

## EPICURUS' SECOND REMEDY: "DEATH IS NOTHING TO US"

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Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
The valiant never taste of death but once.  
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,  
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;  
Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come when it will come.  
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II, ii, 32-37)

That death is complete extinction is the message forcefully driven home by the Epicurean analysis of the soul as a temporary amalgam of atomic particles . . . The moral corollary, that you should not let the fear of death ruin your life, is a cardinal tenet of Epicurean ethics. (Long and Sedley 1987:153)

The second remedy of the *tetrapharmakos* concerns the second of the two great fears to which man is subject: death. Frischer (1982:208) observes that the Epicureans regarded death as "more damaging to peace of mind than all other fears except fear of the gods". The Epicurean position is stated clearly in the surviving writings of the Master, and it is necessary to go directly to the *ipsissima verba* as our starting point, and then to augment our understanding of Epicurus' words with further passages from later Epicureans and other philosophers. In these writings we shall see that death, as the material dissolution of body and soul, is a process at once natural, inevitable, and final.

### 1. *Primary Sources: Epicurus on Body, Soul, and Death*

The first thing which Epicurus strove to establish in his psychological theory was the complete and permanent loss of consciousness at death. (Long 1986:49)

In order to comprehend the Epicurean view of the nature of death, it is essential to gain an understanding of the nature of the soul-body relation according to Epicurus, since it forms the basis for his assertions regarding the irrationality of our fears concerning our own death.

Let us consider first how the soul is distributed throughout the body and therefore possesses unique abilities. According to Epicurus the soul is material, a body consisting of "fine parts distributed throughout the aggregate, and most closely resembling breath with a certain admixture of heat, in one way resembling breath and in another resembling heat" (*Ep. Hdt.* 63=IG I-2).<sup>1</sup> Epicurus mentions also a third part, much finer than the other two "and because of this . . . more closely in harmony with the rest of the aggregate too. All of this is revealed by the abilities of the soul, its feelings, its ease of motion, its thought processes, and the things whose removal leads to our death" (*Ep. Hdt.* 63=IG I-2). The soul is also the seat of sense-perception, acquiring this ability by virtue of its containment and thorough integration within the body:

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1. The following abbreviations will be used throughout the text: IG=Inwood, B. and Gerson, L. P. 1998. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*. Indianapolis: Hackett; LS=Long, A. A. and Sedley, D. N. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. 1. *Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

That is why, when the soul has departed, it does not have sense-perception. For it could not have acquired this power all by itself, but something else which came into being with it provided the body [with this power]; and this other thing, through the power actualized in itself by its motion, immediately produced for itself a property of sense-perception and then gave it (because of their close proximity and harmonious relationship) to the body too . . . (*Ep. Hdt.* 64=IG I-2)

Furthermore, not only does its enclosure and distribution within the body enable the soul's power of sense-perception, the body as a whole also shares in this power.<sup>2</sup>

Epicurus goes on in his letter to indicate that the soul's powers of perception are paramount, and that "the soul, as long as it is in [the body], will never lack sense-perception", but that a body bereft of its soul will lack these powers. Therefore, once the entire body is dispersed along with the soul, as in death, the soul will have lost its powers of sense-perception and motion. It is impossible in this case, says Epicurus, even to imagine the soul with its customary powers while no longer an integral part of the entire aggregate (*Ep. Hdt.* 65=IG I-2).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, Epicurus draws a conceptual limit to the term "incorporeal" by prohibiting its application to anything but void, for only void can "be conceived of as independently existing . . . And the void can neither act nor be acted upon but merely provides [the possibility of] motion through itself for bodies" (*Ep. Hdt.* 67=IG I-2). Thus, argues Epicurus, it is an utter misconception to regard the soul as incorporeal, for this would rob it of its essential characteristics — namely, the ability to perceive, and to act and be acted upon (*Ep. Hdt.* 67=IG I-2).

For Epicurus, then, body and soul are material entities, so integrated as to account for the salient features of living men — intentions, perceptions, actions, etc. — yet subject, like all atomic structures in the universe, to a dissolution which constitutes the death of these same creatures.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Lucretius, "The mind . . . is a natural growth: it is composed of a body that had first to be born, and it cannot remain intact for all time" (*Rer. nat.* 5.59-61; trans. Latham 1951:172-3). Dissolving into the eternal flux, the ephemeral mind and body of man return to their origin.

## 2. *The Fear of Death*

For no one knows whether death may not be the greatest good that can happen to man. But men fear it as if they knew quite well that it was the greatest of evils. (Plato, *Apology* 17.29; trans. Cumming 1956:35).

