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Epicurus on Pleasure, a Complete Life, and Death: A Defence¹

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Abstract

Epicurus argued that the good life is the pleasurable life. He also argued that “death is nothing to us”. These claims appear in tension. For, if pleasure is good, then it seems that death is bad when it deprives us of deeply enjoyable time alive. Here, I offer an Epicurean view of pleasure and the complete life which dissolves this tension. This view is, I contend, more appealing than critics of Epicureanism have allowed, in part because it assigns higher value to pleasures that we produce by exercising our rational capacities and by establishing control over our lives.

Introduction

In his *Letter to Menoecus* (*LM*) and several fragmentary remains of his writings, Epicurus famously gives a hedonistic account of the good life. He posits that pleasure, in itself, is always good, and pain, in itself, is always bad; that experience is a precondition for anything being either good or bad in itself; and that leading a particular type of pleasant life should be our final end, or supreme aim (*LM* in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 113-14 and p. 149; see also *Key Doctrines* [*KD*] 3, 4, 8, 10, 18, 25, and 30, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115). He also appears to claim that it follows from this hedonistic view that death—understood as the permanent end of one’s conscious existence—should not concern us. As he puts one of his apparent arguments to this conclusion:

“Accustom yourself to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil lie in sensation, whereas death is the absence of sensation” (*LM* 124, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 149).

This combination of views, and this apparent inference, have perplexed commentators from the ancient world onwards. For one thing, to some, the quoted passage appears to advance an invalid argument of the following kind (Feldman 1991, pp. 217-18):

1. Pleasures, taken by themselves, are always good for a person and nothing can be good in itself for a person if it does not involve pleasure for them; pains, taken by themselves, are always bad for a person and nothing can be bad in itself for a person if it does not involve pain for them.
2. A person’s pleasures and pains cease at death.

Therefore,

- C. Death is not bad for a person.

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The argument is of course invalid, because all that the first two premisses establish is that death is not bad in itself for a person. But, consistently with hedonism, one can hold that death would be comparatively bad for a person when and because it prevents them from living the pleasant life for longer. Indeed, as many have noted, hedonism seems to *prompt* the conclusion that death can be such a comparative evil. For, if pleasure is good for a person, then it is natural to conclude that a longer life, containing more pleasure, is better for that person than a shorter life containing less pleasure. Bernard Williams puts this point as follows:

“Consider two lives, one very short and cut off before the *praemia* [*vitae*] [the rewards and delights of life, or pleasure, for an Epicurean] have been acquired, the other fully provided with the *praemia* and containing their enjoyment to a ripe age. It is very difficult to see why the second life, by these standards alone, is not to be thought better than the first. (...) If the *praemia vitae* are valuable, (...) then (...) more of them is better than less. But then it just will not be true that to die earlier is all the same as to die later, nor that death is never an evil” (1973, p. 84; for similar reactions see Cicero 2004, 2.87-88; Furley 1986, p. 81; Long and Sedley 1987, p. 154; Striker 1988, p. 327; and Broome 2013, p. 222).

This reaction to Epicurus’ views relies on the idea that a person’s death at a time is comparatively bad for them when they would have instead lived a better life had they not died at that time. This is, of course, a central tenet of what is perhaps the most popular account of the badness of death, the Deprivation Account. (For defences of this view, see Nagel 1970; Feldman 1991; Bradley 2004; and Broome 2013.)

Some commentators sympathetic to Epicureanism have therefore sought to undermine the Deprivation Account. They have done so by drawing on another famous passage in the *Letter to Menoecus*, which reads: “...death is nothing to us, seeing that when we exist death is not present and when death is present we do not exist” (*LM* 125 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 150). As explicated by these commentators, this passage holds that for a deprivation of pleasurable time alive to be comparatively bad for a person, this person must be capable of experiencing this deprivation. But, since death is the end of the person’s conscious existence, it cannot be comparatively bad for him (Rosenbaum 1986; Mitsis 2002, pp. 51-5).

This defence of Epicurus seems to me unpromising, since I find it plausible that if more time alive would make a person’s life as a whole better, then being deprived of that time would be worse for them. Along with defenders of the Deprivation Account, I therefore reject the idea that for something to be comparatively bad for a person, they must be capable of becoming aware of this comparative badness (Nagel 1970; Feldman 1991; Bradley 2004; Broome 2013). Instead, in this paper, my principal aim is to propose an Epicurean conception of the good life which, when combined with the Deprivation Account, *does* yield Epicurus’ conclusion that death is not comparatively bad for us even when continued existence would be maximally pleasurable. In a nutshell: on the Epicurean view I shall propose, an Epicurean sage’s life is complete once they have attained the supremely pleasurable state, so that more time alive in this state (rather than dying) would not make their life as a whole better. On this view, therefore, being deprived by death of more such pleasurable time does not make the sage’s death bad for them.

If successful, my argument will refute the common charge that a central Epicurean argument is invalid. Of course, a further question is whether we should accept the view of the good life on which the valid Epicurean argument relies. While I shall not offer a full assessment of this view, I shall argue that the Epicurean good life is more appealing than critics have allowed. For it involves not only freedom from the fear of death, but also deep enjoyment, significant achievements of ethical and theoretical reasoning, as well as a high degree of control over one's life. Moreover, it is compatible with genuine concern for others—in particular, for fellow Epicureans.

Key to my defence of an Epicurean view will be a proper understanding of Epicurus' distinctive and perplexing conception of pleasure. I undertake this task in Section 1. In Section 2, I propose an Epicurean conception of the complete life and discuss the basis on which Epicureans recommended this life to us. In Section 3, I explain the reasons for holding that death is neither bad in itself nor comparatively bad for a happy Epicurean sage, even though it may be bad for others. In Section 4, I conclude by enumerating the merits of the Epicurean view outlined, as well as what appear to be some of its weaknesses.

Before proceeding, it will be useful to clarify my approach. Two difficulties in understanding Epicurus' views are that we have only a small portion of his writings available and that many of the remaining texts report only key conclusions in a pithy, provocative manner. We therefore are unacquainted with the presumably detailed arguments which Epicurus brought forward to support them. Building on the secondary literature, my aim has been to supply arguments for some of Epicurus' principal conclusions and thereby formulate a view which merits serious consideration as a conception of a good life. The view I articulate is intended to qualify as "Epicurean" in the sense that it is inspired by and aims to be broadly consistent with the surviving texts. I do not claim that this view can be confidently attributed to Epicurus in detail.

