

Achieving Tranquility: Epicurus on Living without Fear

Tim O'Keefe, Georgia State University

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1. Introduction: the place of eliminating fear in Epicurean ethics and physics

Eliminating fear is at the center of Epicurean ethics, because of their idiosyncratic doctrines regarding pleasure. The Epicureans are hedonists, maintaining that only pleasure is intrinsically good and only pain intrinsically bad. (Cicero *Fin.* 1.29). They distinguish between bodily and mental pleasures and pains. Bodily pleasures and pains—such as the feelings of eating a bacon cheeseburger, suffering from hunger, or being punched in the face—concern the present state of one's body. But mental pleasures and pains—such as a thrill of excitement, or a pang of regret—encompass the past and future too. For this reason, the Epicureans think that mental pleasures and pains are greater than bodily ones. (Cicero *Fin.* 1.55-57) When people initially think of pleasure, they often have in mind some process of active titillation of the senses or of the mind, such as a yummy sensation of eating a bacon cheeseburger or a thrill of excitement—which the Epicureans call “kinetic” pleasures. But the absence of pain, such as being free of hunger after having eaten the cheeseburger, is not merely a neutral state between pleasure and pain. Instead, it is itself a kind of pleasure—a “static” pleasure, as opposed to the kinetic pleasures. (Cicero *Fin.* 1.37-38) Indeed, the Epicureans proclaim that the absence of pain marks the limit of pleasure, and that once this limit is reached, the pleasure one experiences cannot be increased. (*KD* 3, *KD* 18)¹

Given this pair of distinctions, the Epicureans maintain that the main constituent of the pleasant life, and hence, of the happy life, is the static mental pleasure of *ataraxia*, or tranquility—the state of being free from mental disturbance. So while it is accurate to call the Epicureans hedonists, it might be less misleading to say that they are “tranquillists.” Fear is the primary obstacle to achieving tranquility, and so Epicurean ethics centers on eliminating fear. (It also concerns itself with eliminating other sources of mental disturbance, such as regret and envy.)

In fact, it might rightly be said that *all* of Epicurean philosophy centers on eliminating fear. That is because Epicureanism is ruthlessly consistent in its hedonism, holding that everything we do—including philosophizing—is justified only to the extent that it contributes to a pleasant life. Epicurus says that philosophical arguments which do not drive out diseases of the mind, i.e., causes of mental disturbance, are empty and useless. (Porphyry *To Marcella* 31) The two most pervasive and damaging fears are the fear of the gods and of death. But we cannot eliminate these fears without a correct understanding of the workings of the world. As Lucretius puts it, the terrifying darkness that envelops our mind will be dispelled not by the rays of the sun, but only by a systematic account of the principles of nature. (*DRN* 1.146–8) So Epicurean physics is subservient to Epicureans ethics, in the sense that the justification for engaging in the study of nature is that doing so is required in order to obtain tranquility. (It is

¹ See also Shaw in this volume.

not subservient in the sense that hedonic considerations are directly appealed to in their argumentation, e.g., fallaciously concluding that death is annihilation because it is comforting to believe that death is annihilation. The arguments for that conclusion proceed in the usual way.)

In this chapter, I will outline some of the main Epicurean arguments that are supposed to combat fear. I will start by giving a taxonomy of types of fear, and of types of therapy for fear. Then I will look at the fear and death and the fear of the gods, and how theoretical wisdom, i.e., physics, helps to combat them. I will close with a consideration of how practical wisdom helps to combat fear.

2. *Types of fear, and types of therapy for fear*

Before considering how the Epicureans try to relieve us of fear, it will be useful to lay out some different types of fear, as different sorts of fear call for different sorts of therapies. Fear depends on believing that something bad will (or may) occur to you—for instance, if I am going to have a wisdom tooth extraction tomorrow, I may painfully anticipate the procedure, perhaps imagining the dentist tugging at the tooth as drool dribbles down the side of my face. But many fears are based on *false* beliefs concerning something that will (or may) occur to me. (This falsehood may consist in falsely believing that the event will occur, or in falsely believing that it will be bad for me if it occurs.) Such fears are harmful, and we may call them “empty” fears. This parallels Epicurus’ own taxonomy of desires, in which he labels as “empty” harmful desires based on false beliefs. (*Ep. Men.* 127; *KD* 29) Epicurus himself does not label some fears as empty, but the later Epicurean Philodemus makes a move similar to one proposed here, where he extends Epicurus’ division of the desires to the emotions by labelling some types of anger as “empty.”²

Just as with the empty desires, such empty fears should be eliminated entirely, and the primary way of eliminating these fears is by uncovering and removing the false beliefs that cause them. This sort of cognitive therapy may in turn be subdivided into two types, depending on the type of false belief in question. Some empty fears depend on a false belief about the nature of the world, e.g., about the afterlife or about the gods. To dispel these fears, we must gain theoretical wisdom, i.e., the sort of natural philosophy Lucretius extols, in order to show us that death is annihilation and that the gods have nothing to do with the workings of the world. Other empty fears are based on false practical beliefs. For instance, I may believe that a large amount of wealth is needed in order to live securely, which leads me to experience great fear when it looks as though the stock market might crash and wipe out my investments. In these cases, what I need is practical wisdom (*phronesis*, sometimes translated “prudence”) so that I know the limits of my desires and can figure out which ways of living actually lead to security.