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2. Lucretius, distinguishing "spirit" and "mind", tells us that they are "so conjoined as to constitute a single substance" (*Rer. nat.* 3.421-4; trans. Latham 1951:109). Regarding the composition of the mind he states, "Since, therefore, the substance of the mind has been found to be extraordinarily mobile, it must consist of particles exceptionally small and smooth and round" (*Rer. nat.* 3.203-5; trans. Latham 1951:102). He goes on to depict the human mind as consisting of wind, warmth, air, and a nameless mobile force which is the vital element of the vital spirit lurking at man's core (*Rer. nat.* 3.262-81; trans. Latham 1951:104).
  3. According to Lucretius, although the atoms of the body will soon enough be dispersed, at the moment of death the body of the deceased remains essentially intact, albeit lifeless: "Death leaves everything there except vital sentience and warmth" (*Rer. nat.* 3.214-5; trans. Latham 1951:102).
  4. For Lucretius it is the exodus from the body of the atoms of mind and intellect which determines death: "While mind remains life remains" (*Rer. nat.* 3.402; trans. Latham 1951:108). In other words, when death has come, mind or sentience no longer remains; the atoms constituting mind and spirit have returned to the void.

Men fear death, as children fear to go into the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other. (Bacon, *Essays* 1812:6).

There are two principal manifestations of the fear of death.<sup>5</sup> First, there is the fear of everlasting *post mortem* survival and, consequently, of eternal punishment, a fear which is effectively confronted by Epicurean arguments concerning men's fear of gods.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the atomistic philosophy of Epicurus leaves no room for *post mortem* survival, since both mind and body are subject to the same processes of dissolution as everything else in the universe, save the gods. Secondly, there is the fear of death as personal extinction, a fear independent of the eschatological considerations intrinsic to the fear of *post mortem* survival: "For the fear of going to the underworld is equalled by the fear of going nowhere" (Seneca, *Ep. mor.* 82.16; trans. Gummere 1930:251). A consequence of this fear is highlighted by Camus' famous pronouncement: "There is but one truly serious philosophical question and that is suicide" (1975:11). In other words, it may be questioned whether it is even possible to live a meaningful life in view of the fact that it may be cut off at any instant, one's desires, plans, relationships suddenly ended once and for all. Another consequence, and for some undoubtedly the greatest source of anxiety, is fear of the death of loved ones, especially their premature death, as well as the fear of similar consequences to others of one's own death.

Epicurus suggests the importance of trying to preserve equanimity in the face of death-as-something-to-be-feared, when he conjoins this notion to the other cardinal goals of Epicurean philosophy in a portrait of the good man which embodies the *tetrapharmakos*: "For who do you believe is better than a man who has pious opinions about the gods, is always fearless about death, has reasoned out the natural goal of life and understands that the limit of good things is easy to achieve completely and easy to provide, and that the limit of bad things either has a short duration or causes little trouble?" (*Ep. Men.* 133=IG I-4).

Elsewhere Epicurus depicts the fear of death as a substantial source of anguish in several manifestations: the intellect's fear of death (*KD* 10=IG I-5), suspicions concerning death as an evil (*KD* 11=IG I-5), apprehensions regarding the limitations on pleasure imposed by finitude (*KD* 20=IG I-5), the power of communal living as a buffer against grief suffered upon premature death of loved ones (*KD* 40=IG I-5), man's universal subjection to death (*Sent. vat.* 31=IG I-6), and even the possibility of being driven to death by fear of death itself.

With respect to death there is one unavoidable problem for man: All men must die; there is no escape. As Epicurus puts it, "One can attain security against other things, but when it comes to death all men live in a city without walls" (*Sent. vat.* 31=IG I-6). This inescapable fact is the ultimate ground of the following fears associated with death.

## 2.1 Death as survival and torment

Lucretius, following in Epicurus' footsteps, discusses both the ways in which men fear death and the consequences of those fears. He speaks of the fear of death caused by an imagined Hell, but points out that such fears are unfounded, for it is in *this* life that men are so oppressed by their own unbridled passions that they live as *if* in Hell: "As for all those

5. Here we are not considering that fear which has evolved as a protective mechanism for the species: "certain types of fear, by stimulating men (and animals) to take avoiding action, contribute to survival . . . To cultivate such fears may be a rational course of action for a man or a society to take" (Furley 1986:84).

6. For arguments that the fear of death was not as ubiquitous as Epicurus and others have suggested, see Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.48 and *ND* 1.86, 2.5. Lucretius' reply to such accusations is that the truth about men's fears is to be found in moments of adversity rather than in words uttered in calm circumstances (*Rer. nat.* 3.57).

torments that are said to take place in the depths of Hell, they are actually present here and now, in our own lives” (*Rer. nat.* 3.978; trans. Latham 1951:126). One who accepts these words of Lucretius may yet fear survival, not because of the torment that lies waiting, but because of the otherwise unknown nature of such survival. The Epicurean response to this is that there is no survival, hence nothing about it to be unknown. Death for the individual person is simply an experiential blank, as was that person’s pre-natal nonexistence; this is a reflection of the symmetry of nonexistence with respect to man’s brief existence.

## 2.2 Death as a final (and possibly painful) end

Segal (1990:12) comments on Lucretius’ view on death as follows: “For Lucretius, as an Epicurean thinker, death is a scientifically understood process, the dissolution of atoms. But death has another, darker side, hidden in the shadows: fear of the painful process of dying through massive physical injury and fears about annihilation, the total extinction of one’s self, dissolution into nothingness”. Epicurus, recognising this fear, has the following to say: “[O]ne must . . . conceive that the worst disturbance occurs in human souls . . . because they fear that very lack of sense-perception which occurs in death . . .” (*Ep. Hdt.* 81=IG I-2).