1. Pleasure

Consider the following passages from Epicurus on the pleasures he regarded as generating the best life:

"The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures" (*Key Doctrines* [KD] 3, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115).

"Refer every choice to the health of the body and the soul's freedom from disturbance, since this is the end belonging to the blessed life. (...) So when we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those that consist in having a good time, but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul. For what produces the pleasant life is not continuous drinking and parties or pederasty or womanizing or the enjoyment of fish and other dishes of an expensive table, but sober reasoning which tracks down the causes of every choice and avoidance and which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion" (*LM* 131-2, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 113-14).

These claims, and especially the assertion that the greatest pleasure involves nothing more than the removal of all pain (by which Epicurus meant all bodily discomfort and mental distress) have struck commentators as implausible, even bizarre. For example, the Cyrenaics (adherents of a contemporaneous, rival school of hedonistic philosophy) are reported to have scoffed that Epicurus apparently believed that pleasure is maximized when one attains

“the condition of a dead man” (Clement of Alexandria 2010, *Stromata* book 2, chap. 21). Cicero, meanwhile, accused the “strict, austere” Epicurus of outright inconsistency, in first setting us a goal (pleasure) that “turns out not to be worth seeking,” since, according to the first quoted passage, “we have no need of it so long as we are free from pain!” (2004, 2.29). Closer to the present, Julia Annas (1987, p. 6) remarks that the mere absence of pain and distress are “nobody’s idea of how to maximize pleasure”.

Contrary to the Cyrenaics and Cicero, I shall argue in this Section that these remarks of Epicurus reflect a sensible view of pleasure. This will also provide the basis for our answer to Annas’s charge, in Section 2.

1.1 *Limiting vulnerability*

Let us start from the plausible idea that, like many of us, if an Epicurean believes they are likely to face significant bads, such as the pain of grave illness, having their basic needs unmet, or their central, strongly held desires frustrated, then they will feel distress. It follows that if they experience what Epicurus called “the soul’s freedom from disturbance”, then they do not believe they are vulnerable in this way.

There are two ways in which an Epicurean can fail to believe they are vulnerable. One strategy is to form no beliefs and suspend existing beliefs about their vulnerability. (This was apparently the strategy for avoiding worry advocated by the sceptic Pyrrho of Elis; see Long and Sedley 1987, p. 13 and pp. 17-18.) The other strategy is to believe that they are not vulnerable. Epicurus takes the latter route, since his writings dwell on the common causes of human vulnerability and describe how one might make oneself substantially less vulnerable. It follows that an Epicurean who does not feel distress (or, as I shall say, “is tranquil”), must believe their vulnerability is limited, in the sense that they must believe that the chance that a substantial evil will befall them is below some threshold.

For a given harm, the threshold chance of this harm occurring must be such that a reasonable person will not be perturbed by a belief in any below-threshold chance of that harm. This means that the threshold will be different for harms of varying magnitude—for example, a 5% chance of having a mild headache tomorrow will not perturb a reasonable person, whereas a 5% chance of experiencing the pain of kidney stones tomorrow would. It is important, however, that the threshold chance of substantial misfortune should not be zero. For if it were zero, then it would generally be impossible to both have reasonable beliefs about one’s vulnerability and be tranquil. And, as we shall see, the realistic possibility of becoming tranquil while maintaining a rationally defensible view of one’s situation is a key tenet of Epicureanism. I shall therefore make the assumption (which seems to me a plausible one) that our psychology permits tranquillity even when we believe there is a non-zero chance of grave ills befalling us; it is enough that the chance of such ills is judged to be very small.

What would a person’s outlook and situation have to be to make this belief in their near-invulnerability justifiable? For Epicurus, a key source of vulnerability lies in our desires: the thwarting of an important, strongly held desire will be perceived as an evil, and the thought that such a desire is sufficiently likely to be thwarted will cause us distress.² But we can, he

² On the Epicurean view here developed, could there be other sources of vulnerability than the frustration of desire? Since pain is an evil for Epicurus, a pain that one does not desire to avoid could be an example of a source of vulnerability that is not linked to the frustration of desire. But Epicurus assumes that, considering the

proposes, greatly limit the likelihood of this perceived evil by limiting our desires and eliminating those false beliefs which cause us distress (see the excerpts from *KD* and *Vatican Sayings [VS]* in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 115-6 and p. 150; *Fragments [F]* 74 in Epicurus 1993, p. 100; and Nussbaum 1994, pp. 104-5).

To this end, Epicurus distinguishes three types of desires: (i) “natural and necessary”; (ii) “natural and unnecessary”, and (iii) “empty”. Each of these comes with a recommendation for its development, maintenance or removal (*LM* 127-8 and *KD* 29-30, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 113-16; Nussbaum 1994, chap. 4). I shall discuss them in turn.

(i) *Natural and necessary desires* are for the things that are required for one’s bodily and mental well-being, such as food, water, shelter, clothing, friendship, and correct philosophy. (Epicurus sees the last of these as a need because he believes a correct view of the world and of the good life are, under the ordinary circumstances of human life, essential to achieving tranquillity; a further reason to see it as a need is because, as rational creatures, it is part of our functioning well that we acquire a reasonable view of the world. See Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 154-7.) Epicurus’ attitude towards these natural and necessary desires is that, since they focus on bodily health and peace of mind, they are based on correct beliefs about one’s good and one ought to maintain them.

(ii) *Natural and unnecessary desires*, the texts suggest, are wants that a typical person could have without having false beliefs about what is good, but which are nonetheless wants that they could also, without threatening their health or psychological well-being, either (ii-a) avoid developing, or (ii-b) rid themselves of, or (ii-c) hold in such a way that they could forgo satisfying them without suffering substantial pain or frustration.

For example, Epicurus suggests that for someone who is considering whether to have children, a desire of type (ii-a) is the desire to care for their child, see it grow up, and have it lead a happy life. A typical childless person would acquire this natural desire if they were to have a child. But they can, Epicurus believed, avoid having this desire simply by avoiding becoming a parent, which is something that Epicurus recommends as one way of avoiding the anxieties of parenthood (Brennan 1996).

As an example of type (ii-b), consider a passionate longing to be with a lover who isn’t a good match. If one knows this longing would, in time, fade if one broke up with them, then this will count as a desire one could rid oneself of without undue harm (see Nussbaum 1994, chap. 5).