Given that the limit of pleasure for the Epicureans is a state free of pain, we might think that the Epicureans aim to eliminate fear altogether. But this would be a mistake. According to Epicurus, the person who says that he fears death, not because it will be painful when it arrives but because it is painful when it is still to come, is a fool, because it is pointless to be pained by the expectation of something that won’t be painful when it arrives. (*Ep. Men.* 125) But to be

² For more on Philodemus’ account of emotions, see Annas 1989.

pained by the expectation of something that would be painful (and hence bad) when it does arrive is fitting, and is not pointless. We may call such fears, based upon a correct belief that something bad will (or may) occur in the future, “natural and necessary” fears. Again, this parallels Epicurus’ taxonomy of desires. He labels the desires for food, hydration and shelter natural and necessary—“natural” in the sense that they are congenital to humans and not acquired by enculturation and argumentation, and “necessary” in the sense that fulfilling them is necessary for happiness, or for freeing the body from troubles, or for life.³ Likewise, the fears of hunger, disease, and the like are congenital to us, and we need such fears to avoid things that would cause us distress, bodily trouble, and death.

In the case of natural and necessary desires, we should not try to eliminate them, but to arrange our lives in order to fulfill them. Practical wisdom is what allows us to do so. What the Epicureans say about “natural wealth” helps illustrate their position and shed light on their analogous attitude towards “natural and necessary fears.” Epicurus says that wealth as defined by “groundless opinion” stretches without limit. (*KD* 15) Pursuing such wealth is misguided and counterproductive, because it leads to anxiety. But the Epicureans do not reject the pursuit of wealth altogether, and they criticize the Cynics, who advocate heedlessly living in utter poverty so as to be carefree. The Epicurean Metrodorus writes that you should not avoid all things that involve difficulty and distress, because not having some of those things will cause more pain than the pain caused by striving to obtain them. One example is health: basic dental hygiene involves bothersome effort, but it is worth it to avoid the agony of badly rotting teeth.⁴ (Philodemus *De Oec.* 13.1-15) And “natural wealth” is like health in this regard: obtaining the limited wealth needed to satisfy your basic needs involves some trouble, but far less than the pain you would experience by heedlessly disregarding wealth altogether. The wise Epicurean does have concern for his property and for the future. (*DL* 10.120)

Likewise, the natural and necessary fears of things like hunger probably cannot be eliminated, and even if they could be, doing so would be a bad idea, because of the important role such fears play in helping us avoid greater pains. Instead of *eliminating* these fears, we should *manage* them, by intelligently arranging our lives so that we can face the future with confidence and they do not bother us much.⁵

Admitting that even the wise person will experience some fear comports with what the Epicureans say generally. We have bodies that are subject to hunger, thirst, disease, and other troubles. The Epicureans admit that such pains are bad, and that even the wise person will feel them. (*DL* 10.119) (This distinguishes the Epicureans from the Stoics, who deny that such pains are bad, and likewise deny that the wise person suffers anything bad.) And because of their bodily vulnerability, even wise humans are not entirely immune to some mental disturbance, such as fear of some future bodily pain. This theme is developed at greatest length by the

³ Further consideration of what it means for something to be “natural” in Epicurean ethics is in O’Keefe 2020a.

⁴ The example is my own. For more on the topic of “natural wealth” and what the Epicurean Philodemus has to say on accumulating property, see O’Keefe 2016 and chapter 8 of Tsouna 2007: 163-194.

⁵ This distinction is originally proposed and further elaborated in Austin (2012), where she argues that the fear of violent death by others is natural and ineliminable.

Roman Epicurean Philodemus. Although the gods feel no anger, as they have no weakness (*KD* 1), when a person is intentionally harmed by another, it is appropriate and natural to feel a painful “bite” of anger. These inevitable pains, says Philodemus, do not bar the wise person from achieving happiness.⁶ In fact, the Epicureans think that having wisdom and the other virtues suffices for living pleasantly (*Ep. Men.* 132; *KD* 5), because the wise person has figured out that bad things have either a limited duration or a limited intensity. (*Ep. Men.* 133) She has also trained herself to be able to think back on good times in the past with gratitude whenever she wishes to. (Cicero *Fin.* 1.57) This allows her to get through the painful times while retaining her basic good cheer. This is shown by Epicurus’ own example; recalling his past philosophical conversations allowed him to endure with equanimity his intense physical suffering as he was dying. (*DL* 10.22) And while pangs of natural anger or fear are unpleasant, such temporary emotional “bites” do not fundamentally disturb the wise person’s peace of mind.

So far, we have concentrated on *argumentative* modes of therapy for fear: arguments to eliminate the false theoretical or practical beliefs that cause empty fears, and arguments about the limits of human desire and the way to intelligently arrange your life so as to fulfill them, in order to teach someone how to manage natural and necessary fears. But the Epicureans also deploy non-argumentative therapeutic techniques; I will briefly discuss them below when talking about the fear of death.

3. *The fear of death*

Speaking of “the” fear of death is misleading, as there is a great variety of fears of death, and a corresponding variety of arguments the Epicureans deploy against them.⁷ But the primary fear that the Epicureans target is the fear that your death will be bad for you, and to combat this fear they deploy a primary argument, the “no subject of harm” argument, as follows. Death is annihilation. Therefore, death is bad for nobody: not for the living, because they have not died, and not for the dead, because they do not exist, and a person must exist in order for something to be bad for them. (*Ep. Men.* 125, *DRN* 3.861–9).⁸

⁶ This notion of “natural anger” is developed in *On Anger* col. 37-45. See Tsouna (2007: 44-51) for further discussion of “bites” generally and (2007: 195-238) and Annas 1989 for more on Philodemus’ treatise *On Anger*.

⁷ For more on this variety of fears, see Warren 2004: 1-16. The entire book is an excellent discussion of the ancient Epicurean arguments about death and the modern discussions of death inspired by them.

⁸ Because of considerations of space, I leave aside the symmetry argument, a close cousin to the “no subject of harm” argument, presented in *DRN* 3.972–7. Briefly: a person terrified of eternal non-existence after his death should think back on the eternal non-existence that preceded his birth, which does not bother him at all, and realize that he has no more reason to fear his post-mortem non-existence than to regret his pre-natal non-existence. Warren 2001 argues that the “symmetry” argument is not really a distinct argument against the fear of death, but merely a vivid way of illustrating that non-existence is not harmful, in support of the “no subject of harm” argument.