## 2.3 Death as a degradation of life’s value

Is happiness possible in a mortal life? This question embodies the notion that the value of life is degraded by the fact that death awaits us all and will not be put off. Camus’ identification of suicide as the fundamental philosophical question reflects this fear. Epicurus recognised the possibility of such an absolute flight from existence: “The many sometimes flee death as the greatest of bad things and sometimes choose it as a relief from the bad things in life (*Ep. Men.* 125=IG I-4). Yet Epicurus reproaches a longing for death as much as he does a fear of death: “[I]t is absurd to pursue death because you are weary of life, when you have made death worth pursuing by your way of life . . . So great is the folly, nay madness, of men that some are driven to death by the fear of death” (Seneca, *Ep. mor.* 24.22-23=IG I-150).

## 2.4 Death as the end of (or pain to) loved ones

Euripides asks rhetorically, “What greater grief can there be for mortals, than to see our own children, ash and bone” (*Suppliant Women* 1071-3; trans. Warren and Scully 1995:59). (In fact, it is precisely this worst of punishments that Medea inflicts on her husband, Jason, in Euripides’ *Medea*.) The question also arises: “How will my family and my dearest friends cope with my (especially premature) death?” In an insecure world, such a question assumes significant proportions.

## 2.5 Death, fear, and consequences

Later Epicureans continued to recognise the fundamental importance of the second strand of the *tetrapharmakos*. Philodemus speaks of death as something to be on guard against, of the importance of having learned “to bear up against natural pains and . . . death” (*On Piety* 72.2080-90; trans. Obbink 1996:249). He also mentions man’s apprehension concerning his natural end: “. . . humans have the fear of death . . .” (*On Piety* 9.240-2; trans. Obbink 1996:123). Diogenes of Oenoanda writes of “. . . the [vain] fear of [death]” (fr. 2; trans.

Smith 1993:367). In another fragment he notes the two main fears that man is prey to: "Well what are the disturbing emotions? [They are] fears — of the gods, of death . . ." (fr. 34; trans. Smith 1993:385).

Lucretius describes men as running away from themselves, filled with self-hatred, ". . . no one knowing what he really wants and everyone for ever trying to get away from where he is, as though mere locomotion could throw off the load" (*Rer. nat.* 3.1057-9; trans. Latham 1951:128). The source of this anxious self-loathing turns out to be fear of the death that awaits all men. This is what initiates the escapist mania he describes, and its consequences are ambition, greed, mistrust, etc., the "running sores of life . . . fed in no small measure by the fear of death" (*Rer. nat.* 3.59-82; trans. Latham 1951:97-8).

Thus, the fear of death was a significant anxiety-producing factor in Epicurus' time — a sickness of the soul, requiring *therapeia* — along with fear of the gods, and that is precisely why Epicurus and the Epicureans who followed took great pains to demonstrate through both philosophical argument and a variety of spiritual exercises that man need not fear death, nor, as a result, allow its waiting hands to snatch away from him (in the midst of life) the opportunity to achieve tranquillity and happiness — to live, in other words, a good life. But is such a thing possible, and if so, how?

### 3. *That death is nothing to us*

It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us await it everywhere. Premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom. He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. . . . So I have formed the habit of having death continually present, not merely in my imagination, but in my mouth. (Montaigne, *Essays*; trans. Frame 1960:1:81, 84).

Let us look more closely at a passage from Epicurus already quoted above: "[O]ne must also conceive that the worst disturbance occurs in human souls . . . because they fear that very lack of sense-perception which occurs in death, *as though it were relevant to them*" (*Ep. Hdt.* 81=IG I-2; my emphasis). Here Epicurus clearly indicates the irrelevance of death to man, a theme which constitutes the second strand of the *tetrapharmakos*. How can death, that most salient fact of human existence, be irrelevant to man? For an answer to this question, we must look further into the surviving writings of Epicurus as well as those of Lucretius.

*KD 2* gives us the most succinct expression of the Epicurean position regarding the fear of death: "Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us" (IG I-5). In accordance with the atomistic physics of Epicurus, then, the death of men (as we have noted above, in 4.2) is the dissolution of an atomic structure, one which constitutes the end of the knowing subject. With this dissolution comes an end to all sense-experience — the *modus operandi* of the human mind — the means by which the objective material world is known. Thus, the sense-experience of man, like his body, is a necessarily finite phenomenon.

Lucretius echoes the very same Epicurean message of *KD 2*: "[D]eath is nothing to us and no concern of ours, since our tenure of the mind is mortal . . . So, when we shall be no more — when the union of body and spirit that engenders us has been disrupted — to us, who shall then be nothing, nothing by any hazard will happen any more at all. Nothing will have power to stir our senses, not though earth be fused with sea and sea with sky" (*Rer. nat.* 3.830-42;

trans. Latham 1951:121).<sup>7</sup> Once again, it is the lack of sense-experience that defines the nothingness of man in death.