To illustrate desires of type (ii-c), consider cravings that it is possible to leave unsatisfied without harm merely by distracting oneself for a few minutes (Martin 2018). Epicurus himself mentions a desire for luxuries (Scholion on *KD* 29, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 116). Such desires, he argued, have as their object an item which meets the person’s genuine needs no better than more basic substitutes. And if one appreciates this fact, then, Epicurus held, one will desire these luxuries calmly, as simply one way of satisfying one’s needs (so that, for example, one may desire fine clothing as merely one way of being adequately

pain in itself, one’s animal nature will always lead one to desire to avoid it (see the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus in Cicero 2004, 1.30, p. 13). An Epicurean will always heed this call of nature (*LM* 127 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 113). More generally, as outlined in the main text, one’s “natural and necessary” desires will, Epicurus claims, perfectly track one’s central interests. I conclude that on the Epicurean view I am developing here, in a person who has all the normal, natural and necessary desires, all significant sources of vulnerability will also involve the frustration of desire.

clothed). So desired, Epicurus held, luxuries will bring delight if they are available, but their absence will bring no frustration; nor will their likely unavailability bring anxiety (*LM* 130, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 114).

Now, with regards to such natural and unnecessary desires, Epicurus' recommendations seem to have been as follows. So long as these desires are not based on false belief (say, the belief that one simply could not be happy without finery, when in fact one could, perhaps by selecting the right social environment, adapt perfectly well to going about in simple clothes), and so long as one could be sufficiently confident that one would always be able to satisfy them without causing pain or distress, there is no objection to developing them, maintaining them, or seeking to satisfy them. For, in these circumstances, having these desires would not be rationally criticisable and would cause no evil—no frustration because they were unsatisfied, no pain or distress in satisfying them, and no anxiety about one's inability to satisfy them (*KD* 8-10 and *VS* 51, in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 115-16). However, Epicurus also emphasized that it is generally the surest route to peace of mind to avoid developing desires of type (ii-a); to train oneself to leave desires of type (ii-b) unfulfilled without becoming frustrated; and to hold desires of type (ii-c) only in the dispassionate manner described.

(iii) *Empty desires* are based on false beliefs about nature or the good life. An example is a desire not to die when it stems from the false belief that after death one will face suffering in the underworld. Epicurus held that the way to rid oneself of empty desires was through careful reasoning about the nature of the world (which, to continue our example, should lead one to conclude that there is no afterlife) and the good life. For he held that these desires would eventually disappear if the false beliefs underlying them were exposed and their falsity was kept in view. Epicurus therefore assumed substantial responsiveness of our desires (as well as our attendant emotions) to our beliefs about the world and our view of the good, in the sense that once we come to justifiably view something as good for us, our desires and emotions will—after some accustomization—fall in line with this understanding (Mitsis 2013, p. 213).³

In sum, a key element of Epicurus' strategy for acquiring a justified belief in one's near-invulnerability is to confine one's wants to natural and necessary desires and those among the natural and unnecessary desires that, given one's circumstances, have a high chance of not being frustrated.

If one accepts Epicurus' view of the malleability of our desires (as I shall do in this paper), then one can see how, under minimally decent socio-economic circumstances, this could go some way towards limiting our vulnerability. However, we need to say more about the

³ Nussbaum's (1994, p. 111) understanding of the categories of "natural" and "empty" is that they are mutually exclusive, because the latter are based on false belief or corrupted acculturation, while the former are based on neither of these. But this interpretation conflicts with Epicurus' claim that a natural and unnecessary desire *may also be empty because based on false belief*, if it is held too passionately: "Whenever intense passion is present in natural desires which do not lead to pain if they are unfulfilled, these have their origin in empty opinion" (*KD* 30, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115). I therefore propose that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, I assume that for a desire to be "empty", it must involve false belief or corrupted acculturation whereas a natural desire need not be (but *may* be) based on either of these. So, for example, one's desire for finery is natural and unnecessary because one can desire such clothing, without false belief, as merely a lovely way of being clothed. But one can also have this desire out of the opinion that it simply will not do to be seen in anything other than "the best" or "the latest fashion" (which, in Epicurus' view, would be a false belief, so that the desire would then be natural, unnecessary, and empty).

nature of an Epicurean's desires. For it is compatible with desiring only that one's basic needs are satisfied that one wants them to continue to be satisfied for a long time to come. But with the high death rates in every age bracket in the Greco-Roman ancient world, in Epicurus' time, one would know that such a desire would likely be thwarted. (Demographers estimate that in antiquity, fewer than half the population made it to 20, and that, at that age, a person had an 8% chance of dying within the next five years and a remaining life expectancy of 28 years; see Scheidel 2008, Fig. 3.1 and Woods 2007, p. 386.) To avoid the anxiety that would attend a strongly held desire to live on for a considerable period, an Epicurean (in the ancient world, at least) would therefore need to do more than merely limit their desires in the manner just outlined.

What more is required? The following fragment of Epicurus' writings is suggestive: "He who has least need of tomorrow will most gladly greet tomorrow" (*F* 78 in Epicurus 1993, p. 100). Let us focus for a moment on the notion of "needing tomorrow". Here, it is useful to consider whether or not one requires more time alive to avoid the frustration of one's central desires (Williams 1973; Luper-Foy 1987; Belshaw 2013).

For some future-oriented desires, one's remaining alive for some time contributes substantially to their not being thwarted. An example is a desire that one will live in one's Epicurean community for years to come. Another example is the desire that one's Epicurean community should continue to thrive, where circumstances are such that one's presence would render it substantially more likely that it would do so.

For other desires, one's remaining alive does not contribute substantially to their not being thwarted. An example is the wish that one's community should persist when, as things stand, its chances of flourishing are largely independent of one's existence, because it is vibrant and because one has ensured its financial viability after one's death.⁴ Other wants of this type are "escape desires" (Luper-Foy 1987), which involve not wanting to be around under particular conditions. Examples mentioned by spokespersons of the Epicurean tradition are preferring one's own death to suffering severe, prolonged pain (Cicero 2004, 1.49) and preferring to die if this will save a friend from grave harm (Diogenes Laertius 10.120 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 133). Another type of desire which by its very nature cannot be thwarted by death is what I shall call "merely conditional" desires. These involve wanting something only on the condition that one is alive—that is to say, one has a preference that this desire is satisfied if one is alive, but does not have a preference to be alive with this desire satisfied over simply not being alive (Luper-Foy 1987). An example would be a desire to live in an Epicurean community next year on the condition that one is around then. This does not involve a wish to remain alive in order to spend time in this community.