Theoretical wisdom is needed to secure the argument's first premise: i.e., that death *is* annihilation, so that we can infer that death is bad for nobody. If we did not know that death is annihilation, then we might have grounds to fear death: perhaps after death I enter an afterlife full of picturesque and inventive suffering or become reincarnated as a factory-farm-raised chicken in retribution for my consumption of McNuggets. This wisdom involves knowledge both of the fundamental principles of Epicurean physics and of the composition and functioning of the mind.

The body obviously ceases to live upon death, and so the Epicurean arguments try to establish that the *psyche* is also mortal, as those who believe in an afterlife think of it in terms of the *psyche* surviving death. The Greek term *psyche* (and its Latin equivalent, *animus*) has a wide range of meanings. It can sometimes appropriately be translated as "soul," for instance as used in the *Phaedo* to describe the immaterial seat of reason and personality. Aristotle says that every organism, including plants, has a *psyche*, the form of a living body which structures its matter and makes it the particular kind of organism it is; here, *psyche* is closer to something like "life principle." But for the Epicureans, the *psyche*—at least in the case of humans—is what allows us to engage in activities like thinking, sensing, and making decisions, and so I will talk about the Epicurean arguments for the mortality of the mind, rather than of the soul.⁹

The Epicureans argue that the mind is something corporeal, specifically a bodily organ. Just as the heart is the bodily organ responsible for pumping blood through the body, so too the mind is the bodily organ responsible for sensation, thought and memory. (*Ep. Hdt.* 63) This is established by the causal interaction of the mind and the body. (*DRN* 3.163–87) The body moves the mind, as shown especially in cases of sensation: a steel-toed boot drives into my kidney, and I feel great pain. And the mind likewise moves the body, as shown especially by actions: I decide to walk to the refrigerator, and lo! my legs move. However, only bodies can move and be moved by other bodies, and so the mind must be something bodily. Lucretius argues that this is true because all action and reaction must occur by contact, and that only bodies can touch and be touched. (*DRN* 3.161–7)

The claim that only bodies can move and be moved by other bodies depends on the fundamental principles of Epicurean physics. The only two things that exist *per se* are bodies and void. (*Ep. Hdt.* 39-40) The universe consists of extended bits of stuff moving through empty space, with all else that exists—colors, time, justice, enslavement, etc.—depending for their existence on the existence of bodies and void. (*DRN* 1.445-482) And so, Epicurus says that the mind cannot be incorporeal, as philosophers like Plato maintain. That is because the only thing that is incorporeal is the void. But the void cannot do or suffer anything; it just allows bodies to pass through it. (*Ep. Hdt.* 67)

If the mind is something corporeal, then it is mortal. This conditional claim also depends on fundamental principles of Epicurean physics. There are two types of bodies—compound bodies, i.e., bodies which are made up of smaller bodies, and non-compound bodies, which cannot be broken down into smaller sub-units—that is, into atoms. (*Ep. Hdt.* 40-41) The mind is a compound body, because it has accidental properties, such as being tired, which change over time. Atoms have a limited stock of properties, such as their size and shape, and they undergo change only in their location and relation to other atoms. (*Ep. Hdt.* 54-55) And all compound

⁹ See also Verde in this volume.

bodies, such as the mind and our cosmos, are transient—they come into existence when atoms come together to form them, and they cease to exist when they disintegrate once more into jostling atoms. (*DRN* 1.526–39).¹⁰

While this might establish that the mind is mortal, it is not sufficient to show that the mind ceases to exist upon death. The Stoics, for instance, think that the *psyche* is something corporeal and mortal, but the Stoic Chrysippus also thinks that human *psychai* survive the death of the body for some time, with the strong and coherent *psychai* of virtuous people being especially long-lasting. (*DL* 7.157) So the general case for the mortality of the mind, based upon its being a compound body, has to be supplemented with more specific theorizing about its location and composition, such that it would disintegrate *upon death*. Epicureans think that the mind is a bodily organ located in the chest, as shown by the (supposed) fact that we experience emotions (such as a shrinking feeling when we are scared) in our chest. (*DRN* 3.136–160) The atoms that make up the mind are especially small and smooth, because thought is quick, and because the mind can be easily moved by images, which themselves are fine atomic films emitted from the surfaces of objects. (*DRN* 3.238–45) On death, the “container” of the body cannot hold those atoms in as it did before, and the mind disintegrates, as the atoms making it up escape into the surrounding air. (*DRN* 3.425–44) And so, those atoms no longer make up a mind. The mind can engage in “sensory motions” only when it is confined in the proper way in a living body, and death is the permanent dissolution of body and mind. (*DRN* 3.548–79)

We can now turn to the ethical premises of the argument, concerning what is good or bad for somebody and the conditions for somebody’s being benefited or harmed. Does the Epicureans’ argument presuppose their hedonism? Some of the things Epicurus and Lucretius say to support these premises do presuppose hedonism. Epicurus asserts that all good and bad consist in sense-experience (i.e., in experiences of pleasure and pain in particular), and thus that death, which is the deprivation of all sense-experience, is neither good nor bad. (*Ep. Men.* 124) Lucretius, when considering the objection that death is bad because it deprives a person of friends, family, and the other joys of life, responds that death also takes away the craving for these things, so that a person won’t be bothered by this deprivation, and hence is not harmed by it. (*DRN* 3.894–903)

So it looks as though we could reject the Epicureans’ argument by rejecting their hedonism. This is what Thomas Nagel does. He says that we care about things other than our conscious states of mind. For instance, I want my children really to love and respect me—not merely for me to have the pleasant belief that they do. Let us imagine that, unbeknownst to me, they betray and revile me. Since I am unaware of it, this betrayal may not bother me, but it still brings it about that I do not get what I want—and it’s plausible to think that a person’s interests are set back when their desires are not fulfilled.