Epicurus' view of death is treated at greater length in his letter to Menoeceus than in any other of his surviving writings.<sup>8</sup> Its essence is the same as that of *KD* 2, but here it is more fully developed:

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter of contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality. (*Ep. Men.* 125=IG I-4)

All of our judgements concerning good and bad are based on, and refer to, sense-experience. Hence, it makes sense for a living man to say "Nutritious food is good for me" or "Gambling is bad for me", but it makes no sense for him to say "Death is bad for me", since death is not something which will be part of his sense-experience: it will, on the contrary, be a "privation of sense-experience", and therefore beyond any relevance to him. Yet how does "a correct knowledge of death" remove one's "longing for immortality"? Epicurus goes on to report that "there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life" (*Ep. Men.* 126=IG I-4). Thus, if there is nothing fearful in the absence of life, one need not long for immortality as a remedy of fear; for death will be merely absence of experience, nothingness.<sup>9</sup>

Epicurus augments his argument against the fear of death, "the most frightening of bad things", and reiterates that death is nothing to us, for "when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist" (*Ep. Men.* 126=IG I-4). In other words, while we live we would be foolish indeed to dwell upon death and thereby allow it to prevent our living a good life; for death is irrelevant while we live and, once we have died, death is equally irrelevant, since we no longer exist to undergo any experiences.<sup>10</sup>

The absence of sensation in death implies the absence of pain. Thus, since death is not a painful state, it is not rational for one to anticipate its pain. Epicurus would call this

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7. Diogenes of Oenoanda expresses similar thoughts when he declares, "I have no fear on account of the Tityuses and Tantaluses whom some describe in Hades, nor do I shudder [when I reflect upon] the decomposition of the body, [being convinced that we have no feeling, once the] soul [is without sensation] . . ." (fr. 73; trans. Smith 1993:402). See also Lucretius, *Rer. nat.* 3.894-930.
  8. Epicurus surely argued in greater detail concerning the fear of death in some of his major works, but beyond the letter to Menoeceus, little of his work survives. Fortunately, Lucretius allots an entire book of *De rerum natura* to "Life and Mind" and to the problem of the fear of death. Preuss (1994:53), referring to *Rer. nat.* 3.417-829, concludes that "the battery of arguments for the mortality of the soul given by Lucretius is probably a fairly orthodox report of many of them". Hutchinson (1994:iv), however, reminds us regarding Lucretius' *De rerum natura* that "it is not possible to know exactly how reliable it is as a source for the views of Epicurus, since the so-called *Major Summary* (a detailed summary of Epicurus' thirty-seven-volume *On Nature*), on which it seems to have been based, has entirely perished".
  9. Commenting on the conclusion to Philodemus' *De morte*, Asmis (1990:2393) notes that he "places all humans on the same level: all inhabit a city that is unfortified against death . . . everyone is ephemeral . . . Therefore, we should prepare ourselves mentally for death, so that when the time comes, we will die without panic, knowing that we have enjoyed life and will no longer have any sensation".
  10. Preuss (1994:52) puts it "in a Parmenidean way" as follows: "[D]eath is nothing because we cannot be dead. The dead do not exist and therefore cannot be anything, even dead. Quite literally there is no one who is dead. If being dead is a state or condition, then no one can ever be in that state or condition".

unnecessary anguish, and Epicurean therapy would remove it through promoting a correct understanding of death. Epicurus concludes: "Thus, he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely anticipated" (*Ep. Men.* 125=IG I-4).

Still less prudent is to attempt to avoid the vicissitudes of life by seeking death as a relief. Worst of all are those — for whom Epicurus has only scorn — who claim that the best is never to have been born, but once having been born the next best is to exit life as soon as possible (*Ep. Men.* 126-7=IG I-4). True wisdom vanquishes both rejection of and fear of death: the wise man is afraid neither to live nor to die, and he will concern himself not with living the longest life but rather the most pleasant life. In fact, says Epicurus, "the same kind of practice produces a good life and a good death" (*Ep. Men.* 126=IG I-4). Such a life and death are possible only for those who have internalized a proper understanding of the true nature of the world.

The distinction between pleasures of the flesh and the higher pleasure of *ataraxia* is the basis for Epicurus' assertion that "[u]nlimited time and limited time contain equal [amounts of] pleasure, if one measures its limits by reasoning" (*KD* 19=IG I-5). He goes on to explain that while only an unlimited time could provide the unlimited pleasures of the flesh, "the intellect, reasoning out the goal and limit of the flesh and dissolving the fears of eternity, provided us with the perfect way of life and had no further need of unlimited time" (*KD* 20). To put it another way, the "perfect way of life" means "rejoicing at each instant that we have acceded to being, and knowing that death cannot diminish the plenitude of the pleasure of being" (Hadot 2002:197-8).

Let us now consider some of Lucretius' remarks regarding fear of death. In response to the idea that adding a significant measure to our lives would lessen our fear of death, he says that such a prolongation "cannot subtract or whittle away one jot from the duration of death. The time after our taking off remains constant . . . The time of not-being will be no less for him who made an end of life with yesterday's daylight than for him who perished many a moon and many a year before" (*Rer. nat.* 3.1087-94; trans. Latham 1951:129). In other words, man must still perish into an unfathomable infinity of not-being, no matter how short or long his life on the earth; any prolongation is merely a deferral of the inevitable end.