Now, when one's continued existence is a precondition for, or likely to significantly contribute to, one's central desires not being frustrated, then these desires provide an

⁴ Some commentators have claimed that an Epicurean cannot consistently have genuine concern about anything that occurs after their death (Luper-Foy 1987; Warren 2004, pp. 162-77). This claim seems to me mistaken. An Epicurean must ensure that their desires are unlikely to be thwarted. But this is consistent with them desiring that some good things will happen to others after their death. For one can, through carefully choosing who one cares about, and by making provision for others, ensure that one's post-one's-own-death, altruistic desires are likely to be satisfied. For example, Epicurus famously made provision in his will for those he cared about. He also ensured the continued viability of his community "The Garden" by arranging that the title to its lands would be inherited by sympathetic Athenian citizens after his death (Leiwu and Remes 1999).

impetus to see one's death as an evil and to feel anxious about the possibility one's death. By contrast, when one's continued existence is inessential to avoiding the frustration of one's desires, these give one at most a weak impetus to see one's death as an evil and little cause for anxiety about it.

Combining these ideas with Epicurus' aforementioned categorization of desires into natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, and empty, one can say that the Epicurean strategy for becoming free from anxiety about the possible frustration of one's important desires has two prongs.

The first prong is carefully crafting and pruning one's desires, in part through the process of ridding oneself of false beliefs about the universe and the good life. This involves limiting one's desires to the natural and necessary ones along with a circumscribed set of natural and unnecessary desires. Moreover, it involves shaping one's future-oriented, natural desires so that one's continued existence does not contribute substantially to their not being thwarted.

The second prong is to arrange one's circumstances so that one's remaining desires are unlikely to be frustrated. Epicurus believed that under moderately fortuitous social and economic circumstances (a society with a substantial degree of stability, rule of law, respect for basic rights over one's body and mind, as well as a basic level of economic development), one can achieve justified confidence in the satisfaction of one's properly limited desires (*LM* 130, in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 114). Practically speaking, for Epicurus, this involved partial social withdrawal by avoiding engagement in politics and by moving to the edge of town to live simply and securely in the company of fellow Epicureans.

Epicurus believed that pursuing the outlined two-pronged strategy would establish the practically necessary and sufficient conditions for freedom from pain and anxiety. In this paper, I shall grant this claim. What is the connection between tranquillity so generated and pleasure as we more commonly understand it? I shall now address this question.

1.2 The pleasures of near-invulnerability

Taking our cue from Philip Mitsis' (1988) memorable claim that Epicureans sought "the pleasures of invulnerability", we can, I propose, identify a host of pleasures that will reliably accompany being in the tranquil state.

First, in the tranquil state, one will feel safe and content, because one has everything at hand that one needs and wants, and one is confident that one's future-oriented wants will be satisfied, or at least not thwarted.

Second, as Gisela Striker (1993, pp. 16-17) points out, in the tranquil state, because one feels secure and is untroubled, one can immerse oneself in one's experiences and wholly engage with one's activities. Now, for an Epicurean, these activities will involve seeking (almost always successfully) to satisfy one's natural desires for food, company, engagement with beauty, philosophy, etc. As a consequence, one's experiences and activities will be enjoyable: eating a piece of cheese, a conversation with a friend, the sight of a beautiful sky, and thinking through a philosophical argument will each bring unmitigated pleasure because one can become engrossed in them without fear, anxiety, or the distractions generated by one's unmet needs or a sense of frustration. This observation of Striker's is important. Famously, Epicurus distinguished so-called *katastematic* (or static) from *kinetic* (or dynamic) pleasures, with the former involving being in a stable, unperturbed state and

the latter involving the fleeting enjoyments involved in satisfying one's desires, such as eating when hungry, spending time with friends when one has a desire for company, etc. Some commentators, including for example Diogenes Laertius (10.136-7 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 118) and Cicero (2004, 2.29), have supposed that Epicurus valued only static pleasure. However, Striker's suggestion opens the door to a different, more appealing Epicurean view, on which both types of pleasure are valued and the static kind is valued in part because it forms a basis for unadulterated enjoyment of those dynamic pleasures that are compatible with the Epicurean lifestyle.

Third, there are the pleasures involved in a sense of control over one's life. If one has successfully followed the Epicurean strategy outlined, one's near-invulnerability is a result of one's correct theoretical reasoning (about the way the world is) and ethical reasoning (about the most choiceworthy type of life), as well as one's choices to shape one's desires and circumstances. In the tranquil state, one therefore feels in control of one's fate, or, as Epicurus puts it, one is "self-sufficient" (*LM* 130 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 114). Now, psychological research reports a positive link between a sense of control over one's life and self-reported happiness (Larson 1989; Myers and Diener 1995; Grob 2003). One reason for this link seems to be a direct impact of a sense of control on one's emotional state. In both non-human animals and people, there appear to be neurological mechanisms in which a lack of a sense of control leads to a stronger negative response to stressors such as physical harm, while a sense of control limits stress (Southwick and Southwick 2018). Moreover, having a sense of control fosters self-esteem and one's sense of satisfaction (Grob 2003). Finally, it seems (to me at least) that a sense of control is simply enjoyable in itself.

Fourth, the achievement of becoming tranquil through philosophy and prudent choice and avoidance generates a justified pride. As Epicurus writes:

"The study of nature (...) makes men modest and self-sufficient, taking pride in the good that lies in themselves, not in their estate" (*VS* 45 in Epicurus 1993, p. 81).

Moreover, once one has attained tranquillity, Epicurus suggests that one can take pleasure in the realization that one has rid oneself of the causes of torment:

"The limit of pleasure in the mind is produced by rationalizing those very things and their congeners which used to present the mind with its greatest fears" (*KD* 18 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 115).

Epicurus' follower Lucretius suggests that these pleasures involved in the comparison of one's tranquil state with one's previous state of trouble are enhanced by the contrast with non-Epicureans. He points out that one can feel glad that one does not share another's misfortune:

"When winds are troubling the sea, it is a pleasure to view from land another man's great struggles; (...) because it is a pleasure to observe from what troubles you yourself are free. (...) Pleasantest of all is to be master of those tranquil regions well-fortified on high by the teaching of the wise. From there you can look down on others and see them (...) straying in their quest for life: competing in talent, fighting over social class, striving day and night (...) to rise to the heights of wealth (...). O miserable minds of men, O unseeing hearts! Do you not see that nature screams for nothing but the removal of pain and the mind's enjoyment of the joyous sensation

when anxiety and fear have been taken away?" (*De Rerum Natura* [DRN] 2.1-61 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 120).