However, it is not so clear that the “no subject of harm” argument presupposes hedonism. Note that the presentation of the “no subject of harm” argument above makes no mention of pleasure—it simply asserts that death cannot be bad for a person who has died, because that person does not exist, and that it cannot be bad for a living person, because their death has not yet occurred. So if death is annihilation, it looks as though the argument goes through no matter what your theory of human welfare is. If my children betray me after my

¹⁰ See also Algra in this volume.

death, this cannot harm me, as I do not exist to be harmed. (Nagel’s replies that death is bad for the person who *used to live*, because it renders their life as a whole worse than it would have been otherwise, and that this harm need not occur at any particular time.)¹¹

Nagel also faults the Epicureans for focusing on the intrinsic neutrality of the “state” of being dead. What makes death bad is not that non-existence is intrinsically bad; it’s that death deprives us of goods we would otherwise have enjoyed, thereby making us worse off.¹² If we accept this counterfactual analysis of what makes death bad, then it looks as though a hedonist also could reject the Epicurean argument, by considering the many pleasures a person would have enjoyed if they had not died.¹³ (Of course, this makes death bad only if the continued life that the person would otherwise have lived would have been pleasant. For a person in end-stage cancer with untreatable pain, ceasing to exist might be beneficial for them.)

The Epicureans would say that this objection presuppose an “additive” model of goodness, that more time furnishes more benefits to a person, which death can then take away. Nagel, for instance, explicitly asserts that if life is something good, then more life is better.¹⁴ But the Epicureans reject this model. The state of being free of all mental turmoil is the limit of mental pleasure, and the person who reaches that state has achieved the good. As Epicurus puts it, infinite time and finite time contain equal pleasure (*KD* 19), and once you obtain the things that remove the pain caused by desire, your whole life is complete. (*KD* 21) Additional time does not increase the amount of pleasure one experiences, any more than, if one reaches a state of bodily health, increased duration furnishes you with more “units of health.”¹⁵

The “no subject of harm” argument addresses only the fear that my death will be bad for me. But what my fear that my friends and family will die? Most people would feel terrible if their daughter died during open-heart surgery, and they might feel fear as their daughter enters the operating room. Lucretius addresses this fear by noting that, if the grief and fear are felt *on her behalf*—i.e., insofar as they are based on the thought that her death is bad *for her*—then it looks like the no subject of harm argument should apply to these feelings too. As Lucretius puts it (*DRN* 3.904–11), if death is not bad for the person who has died, and the dead feel no pain whatsoever, then for us to feel great pain on their behalf seems irrational.

But this still leaves open the possibility that the deaths of my friends and family will be

¹¹ A good point of entry to the “timing puzzle”—i.e., the question of *when* the harm of death occurs—is Luper 2007, who defends “priorism,” the view that a living person is harmed by his death prior to its occurrence.

¹² Nagel 1979

¹³ Feldman 1991 does so.

¹⁴ Nagel 1979: 2.

¹⁵ Rider 2014 explores further these different models of what makes a human life happy and the differences they make to assessing the badness of death. But even if we accept the Epicurean model, it looks like death could deprive somebody of pleasure—that is, when somebody progressing in wisdom but who had not yet attained it dies, and thus misses out on attaining Epicurean happiness. Philodemus considers this case in *On Death* 17.32–18.14 and concludes that it would be natural to feel a bite of pain under such circumstances. See Sanders 2011 for more on this topic.

bad *for me*, and so should be feared, and the Epicureans do not deny that this can sometimes be the case. In contrast to the Stoics, the Epicureans say that entirely eliminating pain, tears and lamentations at the deaths of friends would be a kind of bad insensitivity, and experiencing these pains is worth it in order to seem tender and gain the benefits of friendship.¹⁶ (Plutarch *Non posse* 1101a–b) (While they do not state so explicitly, if the Epicureans admit that grief at the death of a friend is appropriate, it looks as though this would imply a corresponding fear if I believe that my friend might soon die.) But, as with the “bites” of anger or other negative emotions that Philodemus discusses, the grief and fear a wise Epicurean would feel are compatible with her leading a tranquil life on the whole. Epicurus says that the memory of a dead friend is sweet (Plutarch *Non posse* 1105e): presumably the wise Epicurean focuses gratefully on the benefits that the friend provided when they were alive, rather than wallowing in grief over his present loss. Furthermore, the Epicurean model of friendship and its benefits is centered on wise people forming a network of friends, who help one another out and provide security for one another, not on the supposedly irreplaceable, one-on-one interaction between me and some unique friend. So if I am wise, while I might grieve at my departed friend, the absence of one person should not fundamentally upset the security of my life or my prospects for the future.¹⁷

One final fear that the “no subject of harm” argument does not address is the fear that my death will be bad for others: for instance, worrying that my family will find it hard to get by if I die in middle age. Philodemus’ approach to this fear is similar to his approach to the fear that the death of others will be bad for me. He says that it’s natural for the wise to feel a sting of pain at the thought that people close to them may suffer because of their death. But we can manage this fear through practical wisdom, by arranging things so that our death won’t in fact leave them in dire straits. (*On Death* 25.2-36) Epicurus himself provides an example of this: he carefully went to unusual lengths to preserve his will, depositing it and other documents relating to the school in the public archive of Athens.¹⁸

Such actions may seem inconsistent with the overall Epicurean position regarding death. The Epicureans maintain that all things that occur after I die are “nothing to me,” that they cannot be good or bad for me, as I no longer exist. But taking great troubles now for the sake of shaping events that will occur after my death seems to presuppose that they do matter to me, and the Epicureans think that taking such an attitude is irrational.¹⁹ But there is no inconsistency here. The Epicureans believe that friendship is an immortal good, one of the greatest means to attaining happiness, because good friends can be relied on to help you in times of need. But in order to secure the benefits of such a friendship, I must be willing to help out my friend in turn, caring for him as much as I care for myself. In fact, Epicurus says that the wise person is sometimes willing to die for his friend. So while the future execution of the terms

¹⁶ Konstan (2013) explores the Epicurean conception of grief, and argues that it is natural and ineliminable emotion we share with other animals.