Regarding our possible suffering in death, Lucretius argues that the self must continue to exist if we are to "suffer" death, and he argues against a continued identity after death.<sup>11</sup> From the fate of suffering in death, "we are redeemed by death, which denies existence to the self that might have suffered these tribulations" (*Rer. nat.* 3.864; trans. Latham 1951:122). But what about our loss, in death, of the joys of life? Lucretius speaks of men "unhappily cheated by one treacherous day out of all the uncounted blessings of life!", and he counters with, "And now no repining for these lost joys will oppress you any more" (*Rer. nat.* 3.898-901; trans. Latham 1951:123). In other words, such men have lost nothing since they are no longer capable of being the subjects of tragic loss. In a similar vein, regarding the grief of those who remain behind after the death of a loved one, or one who fears the grief of those he leaves behind, Lucretius asks, "If something returns to sleep and peace, what reason is that for pining in inconsolable grief?" (*Rer. nat.* 3.909-11; trans. Latham 1951:123). Once again,

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11. Since we are material, only the reassembly of our identical atomic structure could guarantee our return after death; yet "even that contingency would still be no concern of ours once the chain of our identity had been snapped" (*Rer. nat.* 3.848-54; trans. Latham 1951:121).

death has robbed suffering of a subject; hence, lamentations cannot be for one who suffers. When we see that this is the case, we will not endure inconsolable grief ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Lucretius presents what has come to be known as the Symmetry Argument, based on the observation that man's life is like a brief candle between two essentially identical, vast darkneses, neither of which, vis-à-vis man's existence, is any more fearful than the other.<sup>13</sup> First Lucretius compares the dead to one who has never existed: "One who no longer is cannot suffer, *or differ in any way* from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by death the immortal" (*Rer. nat.* 3.866-69; trans. Latham 1951:122; my emphasis). He continues with his famous image of "Nature's mirror": "Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight — anything depressing — anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?" (*Rer. nat.* 3.972-77; trans. Latham 1951:125). It is clear that Lucretius means that there is *no difference* for an individual person between the dark void before birth and the one after death, and therefore no reason to fear the latter as if it were different from the former.

The power and value of memory as a balm is given testimony by Epicurus: "Sweet is the memory of a dead friend" (Plut., *Suav. viv.* 1105e=IG I-121); and he indicates the proper action toward the grief of friends: "Let us share our friends' suffering not with laments but with thoughtful concern" (*Sent. vat.* 66=IG I-6). One is reminded here of Epicurus' letter to Idomeneus, in which he recounts joyfully, on his last day of life (though in a state of extreme pain), the pleasures of past discussions of philosophy with friends — recollections sufficient to grant him "a blessedly happy day" (IG I-41).

Epicurus notes also a particularly strong connection between the security of belonging to a community, on the one hand, and the proper attitude toward death, on the other: "All those who had the power to acquire the greatest confidence from [the threats posed by] their neighbours also thereby lived together most pleasantly with the surest guarantee; and since they enjoyed the fullest sense of belonging they did not grieve the early death of the departed, as though it called for pity" (*KD* 40=IG I-5). Death is not to be feared, nor the departed to be pitied as if suffering; the pleasant life resulting from "the fullest sense of belonging" is what makes this attitude possible.

We can now suggest typical Epicurean responses to various manifestations of the fear of death by considering several answers to the question *Why am I afraid of death?*

- A1: I fear I will be nowhere (I fear the unknown).  
Epicurean response: You will be as much nowhere as you were before you were born. You did not fear it then; why should you fear it now?
- A2: I have not lived a good life and fear I may be tormented in Hell.  
Epicurean response: Hell is here and here alone, and it consists primarily in those

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12. Diogenes of Oenoanda echoes a similar Epicurean refrain: "[Therefore] in this matter [I must say now: 'I shall be deprived of] life and I shall leave behind the pleasures that belong to it — [pleasures for which however] after [death no one yearns . . .]'" (fr. 73; trans. Smith 993:402).

13. Considering the longest and shortest of human lives, Marcus Aurelius thinks about his own life and advises himself to "look at the abyss of time behind it, and the infinity yet to come. In the face of that, what more is Nestor with all his years than any three-days babe?" (*Meditations* 4.50; trans. Staniforth 1964:75-6).



phenomena resulting from men's fear of death — greed, selfishness, alienation, etc.<sup>14</sup> In any case, you will not be alive after death, the soul having been dispersed and followed by the body: no sensation will be possible.

- A3: I fear the pain of dying.

Epicurean response: There may be pain *before* death — that is, in *dying* (as there was with Epicurus, for example, who demonstrated how to overcome it) — but there can be no pain *in death*, for there is no longer any subject capable of experiencing pain.

- A4: I don't fear my own death as much as the death of my loved ones, or the sadness of those I leave behind after my own death.

Epicurean response: The correct attitude to death is based on a proper understanding of nature. Such knowledge teaches us that the departed cannot suffer, their atoms having returned to the void from whence they originated. Let those left behind understand the true nature of death and hold dear the memory of lost loved ones, as Epicurus has taught, but not unduly lament a return to the ultimate peace of nothingness.