While Lucretius here seems to display a lack of compassion (as well as an unappealing sense of superiority), it is, I submit, possible to take an appropriate form of pleasure in the fact that one's situation is both better than it was and better than that of many others. Consider, for example, how one's joyful appreciation of a good relationship can be enhanced both by comparing it with one's previous, unhappy liaisons and by considering that many people are, regrettably, in unhappy relationships.

In sum, the tranquil state involves a multitude of pleasures: feeling secure and content; the pleasures that attend unperturbed experience and fully engaged activity; a sense of control over one's life; a sense of accomplishment; and, finally, the appreciation of the fact that one is better off than one's less tranquil past self and anxious others.

This answers the Cyrenaics' charge, quoted at the start of this Section, that Epicurus' conception of the limit of pleasure involves the "condition of a corpse". It also rebuts Cicero's objection that Epicurus' hedonism first sets us a goal (pleasure) which it then tells us we have no need to seek once pain and anxiety are removed. But what grounds can an Epicurean offer for the claim that the tranquil state yields the "greatest" pleasure or the most choiceworthy pleasurable life? We shall address this question in the next Section.

2. A Complete Life

How does Epicurus propose to rank different pleasures and pleasurable lives? One possibility would be to follow Jeremy Bentham (1823, Chapter IV) and value an episode of pleasure by its intensity and duration. This proposal has been taken up by contemporary Benthamites. Daniel Kahneman, for instance, simply asks people to rate the strength of positive and negative affects experienced in intervals of a standardised length on a numerical scale ranging from 0 (for "I do not feel the described affect at all") to 6 ("I feel it very intensely"). He then takes the overall quality of a person's life to be the time-weighted sum of these ratings for all positive affects minus the time-weighted sum for all negative affects (Kahneman, Wakker, and Sarin 1997; Kahneman et al. 2004).

It is clear, however, that Epicurus did not hold such a view (Mitsis 1988, chap. 1). One reason to reject it as an interpretation of Epicurus' thought is that together with the Deprivation Account it implies that more pleasurable time alive would make one's life better and that a death that prevented such time alive would make one's life overall worse. Not only would this make a nonsense of Epicurus' claim that "death is nothing to us", it is also inconsistent with his recommendation to seek a life of serenity. For the longing for an extended life of pleasure which would attend such a Benthamite view of the good life would naturally generate anxiety about death and render tranquillity impossible to achieve.

Indeed, in the following passage, Epicurus rejects a view which would regard a life of pleasure as always improved by its extension. Instead, he suggests, one can lead the best life in a limited period, even while gladly accepting another pleasurable day.

"The flesh places the limits of pleasure at infinity, and needs an infinite time to bring it about. But the intellect, by making a rational calculation of the end and the limit which govern the flesh, and by dispelling the fears about eternity, brings about the complete life, so that we no longer need infinite time. But neither does it shun pleasure, nor even when circumstances bring about our departure from life does it

suppose, as it perishes, that it has in any way fallen short of the best life" (KD 20-1 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 150).

My proposal is, then, that Epicurus takes those pleasures to be "greatest" that are constitutive of a best and complete life (cf. Warren 2004, pp. 130-5). Indeed, the pleasures of near-invulnerability and the notion of a complete life are intimately connected. For, as we have seen, a person who enjoys Epicurean peace of mind cannot have strong, central desires that they believe are likely to be thwarted by death. It is therefore a precondition for attaining and maintaining tranquillity that one believes that there is no more than a low chance that death will make one's life as a whole worse than it otherwise would have been. One part of the Epicurean strategy for meeting this condition is to structure one's aims so that, once one has become a tranquil sage, one has no motive to regard death as a comparative evil. This involves limiting one's future-oriented desires to those things for which one's continued survival will, as things stand, be instrumentally inert (such as the financial sustainability of one's community once one has made arrangements to ensure it after one's death) and to the aforementioned "escape desires" and "merely conditional desires" (Luper-Foy 1987). That is, *if* one lives to see another day, one will want to spend it untroubled and enjoyably, but one will not desire to live another day *in order to* spend more time in this manner.

This constellation of one's desires must, on Epicurus' psychology, align with one's view of one's good. The most secure route to tranquillity, therefore, must also involve believing that once one has attained it, further time alive would not make one's life as a whole better.

Given Epicurus' commitment throughout his writings to a truthful philosophy of nature and life, it is important to ensure that this conviction that one's life would be complete once one had achieved peace of mind would be correct and not merely a false belief that was useful for attaining tranquillity.

I propose that to establish the correctness of the sage's conviction that their life is complete, an Epicurean should appeal to the idea that it is a precondition for something being bad for a reasonable, thoughtful, and well-informed adult that it would thwart a desire of theirs.⁵ The idea is that for the deprivation of something (such as more time in a tranquil state) to be bad for a rational, well-informed, self-directed person, this person must be affirmatively engaged by the possible receipt of this thing; they must feel some pull towards receiving it (rather than the alternative in question). If lacking the thing in question is of no concern to them, then their receiving it is not better for them.⁶ Once one grants this assumption, death is not bad for an Epicurean sage, since they desire more time in the tranquil state merely conditionally and their other future-oriented desires are also

⁵ The claim is limited to adults in order to allow that death may be comparatively bad for young child who has not yet developed future-oriented desires that death could thwart. It is limited to cases of reasonable adults to allow that death could be bad for adults who through mental illness currently have no desires which death could thwart, but who would (re)acquire such desires if they were cured. For a defence of a stronger claim (without some of the limitations I impose), see Belshaw (2013).

⁶ A complication here is that, towards the end of this Section, I propose an Epicurean view on which correct understanding and the achievement of control over one's life contribute to the value of pleasures by amplifying them. On this hybrid "pleasure-and-achievement" view, lack of understanding, imprudence and lack of control are bad partly because they make one's pleasures less valuable than they otherwise would be. This view is compatible with taking it to be a precondition for something being bad that it thwarts a desire of a thoughtful, well-informed adult. For such an adult will, on the Epicurean view proposed, desire knowledge, prudence and control over their fate.

unthwartable by death. On this assumption, then, the Epicurean sage's desires make it the case that their life is complete once they achieve tranquillity.