¹⁷ O’Connor 1989 explores in detail this aspect of Epicurean friendship.

¹⁸ Noted in Warren 2004: 163.

¹⁹ Warren (2004: 162-199) advances this sort of argument.

of my will cannot benefit me, my present actions of ensuring that in the future my will shall be faithfully executed can benefit me, as can other actions for the sake of those close to me.²⁰

All of the arguments we've been considering so far—at least the ones that have as their goal eliminating some fear of death, and not merely managing it—have as their conclusion that death is not bad. And if we accept the Epicureans' further point that it is irrational to fear something that is not bad, these arguments also show that fear of death is irrational. But merely showing somebody that an emotion is irrational may not suffice to dispel that emotion, and if not, then the Epicurean arguments, even if they are cogent, might not be therapeutically effective. The Epicureans are optimistic about the power of reason, and of the sort of cognitive therapy they advance, to remove harmful beliefs, desires, and passions. But they are not naïve. Although the “no subject of harm argument” may seem to show that death is bad for nobody and should be feared by nobody, the Epicureans don't imagine that the person who accepts its conclusion will immediately and entirely lose his fear that his death will be bad for him.

In what we have of his treatise *On Death*, Philodemus advances arguments, some of which we've discussed above, against a wide variety of fears of death. These include some very particular fears: for instance, that your enemies will gloat over your death or that you will die at sea. Sometimes, Philodemus simply applies the more general Epicurean arguments to the case at hand: e.g., observing that you won't exist after your death to be bothered by the gloating of your enemies. Other times, he dismisses the particular fear by noting that there is no rational basis for thinking this type of death is worse than any other. For instance, death at sea may seem particularly fearsome, but you can equally well drown in a bathtub, and having your body devoured by fish is no worse than by maggots and grubs. That Philodemus advances such particular arguments, and not merely all-purpose ones such as the “no subject of harm” argument, is significant. Even if a person is convinced that death is not bad for him, he may still inconsistently hold, for instance, that death at sea in particular is bad, and Philodemus rightly shows a concern for eliminating all of these particular beliefs that fuel the fear of death. Lucretius adds to this the observation that some of the inconsistent beliefs may be subconscious. A person who is horrified by the thought of his body being torn apart by animals after his death may believe that he believes that death is annihilation, but his horror shows that unconsciously he still has some unacknowledged belief that a part of him survives his death (*DRN* 3.870-893).

Philodemus and Lucretius also deploy non-argumentative modes of therapy to treat destructive emotions like fear. Philodemus says that sometimes imagery is more therapeutically effective than argumentation. A person overly prone to anger might not appreciate how badly off they are if somebody merely gives them an argument about the consequences of anger, but bringing those consequences before their eyes via vividly depicting them will make them eager

²⁰ Karatzoglou (2020) also advances an argument along these lines. While I believe that the case of wills poses no special problems for the Epicurean, there is a larger question of whether what the Epicureans say about friendship is consistent with their egoistic hedonism in ethics. Annas (1993: 236-244) argues that they are inconsistent, and Evans 2004 that they are consistent. A recent paper on the topic, also arguing that they are consistent, is Rossi 2017. See also Asmis in this volume.

to be treated.²¹ Lucretius advances arguments against the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of the soul from life to life, but he also tries to discredit the theory by mocking it and making it seem silly. It is ridiculous, he says, to imagine innumerable immortal souls jostling one another around a pair of rutting animals in order to be the first one in when new life is conceived. Lucretius then suggests that maybe they avoid this conflict by agreeing to a “first come, first served” policy. (*DRN* 3.776-783) Lucretius also uses imagery to evoke emotions and thereby bolster argumentation. Lucretius believes that traditional Greek and Roman religion is one of the prime causes of fear and other evils in the world, and he wants to remove any allegiance his reader might have to such religion. But he does not merely give an argument that traditional religion is evil. Instead, he vividly depicts the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon in order to appease the anger of Artemis, evoking pity for Iphigenia and indignation at Agamemnon. (*DRN* 1.80-101)²²

4. *The fear of the gods*

Alongside death, the other main fear that the Epicureans want to treat is the fear of the gods. As with the fear of death, they try to prove that the fear of the gods is irrational by showing that the gods are not the cause of anything that is bad for us: in particular, by showing that the gods have nothing to do with the workings of the world and thus are the cause of nothing whatsoever. And as with showing that death is annihilation, showing that the gods have nothing to do with the workings of the world requires theoretical wisdom, appealing both to fundamental principles of Epicurean physics and to more specific observations.

The Epicureans exclude divine action as an explanation of what occurs in the world by excluding teleological explanations from their cosmology in general. As noted above, the Epicureans believe that the two fundamental constituents of the world are bodies and void, with compound bodies (such as you, me, and the cosmos) being composed of undividable atoms. Atoms move through the void because of their weight, past motions, the occasional minimal random “swerve” to the side, and their collisions, reboundings, and entanglements with other atoms. Everything else is a result of these atomic motions. Our cosmos—the particular world-system of earth, sun, moon and planets that we inhabit—formed because there happened to be a great concentration of matter in one region of space. It started as a turbulent mass with different sorts of elements all mixed together. But over time they begin to separate out, with like element starting to unite with like, as more massive elements, such as earth, settled down and extruded less massive elements, such as air. (*DRN* 5.416-508) Lucretius notes that these atoms did not get together and make an agreement about how to form the cosmos; individual atoms cannot think. Instead, they fortuitously happened to form it because of “blind” factors such as their weight and shape. And this exclusion of purpose also

²¹ Philodemus *On Anger* 4.4-19. For more on this technique of “setting before the eyes,” see Tsouna 2007: 204-209, and more generally on the treatise *On Anger*, 2007: 195-238. We do not have available to us an example of this technique applied to the fear of death, but there is no reason to think that it could not (and was not) be used for it also.