- A5: I fear the utter end of my life — I fear nothingness and, most especially, a premature death. Hence, I long for immortality. In fact, life seems pointless in view of my certain death and the non-survival of my soul. Can a finite life be anything other than absurd?

Epicurean response: Death will come when it will come; meanwhile, it is not present, nor ought we to allow fears about it to ruin each potentially blessed day of life. When death is present, we shall no longer be. Furthermore, there is nothing absurd in the blessed life which we can all live, for once we have realised that death is nothing to us, we will have already begun to make life's mortality a blessing by having removed our desire for immortality. We can continue to live a blessed life through those pleasures which are worthy of us — philosophy, friendship, discussion, communal life, etc. — knowing that accession to the highest pleasure in the present moment is equivalent to an infinity of such moments.<sup>15</sup>

Epicurus thus provides, through philosophy, *therapeia* for those who fear death as one of the worst of human ills: for those who fear *post mortem* torment, he assures them that death represents a final atomic dissolution (and, in any event, divine punishment is inconsistent with divine blessedness);<sup>16</sup> for those who fear their own utter dissolution, he assures them that the end is not capable of being experienced, because after death there is no longer a conscious subject to experience anything; for those who doubt the possibility of living a meaningful yet finite life, Epicurus assures them that the good, the highest pleasure, *ataraxia*, can be experienced fully in a finite time. Epicureans of the ancient world seemed convinced of these assurances, on the basis of Epicurean arguments as well as their everyday practical activity;

14. Epictetus reflects on this point: "Why, do you not know, then, that the origin of all human evils, and of baseness and cowardice, is not death, but rather the fear of death?" (*Discourses* 3.26.38; trans. Oldfather 1928:239).

15. Annas (1993:346) comments on the duration of Epicurean pleasure: "[W]e make a mistake about duration; we think that, if a happy life is good, then more of it is in itself better than less. Epicurus can meet this point by showing us that the pleasure that is fit to be our final end is not the kind of thing that is improved by having more of it. Living a life free of frustration, trouble and disturbance is good, without being made better by going on longer." See also *KD* 19 and 20, and Hadot's (2002:197-8) discussion on this point.

16. Interestingly, one reason why the gods' life was blessed was that "... none of them was tormented by the fear of death" (Lucretius *Rer. nat.* 5.1180; trans. Latham 1951:207).

modern scholars, however, have expressed serious doubts, to which we shall now turn, for they are seen by some of these scholars to constitute a major obstacle to acceptance of Epicurus' dictum: "Death is nothing to us".<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. *Deprivations of death*

The idea that a premature death is a misfortune for its victim seems rather obvious. I believe that it has been responsible for most of the anxiety which people (such as I) have felt about dying; it seems to them very likely that they are going to die prematurely even if they live to be 120 years old, which they will not. (Luper-Foy 1987:272).

Many modern philosophers have suggested that grounds for fear of death exist on the basis of death's possible harm to the one who dies.<sup>18</sup> The alleged harm takes the form of thwarted desires, impaired interests, unfulfilled possibilities (projections of oneself into the future), etc. — in a word, *deprivation*. Those who make such allegations are generally known as *deprivation theorists*.<sup>19</sup> Here we shall use the term *deprivation theory* to include any such deprivations (if one's desires are thwarted, then one is *deprived* of having one's desires satisfied; if one's interests are impaired, one is *deprived* of having one's interests fulfilled, etc.).

Erler and Schofield (1999:663), recognizing that our fear of death in the form of fears concerning "what happens to our dead bodies", or possible "punishment in the underworld", or the "distress of anticipation itself" is dissipated by the words of Epicurus at *Ep. Men.* 124-5, point to another possibility.<sup>20</sup>

But what if our fear at the thought of death is caused not by apprehension that something bad will or may befall us, but by the belief that we will be deprived of good things we *might* have enjoyed or gone on enjoying? Such a belief would be particularly upsetting if the goods in question were conceived as forms of pleasure or enjoyment needed to make our lives in some important sense complete. A fear of this kind is not adequately dealt with by the argument that in death we *actually* experience nothing at all.

They go on to acknowledge that both Lucretius and Philodemus "were aware of this possibility",<sup>21</sup> as was Epicurus himself. The possibility to which they refer, that death is bad because it prevents the fulfilment of desires or objectives and/or takes away possible goods we might have enjoyed, is the heart of deprivation theory. A number of scholars intuitively

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17. To be sure, there were also ancient critics of Epicureanism, usually with an axe to grind — Cicero and Plutarch, for example — but, with respect to the fear of death, it is the anti-Epicurean arguments of modern critics that have been the focus of recent scholarship. In referring to Epicurus' main argument against the fear of death, Nussbaum (1994:204) declares that "[m]ajor interpreters agree, on the whole, in finding the argument insufficient to establish its radical conclusion". The "major interpreters" referred to by Nussbaum include such scholars as Nagel (1979), Pitcher (1984), Feinberg (1984), Furley (1986), Luper-Foy (1987), and Feldman (1991), among others.
  18. Nussbaum (1994:204) notes with respect to the question of death's possible harm that "there is no aspect of Hellenistic ethics that has generated such wide philosophical interest, and produced work of such high philosophical quality".
  19. See Li (2002), Chapters 2, 3, and 4, where anti-Epicurean deprivation arguments are considered under the separate headings "Desire-thwarting Theory", "Deprivation Theory", and "Interest-Impairment Theory".
  20. Annas (1993:345), reflecting on the meaning of the fear of death, notes that "it is hard to think that the fear of death and what it deprives us of, is merely a fear of being mortal".
  21. Erler and Schofield cite, in particular, Lucretius, *Rer. nat.* 3.894-9 and Philodemus, *De morte* 4, col. 12.1-14.14; see also Epicurus, *KD* 20=IG I-5.

disenchanted with the Epicurean view of "death as nothing to us" have argued in support of deprivation theory, although, as we shall see, there are others who have rallied to Epicurus' defence.