The Epicurean complete life, then, is one in which one attains tranquillity and maintains it until death. But Epicurus doesn't merely state that this life is complete; he also calls it a "best" (most choiceworthy) life. The two ideas are, of course, not the same. For one might grant that the sage's life is complete when they attain tranquillity, but deny that one has sufficient reason to choose to become a sage. On what basis did Epicureans recommend the sage's life?

The first reason is, of course, that it is the most secure route to the pleasures of tranquillity. The latter are most reliably accessible to those who have curtailed their desires so that, once in the tranquil state, they have no need of further time. This, I take it, is the meaning of Epicurus' expression, quoted above, "He who has least need of tomorrow will most gladly greet tomorrow" (*F* 78 in Epicurus 1993, p. 100).

The second reason is comparative: as the quotation from Lucretius in the previous section makes clear, Epicureans believed that lives that are not tranquil are generally unhappy: due to their false beliefs about the nature of reality (especially their belief in a miserable after-life) and about what is worth seeking, people typically develop desires which are likely to be frustrated. They thereby render themselves hostage to fortune and make themselves sick with worry. A life of tranquillity is, therefore, far more pleasurable than the common alternative lives of their time.

The third reason is that the Epicurean tranquil life goes a long way towards meeting ancient Greek criteria for the good life, or *eudaimonia*. Indeed, as argued in Annas (1987, 1993) and Mitsis (1988), Epicurus' view appears designed to meet the conditions for *eudaimonia* specified by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which are that this life should be:

- (i) Desired for its own sake (and not for the sake of anything else);
- (ii) Typically human, i.e., involving the exercise of theoretical and practical reason;
- (iii) Maximally in our control; and
- (iv) Sufficient, in the sense that it contains all those things that by themselves makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing, including from the perspective of one's family, friends and co-citizens (Aristotle 1999, Book I).

From our discussion, it will be clear why Epicureans could make a decent case that their view satisfied the first three criteria. The tranquil life satisfies the first criterion because it yields substantial pleasures, which are desired in themselves, and minimizes pains, which are undesirable in themselves. It satisfies the second criterion because the pleasures of near-invulnerability are generated by philosophical inquiry into nature and the good life that leads to correct beliefs about both, by the crafting of one's desires, and by choosing a way of life that will ensure their non-frustration. (It therefore is immune to Aristotle's [1999, 1095b20] criticism of hedonism that it recommends "a life fit for grazing animals".) It satisfies the third criterion, because it involves rendering oneself near-immune to contingencies. Of course, the ability to attain tranquillity requires the ability to arrive at the Epicurean understanding of the world and the capacity and time to shape one's desires and adjust one's living arrangements according to its tenets. In this sense, it requires the moderate good fortune of living for a substantial period of time under social and economic

circumstances that permit such inquiry and this way of life. But once these conditions are met, attainment of the good life is very substantially under one's control.

It is less clear, however, what reasons one could offer for thinking that Epicureanism satisfies the fourth criterion, which specifies that an *eudaimon* life must "lack nothing", including from the standpoint of "parents, children, wife, (...) friends, and fellow citizens" (Aristotle 1999, 1097a10-12). Crucially, this criterion is not just about how a life feels from the inside, but about whether the person whose life it is will be a good adult child, a good parent, spouse, and friend, and an upright resident of a polity. Indeed, some have argued that no Epicurean view could satisfy this criterion, because it is incompatible with genuine affection for others, since concern for them will make one vulnerable (see, e.g., Luper-Foy 1987, p. 244; Luper 1996, pp. 144-5).

While it is true that concern for others can be a source of vulnerability, this does not imply that an Epicurean can have no such concern. The clearest case of Epicurean concern for others involves friendship. The texts assert that friendship is a basic need and "by far the greatest [thing] wisdom acquires for the blessedness of life" (*KD* 27 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 126). While, on the Epicurean view, friendship originates from each person's realization that they need the assurance of companionship, support, and care that friendship brings, Epicureans also recognize that it is not possible to be friends without genuine affection for one's companions, so that one must seek out appropriate companions and cultivate genuine affection for them. And, once one loves a friend, one will, out of love, take on risks or great pains for them (*KD* 27-8; *VS* 23, 28, 34, 39, 52, 66, and 78; Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1111b; all in Long and Sedley 1987, pp. 126-7; Cicero 2004, 1.65-70).⁷ What is true, however, is that since one's friends' misfortunes will cause one distress, for friendship to be compatible with one's tranquillity, one must choose friends who will be unlikely to come to grave harm. In other words, an Epicurean will find it advisable to choose as friends fellow Epicureans, who are equally devoted to becoming nearly invulnerable.

The case regarding one's family is less clear-cut. As mentioned, Epicurus seems to have cautioned against marriage and children (Brennan 1996). But if one comes to Epicureanism having started a family, then the Epicurean assumption is that one will have natural affection and concern for them, so that one would be distressed if one's family members came to harm (Lucretius *DRN* 5.1011-27 in Long and Sedley 1987, p. 127). Moreover, it is plausible that it would typically do great violence to one's character to cut oneself off from those one loves. Therefore, Epicurean advice to someone with a family would be to find circumstances in which one's loved ones will be unlikely to come to harm—which, again, is likely to be by entering an Epicurean community, where one can form bonds of friendship with those who will help one look after one's loved ones. (As, for example, Epicurus took care in his will of the needs of his friend Metrodorus' children; see *F* 36 in Epicurus 1993, p. 95.) Regarding the relationship with one's parents, an Epicurean would, I think, similarly appeal to natural affection to explain how a good Epicurean would be motivated to proper filial care.

Finally, with respect to fellow citizens, Epicurus argued that the tranquil life could be lived only by a person who honoured the basic norms of justice, which involve abstaining from harming others and respecting conventions assigning property rights (*KD* 31-7 in Long and

⁷ In this sense, the Epicurean view of friendship seems close to what Railton (1984, pp. 143-45) calls the "sophisticated hedonists'" attitude to friendship.

Sedley 1987, p. 125). Other citizens would, therefore, have nothing to fear from Epicurean neighbours and could count on them to abide by all the norms that are essential to the functioning of a decent polity.