²² For more on Lucretius’ use of such techniques and how they comport with a commitment to rational argumentation, see O’Keefe 2020b.

applies to meteorological phenomena within the cosmos, such as eclipses, lightning bolts and earthquakes (*Ep. Hdt.* 76). Lightning occurs when clouds collide and strike out numerous “seeds” of fire, analogous to the way in which two stones or a stone and a chunk of iron strike one another and make sparks (*DRN* 6.160–218). This sort of explanation is supposed to render unnecessary and to displace explanations that appeal to the will of the gods, such as saying that lightning occurs because of the wrath of Zeus.

But to render this world-view acceptable, the Epicureans need to show how all of the particular workings of the world *can* be explained via the interaction of atoms, without divine intervention. In the case of cosmological and meteorological phenomena, such as eclipses, this leads to their doctrine of “multiple explanations.” The Epicureans believe that we can be certain of the basic principles of atomism—e.g., that the world consists of bodies moving through void, with compound bodies composed of atoms—because only these principles are (supposedly) consistent with the phenomena we observe, such as seeing bodies in motion. But we do not have enough information from what we observe to infer the precise explanation of many phenomena, such as eclipses. So in these cases the Epicureans are content to provide a disjunctive list of the possible atomic explanations of the phenomenon.²³ (*Ep. Pyth.* 92–115; *DRN* 5.592–770) That’s good enough to show that the phenomenon *can* be explained via the interaction of atoms, without recourse to the gods. And because knowledge of the natural world has no intrinsic value, but is valuable only for the sake of obtaining peace of mind, trying to discover which of the possible explanations is the actual one would be pointless. (*Ep. Hdt.* 79–80; *Ep. Pyth.* 85–8)²⁴

The Epicureans also need to give non-teleological explanations for the way organisms are put together. The eye seems well-designed for the sake of seeing, providing valuable information to an animal, and teeth well-designed for biting and chewing, allowing an animal to obtain the nutrients it needs to stay alive. Philosophers like Plato and the Stoics took the apparent craftsman-like skill exhibited in the cunning organization of our bodily parts as evidence for the existence of a wise craftsman god. The Epicureans want to block any such inference. They also do not accept Aristotle’s doctrine that organisms, although not the product of any sort of divine plan, nevertheless exhibit an intrinsic, natural teleology²⁵

The Epicureans admit that animal parts are useful for certain ends, but they deny that it follows that achieving those ends is their function or purpose. (*DRN* 4.823–857) A hammer’s function is to hammer things: somebody put it together for that purpose, and so the facts about its shape and material composition are a result of its function. But if I go camping and forget my hammer, I may pick up a flattened rock from a nearby stream to drive my tent stakes into the ground. The rock would happen to be useful for hammering, but it does not have hammering as its function: its shape and material composition are due to factors like erosion by the water, not

²³ See also Verde in this volume.

²⁴ Hankinson 2013 is a good exploration of the doctrine of multiple explanations and of possible differences in the doctrine as explained by Epicurus and Lucretius.

²⁵ Perhaps the Epicureans believe that in order for something to exist for the sake of some goal, it must be the result of the intention of some agent; cf. Simplicius *in Phys.* 198b29. So it does not make sense to say e.g. that teeth exist for the sake of cutting and grinding food, even though nobody made them for that purpose.

to the fact that its shape and composition would help me set up my tent.

But it is not a coincidence that the organisms around today have bodily parts that are useful for the sake of survival and reproduction. In the past, there was a much wider variety of organisms around, but creatures with bodily set-ups less well suited for survival and reproduction died off in the competition with others. A creature with its heart located in an extremity would circulate its blood less well, and so it might be sluggish; creatures like us but without teeth would gum their food and so eventually starve to death; and so forth. Because of this process of natural selection, only the members of the fittest species are around nowadays. This is the result of the process of natural selection, but not its goal.²⁶

The arguments above, in the Epicureans' general physics, cosmology, and biology, go a long way to make plausible a world-view where the gods play no role. Nonetheless, they are not enough to rule out the existence of gods we may have reason to fear. They rule out the existence of an immaterial craftsmen god responsible for ordering the material world, such as the Demiurge described in Plato's *Timaeus*. But the *Timaeus* also states that the cosmos as a whole, and the heavenly bodies within the cosmos, are living and divine beings. (Plato *Ti.* 30b) The Stoics, who are both materialists and pantheists, say the same thing.²⁷ (Plutarch *St. Rep.* 1052c–d) Because the Epicureans admit that some compound bodies, like you, me, and other animals, are living and act for the sake of things, they need further arguments to establish that such cosmic deities do not exist, and that nothing occurring in the world is due to their will. Likewise, the general principles of Epicurean physics on their own do not prove that there aren't heavenly gods within the world; further argumentation is needed.