#### 4.1 *Deprivation theory*

What, exactly, is the nature of arguments for death's badness? Mitsis (1996:803) offers a general characterization:

One standard and intuitively compelling way of expressing the harm of death is to say that it deprives people of the life and goods that they would have enjoyed had they not died. Such a view of the harm of death — death as deprivation — has received widespread support from several contemporary philosophers, and indeed, it is sometimes claimed that the Epicurean attack on the fear of death falters precisely on this point; that is, by concentrating too exclusively on the actual condition of the dead and their lack of existence, Epicureans fail to take sufficient notice of the nature and extent of what the dead have possibly lost.

Thus, deprivation theorists argue that death deprives us of something intrinsically good — as yet unfulfilled possibilities in life.<sup>22</sup>

Furley (1986:85) develops this distinction into two possible reasons for fearing death: "(1) because what may follow a man's death may be unpleasant or in some other way bad for him; (2) because although nothing follows upon death, death will deprive him of the good things of life."

Furley admits that the Epicurean argument against the first reason is a strong one, given Epicurean atomism and the soul's non-survival of death. He goes on, however, to propose a rationale for distinguishing two sub-categories of the second case:

In the case of the second reason, we must first of all note that "fear" is an inappropriate name for the emotion felt when there is no uncertainty. So for the sake of completeness we must distinguish two cases: (2a) S fears that he may die prematurely (being uncertain when he will die), because he will then be deprived of all the good things of life; (2b) S is angry that he will die (knowing that he will die), because he will then be deprived, etc. (1986:85).

In other words, one can fear the incertitude of death's timing, or be angry with the certitude of death itself — both for the reason that death is a deprivation.

We shall not, at this point, attempt to engage in a detailed consideration of all modern arguments for and against the Epicurean position concerning fear of death (in any case, the enormity of the literature precludes such an in-depth examination here). Rather, we shall consider the salient features of deprivation theory in general, as well as some of the responses to deprivation theory by defenders of the Epicurean position; further, we shall show how deprivation theorists implicitly assume (or posit as "intuitive") premisses which contradict the Epicurean notion of a good life.

What, then, is the harm or evil in death alleged by deprivation theorists, and to whom does it apply, and when? In order to answer these questions, deprivation theorists try to relate the fact of death to its consequent fear of plan-, desire-, or action-deprivation, and to show why it is rational to fear death. They usually aim their efforts directly at the Epicurean argument

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22. Furley (1986:90) writes that "the essential element in a rational fear of death is the fear that our desires and intentions are unreal, in the sense that they have no possibility of fulfillment . . . I am suggesting that the fear of death is the fear that there are no more possibilities, and that Epicurus's argument does not succeed in making out that this is irrational, because it is a fear concerned with our present state, not about our future (or timeless) state".

which concludes that death is not a harm to the one who is dead. This argument has been set out by Rosenbaum (1986:121-2) as follows:

- (a) A state of affairs is bad for person *P* only if *P* can experience it at some time. Therefore,
- (b) *P*'s being dead is bad for *P* only if it is a state of affairs that *P* can experience at some time.
- (c) *P* can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins before *P*'s death.
- (d) *P*'s being dead is not a state of affairs that begins before *P*'s death. Therefore,
- (e) *P*'s being dead is not a state of affairs that *P* can experience at some time.

THEREFORE, *P*'s being dead is not bad for *P*.

Note how central to the argument is the notion of *experience*. If one cannot experience a given state of affairs, it cannot be bad for one (Premiss A); this principle is known as the "existence requirement". In addition, a given state of affairs can be experienced only if it begins before death (Premiss C). Deprivation theorists typically question one or the other, or both of these premisses.

Let us now examine some of the ways in which deprivation theorists have approached the Epicurean argument. First, consider a basic *attitude* common to deprivation theorists, as expressed by Murphy (1976:54): "*That it is bad is, I take it, obvious; for death, along with suffering, in part define the very concept of what is a bad thing for a person . . . the very concept of the fearful*". Thus, deprivation theorists take it that, *intuitively*, death is bad for the one who dies — in fact, generally, because of its ultimate nature, the worst of bad things; and death is bad because of what it deprives us of: as Nagel (1979:63) puts it, "[I]f death is an evil, it is the *loss of life*, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable". The deprivationist view can be characterized generally as one in which death is seen to be "bad for the person who is no longer, because it makes empty and vain the plans, hopes, and desires that this person actually had during life" (Nussbaum 1994:207). This, then, is the position from which deprivation theorists argue against the Epicureans. In attempting to refute the Epicurean argument, they have produced some innovative, and often complex, arguments of their own<sup>23</sup> (significantly, as we shall see, deprivation theorists reject — usually implicitly — the hedonistic basis of Epicurean ethics).