There is, of course, much more to be said on the question whether the Epicurean view outlined satisfies Aristotle's demand that the life outlined should contain enough of all that is good in human life (for further discussion, see Mitsis 1988, chaps. 2 and 3; Annas 1993, pp. 236-44). A full discussion of this question lies beyond the scope of this paper. But I hope to have established that Epicureans had substantial arguments to regard the tranquil life as not merely complete, but also as recognizably good, at least in important respects.

In sum, the view outlined is as follows.

Epicurean good and complete life: Through theoretical and ethical reasoning (which helps one come to a more accurate picture of reality and of the good life), through wise shaping of one's character, and through prudent choices regarding one's relationships and circumstances, one renders oneself nearly invulnerable and attains the pleasures of tranquillity. Once the tranquil state is achieved, more time in this state does not make one's life any better than it would be if one died after a shorter period in this state, because one desires life in this state only conditionally. In this sense, one's life is complete upon attaining the tranquil state. Nonetheless, life in this state is welcome and good, since it is both enjoyable and satisfies one's conditional desire to live in that state rather than with anxiety or in pain.

While this view seems to align with Epicurean texts, its consideration of the ways in which tranquillity is achieved may seem out of place.⁸ After all, hedonism is commonly understood as the view that only the felt quality of experience matters, not how it is generated (see, e.g., Nagel 1970; Nozick 1974, pp. 44-5). On this understanding, it should be a matter of indifference whether one attains the pleasures of tranquillity through careful philosophical reasoning to a correct conclusion and through wise choice and avoidance or whether, instead, one attains tranquillity through poor reasoning, the acquisition of false but comforting beliefs, and luck.

It is indeed possible to see Epicurus' repeated emphasis on the need to acquire correct beliefs and control over one's fate as a mere consequence of the fact that he believed that, as it happens, such beliefs and control are more conducive to tranquillity than the falsehoods believed by the majority in his time. However, I submit that there is a different interpretation, on which the successful exercise of one's capacities for theoretical and ethical reasoning and the attainment of control contribute to the value of the tranquil state and its pleasures. For, consistently with Epicurus' claims that pleasure is, in itself, always good, and pain, in itself, always bad; that experience is a precondition for anything being either good or bad in itself; and that the tranquil life should be our final end, one can hold that pleasures that are the result of our successful exercise of our rational capacities and that are consequent on attaining self-control are more valuable than pleasures that are not. On this view, the successful exercise of one's capacities for rational belief formation and self-governance and the attainment of control amplify the value of pleasures, while their absence dampens their value. While rationality and control cannot render a pleasure valueless (or bad), they can render a particular experience more valuable than it would be if

⁸ I thank Anthony Price for pressing this objection.

they were lacking. Someone who becomes tranquil through believing, without adequate basis, that an amulet purchased from a shaman has made them invulnerable, who happens to meet with good fortune to the end of their days, and who dies happy because they credulously believe they will go to heaven leads a good, because pleasant, life, on the proposed Epicurean view. However, it would not count as a best life, since it lacks the achievements involved in acquiring correct beliefs and in mastering one's fate.

There is, I think, some reason for taking this hybrid pleasure-and-achievement view to be Epicurus's.⁹ For towards the end of the *Letter to Menoeceus*, after exalting "sober reasoning" and "prudence", he writes:

"the wise man (...) thinks that it is preferable to remain prudent and suffer ill fortune than to enjoy good luck while acting foolishly. It is better in human actions that the sound decision fail than that the rash decision turn out well due to luck" (*LM* 135 in Epicurus 1993, p. 68).

It is challenging to make sense of these claims if one attributes to Epicurus a standard hedonistic view on which only the quality of a person's experience matters—for it seems the fool in Epicurus' scenario is likely to have a better experience than the wise person. Of course, one could attempt to render Epicurus' claims consistent with a purely hedonistic view by supposing that he had in mind that, in the long run, the fool will suffer and the wise will thrive. But, I submit, a more natural reading of the passage is that possessing correct understanding and being prudent contribute to making one's life good.

A further advantage of such a hybrid, pleasure-and-achievement view is that it renders Epicureanism immune from two well-known objections to "pure" hedonism. The best-known of these runs as follows. If, as pure hedonism posits, all that matters is how our life feels "from the inside", then one ought to choose a life of happy illusions (generated by, say, false friends, drugs, or an experience-inducing machine) over even a marginally less pleasurable life of genuine achievements which is in touch with reality. But one ought not to choose the former. Therefore, pure hedonism is mistaken (see Nagel 1970; Nozick 1974, pp. 44-5).

The second, related criticism is that Epicurean ethics is mistaken in valuing our activity only instrumentally. As Annas puts it:

"If we are happy by achieving a condition of *ataraxia* [tranquillity], then our happiness resides not in what we actually do or produce, but in our condition of being untroubled about it. There is much to ancient criticisms that for Epicurus our final end is too passive" (1993, p. 347).

The Epicurean view proposed is immune to both these objections, since it values both the quality of our experience and attaining genuine understanding and self-management through rational activity. (As mentioned, the rational achievement components have no value independently of experience but function only to "amplify"—if present—or "mute"—if absent—the value of the pleasure they produce.) It would therefore regard a life of

⁹ Mitsis (1988, pp. 54-5) notes that Epicurus apparently appeals to non-hedonistic criteria in order to provide reasons for his claim that the pleasures of the tranquil life are more choiceworthy than those of a life which seeks fleeting, intense pleasures. But he does not formulate, or attribute to Epicurus, the view I here outline.

passive enjoyment that is based on an illusion as inferior to a somewhat less pleasurable life generated by philosophical activity and prudent choice.

3. Death

We are now in a position to spell out the proposed Epicurean argument regarding the conditions under which a person's death is not an evil for them.

1. Pleasures, taken by themselves, are always good for a person and nothing can be good in itself for a person if it does not involve pleasure for them; pains, taken by themselves, are always bad for a person and nothing can be bad in itself for a person if it does not involve pain for them.

2. A person's pleasures and pains cease at death.

Therefore,

C1. Death is not bad in itself for a person.

3. The best life for a person involves attaining the pleasures of tranquillity through philosophy, shaping their character and desires, and prudent choice and avoidance.

4. For an Epicurean, who achieves this tranquillity in part by ensuring that, once they have attained tranquillity, they desire more time in the tranquil state only conditionally, this life is complete. For a person with these desires, a long remaining life continuously spent in the tranquil state would be no better than a short remaining life spent in this state. Nor would any further life involving some combination of time in the tranquil state and time spent outside it make their life any better.