The argument against Platonic and Stoic cosmic and celestial deities is fairly straightforward. In order for something to be a god, it must have a mind. But clods of earth, balls of fire, and seas of water cannot have minds, because they are not even alive (*DRN* 5.110–45). Organisms must be composed of the right sorts of materials, organized in the right sort of way. Plato and the Stoics also think that god is philanthropic, crafting the world for our benefit. (Cicero *Nat D.* 2.133) The Epicureans, famously, are the first philosophers we know of to advance the problem of evil: the world is too flawed for it to have been created for our benefit, as shown by droughts, tornadoes, diseases, and animal attacks. Lucretius concludes his litany of the woes in the world by saying that infants rightly cry out when they enter the world, considering misfortunes that await them. (*DRN* 5.195–227). The benevolent god of Plato and the Stoics is extremely powerful, not literally omnipotent, unlike the God of traditional Judeo-Christian theology who is more often targeted by the problem of evil. He is bound by the limitations of matter. Plato and the Stoics use this to explain away some of the evils in the world: for instance, Chrysippus, following the lead of Plato (*Tim.* 75 a-c), says that our skulls are as fragile as they are because if God had made them any thicker, we would be stupider. (Gellius

²⁶ This course raises the question of where this earlier great variety of species came from: the Epicureans think that they were generated long ago by the earth when it was in a fertile period, with great heat and moisture. Lucretius appeals to the supposed generation of animals even now from muddy warm areas to render this idea plausible. (*DRN* 5.772–825) For much more on Epicurean biology and their doctrine of natural selection, see Campbell 2003

²⁷ See also Powers in this volume.

NA 7.1.1–13)²⁸ Nonetheless, Lucretius is rightly confident that the ways in which the world works shows that it was not put together for our sake.

When it comes to traditional deities like Zeus—long-lived beings who are super-human in power although subhuman (or perhaps merely human) in character—Lucretius focuses his attention on the thunderbolt, traditionally thought to be Zeus’ weapon. When we look at where and when thunderbolts strike, they form no intelligent pattern. They fall here and there for no purpose, striking both the innocent and the guilty, and sometimes even Zeus’ own temples. Lucretius asks why Zeus would bother to hurl thunderbolts on uninhabited stretches of desert or the sea, suggesting sarcastically that maybe he does so for target practice. (*DRN* 6.379–422) So the way thunderbolts fall does not fit plausibly into any sort of divine plan at all, either for good or for ill, while it fits perfectly with the hypothesis that they are the result of blind forces operating in a universe that is indifferent to us.

In addition to these empirical arguments against the existence of meddling gods, the Epicureans also advance a conceptual argument. We have a basic grasp of what it is to be a god (the Epicureans call this sort of intellectual grasp a *prolepsis*, or “preconception”), that a god is immortal and blessed.²⁹ (*Ep. Men.* 123–4; Cicero *Nat. D.* 1.45) Feeling anger and giving trouble to others are signs of weakness inconsistent with blessedness (*KD* 1), so a vengeful being like Zeus cannot be a god. Less plausibly, the Epicureans criticize the Stoics’ notion of god by saying that managing the world would be a real hassle. (Cicero *Nat. D.* 1.52)

Initially, this conceptual argument seems to accomplish little. After all, a person could accept the Epicurean thesis about our preconception of the gods and still maintain that a being like Zeus exists simply by saying Zeus should be called a “schmod” rather than a “god.” But being blessed is part of the popular Greek and Roman view of the gods, and so pointing out the ways in which other things they ascribe to the gods are inconsistent with blessedness may be dialectically effective in leading people to abandon these other views in order to uphold the gods’ blessedness. Also, because they denied that the gods have anything to do with the workings of the world, the Epicureans were often charged with impiety. Using this argument, the Epicureans turn the tables and say that it is the opinions of the many, who believe in gods meddling with the world, that are impious, because they ascribe things to the gods that are unworthy of them. (*Ep. Men.* 123–4) The Epicureans vehemently deny that they are atheists, insisting that they believe in gods: blessed beings, human in shape, who engage in no toil, suffer no trouble, rejoice in their own wisdom and virtue, and know that their lives will always be filled with supreme pleasure.³⁰ (Cicero *Nat. D.* 46–51) We may reverently contemplate these

²⁸ For more on how their arguments are supposed to work, see Bryan 2013.

²⁹ Chapter 7 of Fine (2014: 226–256) does a nice job of explaining what a *prolepsis* is and of fitting it into the wider context of philosophizing about how inquiry is possible. See also Taylor in this volume.

³⁰ The ontological status of the gods within Epicureanism is disputed. On the “idealist” view, the are merely thought-constructs or idealizations of human blessedness, whereas on the “realist” view, the gods exist as organisms in the same way as we do, perhaps in the *intermundia*, or empty spaces between the worlds. Veres 2017 offers a useful overview of the texts and interpretations. A recent defense of idealism is Sedley 2011 and of realism is Konstan 2011. See also Verde in this volume.

gods and use them as models of blessedness to aspire to, but we need not curry their favor nor fear their wrath.

5. *Practical wisdom and living without fear*

In section two, I briefly discussed the way practical wisdom helps us manage fears such as the fear of being sick or hungry. In this section I will expand a bit on how this process works, and close with a discussion of why practical and not just theoretical wisdom is needed to eliminate entirely the fear of death and the fear of the gods.

Practical wisdom teaches us the natural limits of our desires and how to arrange our life so that we can effectively fulfill our natural and necessary desires. (*KD* 18–22, 29–30) Because of the tight connection between bodily and mental pleasures and pains in Epicurean moral psychology, almost every operation of practical wisdom serves a dual role, promoting both *aponia* (lack of bodily pain) and freedom from fear.³¹ Mental pleasures and pains are greater than bodily ones, but they depend on them, in the sense that the memory or anticipation of bodily pleasures and pains causes mental pleasures and pains. When we exercise practical wisdom, this helps us gain future bodily benefits, e.g., obtaining the health that comes from living temperately and avoiding the bodily distress caused by gluttony. But more importantly, we gain the confidence that we will do well in the future, gaining what is good and avoiding what is bad, and thus achieve freedom from fear.³²

Friendship provides a good example of how this works. If political power and fame are good for anything genuinely worthwhile, they're good for obtaining security from threats posed by other people. (*KD* 6-7) But, as it turns out, they're not very effective means for gaining security; instead, they bring us into conflict with others. So the wise Epicurean will not have the empty desires for fame and political power, because he realizes that leading a quiet life and withdrawing from the many are much more effective means to gaining safety. (*KD* 14; *DRN* 5.1117–35) But an utterly solitary life would be full of risks; we need friendship in order to be secure from danger. (Cicero *Fin.* 1.65–66) As Epicurus puts it, the wise person wishes to have friends so that he might have somebody to attend him when he is sick and help him when he is imprisoned or impoverished. (Seneca *Ep.* 9.8) But Epicurus also says that it is not so much the actual help from our friends that we need, but confidence that they will help us. (*SV* 34) If I am sick, and my friends come by to tend me, they promote my bodily well-being, which is a genuine good. But during the times I am feeling fine, I know that I can rely on my friends when I do get sick, and I thereby gain the much greater benefit of facing the future without fear.

