lucretius, of course, may be relying to some extent on his earlier argument that we have no reason to fear past non-existence because it is not painful. But this would fail to show why, if death and prenatal non-existence are limits at either end of our lives, we should not want each of these limits to be as remote as possible. Notice, it will do no good for Lucretius to argue that it is just a brute fact about us that we are undisturbed by thoughts of our past non-existence. Apart from the objection that it certainly is conceivable for individuals to be troubled by their previous non-existence, this argument would leave him vulnerable to a parallel objection. We might argue that it is also a brute fact about us as human beings that we are disturbed by the thought of our future non-existence. The symmetry argument appeals to rationality, holding that it is irrational to maintain dissimilar attitudes towards two states which are mirror-images of each other. It would therefore be a very odd result of the argument, if it merely recommended trading in one irrational attitude for another.

Can Lucretius offer any good reasons for retaining our general indifference to our past non-existence? Answers are not easy to come by here, but one possible suggestion derives from Epicurus' belief that it is rational to care only about things that are under our own control. In the case of our past non-existence, we readily understand that it is a state over which we exert no control. Yet, although death is ultimately out of our

control as well,[35] we generally fail to acknowledge that, in Epicurus' phrase, we all live in a city without walls (*SV* 31). If this suggestion is right, it might explain why Epicurus thinks that our indifference to past non-existence is not merely arbitrary, but eminently rational. By enabling us to see that death is similarly out of our control, the symmetry argument compels us to revise our conventional attitudes and view our future non-existence with the same kind of rational indifference. For the same reason, any special concern about the duration of our lives would be irrational. If we should value only those things that are in our power, the length of our lives must ultimately become a matter of indifference for us as well (cf. *Ad Men.* 126).

In closing, I want to return briefly to Epicurus' claim about the unimportance of duration in rational assessments of the overall pleasantness of our lives (*KD* 19-21). Cicero takes Epicurus to be clearly (though wrongly) denying that pleasure is increased by duration (*voluptatem crescere longinquitate*) or rendered more valuable by its continuance (*De Fin.* ii 83). Recently, several scholars have resisted Cicero's interpretation because they take Epicurus to be claiming something much less bewildering about the role of duration in our evaluation of pleasures. Long and Sedley, for instance, argue that Epicurus does not mean to assert that time has no bearing at all in assessing quantities of pleasure. Rather, in their view, he is claiming that we can experience the same level of pleasure in a finite or infinite time.[36] Pleasure is something with clear natural limits and we can reach these limits as soon as we understand them sufficiently. Epicurus is thus merely observing that we do not need an infinite amount of time to come to such an understanding; nor could any particular complete experience of pleasure reach more intense levels, even if we repeated it an infinite number of times.

35. It might be objected that, although we can exert absolutely no control over the conditions of our prenatal non-existence, we can control to some extent the circumstances of our deaths. Epicurus might plausibly argue, however, that the *relevant* similarity between these two states is that they ultimately are out of our control.

36. Long and Sedley 1987, p. 154; but see *Ad Men.* 126 where Epicurus' analogy clearly suggests that he is talking about quantities and not the the quality of pleasure. Cf. Gosling and Taylor 1982, pp. 356ff. for further discussion of this problematic claim.

On this interpretation, Epicurus must still admit that death can cut short and hence harm the happiness of mortals enjoying even these most complete levels of pleasure. He might therefore readily acknowledge that a long, happy life is preferable to a short, happy one.

Long's and Sedley's reading has obvious attractions inasmuch as it leaves Epicurus with a much less paradoxical claim to defend. It also, however, leaves him without a leg to stand on in claiming that death in no way diminishes the complete happiness of mortals (cf. *KD* 20: ὡς ἐλλείπουσά τι τοῦ ἀρίστου βίου κατέστρεφεν). Moreover, if Epicurus believes, as they contend, that a long, happy life is better than a short, happy one,[37] he would need to ascribe some value to the repetition of particular pleasures. Although pleasures cannot be intensified when repeated, the Epicurean still must acknowledge, on their view, that the overall pleasantness of one's life can be increased by such repetitions and by the ongoing satisfaction of desires. Lucretius, however, takes great pains to refute just such a view of pleasure and desire (iii 944-45; cf. iii 1003ff., 1081ff.). Once our desires are satisfied and we reach a state of katastematic equilibrium, nothing of value can be added to our pleasure. Nor would we gain anything by prolonging such a state. The completeness of life and pleasure is independent of duration.[38]

37. Notice also that Epicurus avoids distinguishing levels of happiness among sages, which would be necessary if he believed that "a long, happy life is better than a short, happy one." Nor would such a dictum cohere very well with the following boast that he made to his mother: "...For these things that I gain are nothing small or of little force, things of the sort that make my state equal to a god's, and show me as a man who not even by his mortality falls short of the imperishable and blessed nature. For while I am alive, I know joy to the same degree as the gods" (Arrighetti, Frag. 72.29-40). We might normally overlook a stray comment to one's mother, if it were not for the fact that similar pretensions to divine invulnerability influence Epicurus' thinking at several critical junctures in his ethics. At first glance, such claims of divinity and invulnerability might seem to be merely 'grandiose' extra-philosophical posturing; however, a strong commitment to invulnerability might best explain his denial that a long, happy life is better than a short, happy one.

38. For the Aristotelian background of Epicurus' conception of complete pleasure see Miller 1976, pp. 169-177. In her response, Striker argues that a very short life could not possibly be complete. If, like Aristotle, we think that a complete life requires the development of a wide range of capacities, it may indeed be true that a very short life cannot be complete. Epicurus' conception of com-

Nor is it sufficient to claim, as Long and Sedley do, that although Epicurus admits that death may indeed diminish the overall happiness of one's life, he thinks that we must avoid giving in to fear, since such fear only will spoil our present pleasures. This argument at best shows, however, that it can be harmful to be preoccupied with death; but it by no means eliminates our reasons for fearing it. And it is surely this latter task that Epicurus sets himself in proving that death is nothing to us.

Thus, in trying to make sense of Epicurus' views on death, I think that we must come to grips with his conviction that a premature death is no misfortune for someone enjoying complete happiness. This Epicurean claim, although paradoxical, rests on several stubborn intuitions about death and the duration of life which, as we have seen, cannot be easily dismissed.[39]

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pleteness relies on a very different view of happiness, however. He thinks that we only need to develop a much more limited range of capacities to be completely happy. Even so, we might argue that agents will require some length of time even when developing a very limited range of capacities. Once we have achieved complete pleasure, further duration will add nothing of value; but perhaps those who have not yet achieved complete happiness still have reason to fear death and to regard the duration of life as important.

39. I am extremely grateful to David Konstan, Glenn Lesses, Stephen Rosenbaum, Chris Shields, Gisela Striker, Milton Wachsburg, and Jennifer Whiting for helpful criticism on earlier drafts of this paper.