5. A person's death at a time is comparatively bad for them just in case they would have instead lived a better life had they not died at that time.

Therefore,

C2. For an Epicurean who has achieved tranquillity, death is not comparatively bad.

Therefore,

C3. For an Epicurean who has achieved tranquillity, death is neither bad in itself nor comparatively bad.¹⁰

The final conclusion is, then, that "death is nothing [bad] to us [tranquil Epicureans]". It is noteworthy that this argument concerns only the Epicurean sage's inability to be harmed by death. (This interpretation fits, of course, with the fact that this claim appears in a letter to a fellow Epicurean.) It is simply silent on the question whether death is bad for non-Epicureans.

Moreover, this argument is compatible with the conclusion that death is comparatively bad for Epicureans if it comes before they achieve their aim of achieving tranquillity and if they would have attained tranquillity had they not died then (Annas 1993, pp. 346-7).¹¹ In this respect, the proposed Epicurean view differs from the interpretation of Epicurus offered by

¹⁰ Burri (2019) argues that death can also be bad if it frustrates one's agential goals. It will be clear that for the tranquil Epicurean, death will not be bad in this sense either.

¹¹ For reasons outlined in Burri (2019), it might also be bad for them because it thwarts their agency.

a number of other authors. Luper, for example, concludes that since they must be indifferent to death *at any time*:

“Epicureans cannot allow themselves any motivation to live [and] they must ensure that they never think that it would be good to live. A conception of a good or worthwhile life is a description of a life that would be good to live: such a conception Epicureans completely lack” (Luper-Foy 1987, p. 243; cf. 1996, pp. 141-2).

Likewise, Stephen Rosenbaum (1990, p. 36) writes:

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

Now, Luper and Rosenbaum are correct that adoption of the view of the good and complete life outlined here would imply both that death could sometimes be bad for an Epicurean—namely, one aspiring to become tranquil—and that the prospect of failing in their aim to reach it could generate anxiety. However, I submit that Luper and Rosenbaum’s suppositions that death can never be bad for an Epicurean and that Epicurean aspirations must never lead to anxiety are inessential to Epicureanism. Indeed, as James Warren (2004, chap. 4) details, the idea that achieving the best life takes time (and that death on the way to achieving it is bad) is common in the Epicurean tradition. For example, the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara writes:

“it is reasonable for this reason [viz., in order to attain the Epicurean complete life] to try to live for as long as possible and to think that for this reason some young people die miserably. For it is the mark of a man of understanding to desire to live for a certain period of time in order to fulfil the innate and natural desires and grasp the whole of the most appropriate way of life possible. As a result, being satisfied with goods and rejecting every disturbance which desires cause, he comes upon tranquillity” (*De Morte [DM]* XIII.36-XIV.14 in Warren 2004, p. 149).¹²

In sum, on the view proposed here, attaining insight, independence from fortune and tasting the pleasures of invulnerability all provide Epicureans with a motivation to live (indeed, to keep going in the face of difficulties). It is only Epicureans who have accomplished these aims who can invariably face death with equanimity.

4. Conclusion

From the ancient world to the present, Epicurean views of pleasure and the complete life have been widely derided as absurd or without foundation, and one of their key arguments about the badness of death has been dismissed as obviously invalid. As we have seen, some have gone so far as to deny that Epicureans possess a conception of the good life. Even commentators who have credited Epicureans with a coherent outlook have criticized their view of the good life as “unduly passive”.

¹² Of course, Philodemus holds that once tranquillity is attained, the sage’s life is complete:

“The one who understands, having grasped that he is capable of achieving everything sufficient for the good life, immediately and for the rest of his life walks about already ready for burial, and enjoys the single day as if it were an eternity” (*DM* XXXVIII.14-19 in Warren 2004, p. 152).

I have outlined a hybrid, pleasure-and-achievement Epicurean view which answers these critics. On this view, one has a good life when, through philosophy and prudent management of one's desires and circumstances, one makes oneself substantially invulnerable. As a consequence, one becomes tranquil and enjoys the diverse pleasures afforded by a simple life with one's Epicurean friends. Importantly, the shaping of one's desires in order to render oneself invulnerable involves desiring to attain the tranquil state, but then desiring more time alive in this state only conditionally: once one has become tranquil one wants to remain so if one remains alive, but one does not want to remain alive in order to spend more time in the tranquil state. Because one desires more time in the tranquil state in this way, one's life is complete upon becoming tranquil and death can no longer harm one.

Crucially, on this view, while pleasures are always good, and nothing is good that does not involve pleasure, the value of a pleasurable life depends in part on the manner in which it is attained. The pleasures of tranquillity are more precious when they are the result of understanding aspects of nature and the good life and of intelligent craftsmanship of one's desires.

Naturally, I do not pretend to have answered all objections that could be raised against the proposed Epicurean view of the good life. One particularly troubling shortcoming of the view is that it urges shielding oneself from people whose vulnerability to harm would cause one anxiety or pain if one were to care deeply for them. Another is that tranquillity requires refraining from serious commitment to projects the success of which is substantially uncertain, and the failure of which would cause one distress. And, of course, making oneself invulnerable to death requires that, aside from the project of achieving tranquillity in the right way, one has no projects which require one's continued existence and no loved ones whose happiness substantially depends on one being around. In other words, a central difficulty with the outlined Epicurean view is that the "triumph over fate" that it celebrates¹³ is achieved at the cost of abandoning a great many ways of engaging with and caring for people and the world, so as to occupy only territory which one can be confident to hold come what may.¹⁴ A different, perhaps more meritorious stance would attempt to hold more ground in full knowledge that one may end up defeated.¹⁵

Nonetheless, I have argued, the Epicurean life of untroubled, simple, and convivial pleasures achieved through control over one's life through reasoned inquiry and intelligent character formation involves substantial goods. Epicureanism therefore provides a model of a philosophical life which is recognizably good in important respects for the one who lives it and which would remain good if it continued, but which is nonetheless immune to harm from death.

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¹³ "I have anticipated you, Fortune, and have barred your means of entry. We shall depart from life declaring in a song of triumph how well we have lived" (*VS* 47, in Epicurus 1993, p. 81).

¹⁴ See Luper (1996) for an argument to this conclusion.

¹⁵ This is George Orwell's critique of those who seek equanimity through disengagement: "The essence of being human is that (...) one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals." (Orwell 1968, p. 467). I thank Susanne Burri for this quotation.

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