The Epicureans believe that the fear of death and the fear of the gods are based on false beliefs about the nature of the world, and so we need natural science in order to dispel these fears and lead an untroubled life. (*KD* 11-13) But these fears are also caused by character flaws, which in turn are based on false ideas about what is good and bad. Lucretius depicts a

³¹ I say *almost* every operation of practical wisdom, because some operations of practical wisdom are concerned with the past, not the future. In order to lead a pleasant life, I should rid myself of the pain of regret and seek the pleasure of gratitude, and I can train myself to recall sweet memories as a way to have pleasure always available to myself. (Cicero *Fin.* 1.57)

³² See also Asmis in this volume.

personified Nature chastising an old man who fears death. His fear, she says, is caused by greed and ingratitude. According to Nature, he fears death because he always desires what is not there (*DRN* 3.957), and because he thinks that he has not had enough out of life. Thus, since he thinks that his life is incomplete (*DRN* 3.958), he is fearful when he thinks of it being taken away from him. According to Lucretius, many people are never satisfied with what they presently have. This causes them to lust for life, in order to get what they do not yet have, but this gaping thirst can never be quenched (*DRN* 3.1076–86).

The Epicureans would diagnose such people as exhibiting both an ethical and an intellectual failure. Ethically, they are greedy and ungrateful.³³ Intellectually, they subscribe to the sort of flawed “additive” model of goodness described above: no matter what goods they obtain, they can always gain more. And so their lives are never complete, and they view death as taking away some good that they could have enjoyed. Nagel neatly encapsulates the idea: death is “an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods,” and he concludes, “if there is no limit to the amount of life it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all.”³⁴

Does Lucretius’ rebuke of Nagel’s Roman predecessor show that, for the Epicureans, it would be rational to fear death if the “additive model” of happiness were correct? That is, does Lucretius concede that, if the additive model were correct, then the person who dies would lose something valuable, which would be bad for him? If so, then while the person is irrational at the end of the day, insofar as he has an unjustified model of goodness, his fear is at least rational given his mistaken beliefs.

I think that Lucretius does not concede this. If the “no subject of harm” argument succeeds, it shows that, even if the additive model is correct, death is not bad for the person who dies. Let us suppose that at the end of my workday I am looking forward to the pleasure of trick or treating with my children. But as I drive home, a traffic accident involving a tractor-trailer truck on the Interstate ahead of me blocks all lanes of traffic, and I am unable to get home in time to trick or treat. In such a case, Nagel would claim that the accident harms me by making me worse off, because I am deprived of the additional pleasure that I would have experienced had the accident not occurred. But if we change the scenario slightly, and instead the tractor-trailer truck plows into my Prius and instantly kills me on my commute home, things are completely different. I still do not get to experience the pleasure of trick or treating, but this “deprivation” is not bad for me, because I do not exist to be harmed.

Instead, I think that Lucretius is making a more subtle point: when contemplating his death, the person who holds an “additive model” will think ahead to the goods that he supposes he would have received had he continued to live, and he will regard himself as deprived of them, and thus he will fear death. In this way, he is analogous to the person who feels a shudder of horror as he pictures his corpse being savaged by animals. In both cases, in the act of imagination he falsely places himself where he will not be, and thus irrationally regards himself as harmed. So the greed and ingratitude of the fellow who holds an additive model of goodness *causes* his fear of death, but it does not at all *justify* it, even conditionally.

³³ See Rider (2019) for more on the role gratitude plays within Epicurean ethics.

³⁴ Nagel 1979: 10.

The Epicureans make a similar point regarding the fear of the gods, that character flaws lead to fearing the gods. Epicurus says that the greatest harms come from the gods to bad people and the greatest benefits to the good. (*Ep. Men.* 124) This appears inconsistent with thinking that the gods have nothing to do with the workings of the world, so we have nothing to hope or fear from them. But what he means is that our *idea* of what the gods are like can benefit or harm us. The wise person who has a correct idea of the gods can reverently worship them and strive to model her own life on the life of the gods, thereby living as a god among humans. (*Ep. Men.* 135) On the other hand, the fool who worships a vengeful god who demands blood and punishes those who disobey him can never be at peace. Note that Epicurus says *bad* people are harmed by their gods—not merely misguided ones. Because the gods are paradigms of blessedness, our conception of the gods will reflect the idea we aspire to, and what we find worthy of worship. So the reverence of a bloodthirsty and vengeful god will reflect a corrupt adoration of cruel power and domination over others. Along similar lines, Lucretius says that the fanciful afterlife punishments that belong to superstitious religion are just a projection of torments people suffer here and now. For instance, while there is no literal Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the hill, politicians who ceaselessly thirst for public approval but repeatedly come away disappointed are like Sisyphus. (*DRN* 3.978–1023)

The upshot of this is that while theoretical wisdom can correct the mistaken views about the world that cause the fear of death and the fear of the gods, and thus show that these fears are groundless, it will not suffice to entirely eliminate those fears. Practical wisdom is the source of all of the other virtues, (*Ep. Men.* 132) and so we also need practical wisdom in order to remove the character flaws that fuel these fears.³⁵

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³⁵ Some of the exposition of particular points in this chapter is adapted from O'Keefe 2006, 2010, and 2011.

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