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23. Nagel (1979:65) suggests a subject of harm: ". . . most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment"; he goes on to argue that death has such a subject. Silverstein's (1980:95-116) complex approach is to revise the ontological status of the dead by arguing that the dead, though dead, are nonetheless existent. Yourgrau (1987:137-156) criticizes Silverstein, on the one hand, yet defines the dead as *Nonexistent Objects*, on the other, going so far as to claim that "there simply is such a person as Socrates, and nothing, not even his death, can ever erase this fact" (1980:143). Feldman (1991:305-26) uses a "possible worlds" analysis in which a state of affairs is bad for someone if "her welfare level at the nearest possible world where it obtains is higher than her welfare level at the nearest possible world where it does not obtain" (1991:315). Mitsis (1996:811) criticizes Feldman's approach on the grounds that "the thesis that possible-world counterparts carry a person's identity forward is at least initially at odds with the causal discreteness required of distinct possible worlds". Feinberg (1984:169-90) and Pitcher (1984:157-68) argue that it is the *antemortem* person who is harmed by death. Williams (1973:73-92), on the other hand, distinguishes "categorical" or "unconditional" desires from "conditional" desires in an attempt to show that thwarted desires need not be experienced in order to be harmful. Luper-Foy (1987:267-90) contends that the indifference of Epicureans towards death is a reflection of their lack of meaningful desires: "Epicureans are not interested in anything that could lead them to regard living as a good thing" (1987:280). One wonders

A common view held by deprivation theorists is that accepting Epicurus' dictum that "death is nothing to us" involves accepting also some rather disagreeable and counter-intuitive consequences:

It means that even if a man is betrayed by his friends, ridiculed behind his back, and despised by people who treat him politely to his face, none of it can be counted as a misfortune for him so long as he does not suffer as a result. It means that a man is not injured if his wishes are ignored by the executor of his will, or if, after his death, the belief becomes current that all the literary works on which his fame rests were really written by his brother, who died in Mexico at the age of 28. (Nagel 1979:64).

Here Nagel has given us "intuitively plausible cases of harm that seem to be counter-examples to the Epicurean view" (Braddock 2000:53). In addition to declaring that such consequences are entailed by Epicurus' dictum, deprivation theorists also stress, in particular, the harm of *premature* death. Annas (1993:346) observes a relation between deprivation and premature death: it is not so much that death ends a life, but that a life is "cut short before its proper time, or a death . . . is premature". This is because we are inclined to view life as "having a shape, progressing from youth to middle age and then to old age", each stage having its own peculiar domain of interests and activities serving to confer on it a particular form. For this reason we can intuitively recognise that "a normally endowed person who dies at eighteen, with hopes and projects unfulfilled, has had a premature death, whereas someone who dies at seventy-five, with a reasonable proportion of her projects fulfilled, has not".<sup>24</sup> Epicurus could deny this "intuition", Annas (1993:347) concedes, though only if the young person had acceded to the state of *ataraxia* before dying, but she resists the conclusion that, having achieved the full Epicurean life, dispensing with false belief, "living naturally and achieving a state where you are not bothered by troubles and upsetting desires, there is *nothing* to choose between living like that for forty years and dying tomorrow".

Thus, the notion of *duration* becomes a central one in deprivationist arguments: the idea that by being deprived by death of a number of years of life, one is harmed by consequent deprivation of goods — the shorter life's duration, the greater the deprivation. This is the serious charge laid at the doorstep of Epicurus and his followers.

##### 5. *Epicurean defences*

The realization that because of man's mortality such happiness itself is limited in that sensation and hence all pleasure ends at death is not disturbing. Indeed so far from being disturbing it is a source of satisfaction. After death we can be completely confident that there is nothing to fear . . . Indeed the fear of death being removed, we can enjoy the fullness of pleasure, the highest happiness, in the instant. (Rist 1972:119).

Nothing is to be gained by extending our lives. Indeed, to wish to extend our lives is to betray an incorrect and pernicious view of pleasure. (Warren 2000:243-4).

The deprivation theorists' arguments ultimately boil down to the belief that death is bad because it deprives us of goods, the goods we would have enjoyed had we not died when we

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whom Luper-Foy is referring to here, for anyone who has read the surviving words of Epicurus, Lucretius, Philodemus, and Diogenes of Oenoanda — or even Seneca's characterizations of Epicureans — could hardly regard the Epicureans as "cold-hearted and passionless" (Luper-Foy 1987:272); see Rosenbaum (1989:291-304) for a pro-Epicurean response to Luper-Foy.

24. Li (2002:74) argues that "a person's premature death is always a harm to him".

did. Particularly significant is the notion of prematurity of death: death in youth is ultimately a greater loss than death in old age. Epicurean responses focus on a) death's alleged harm, b) an elucidation of Epicurus' position regarding death, c) the relation between duration and completeness of a life, and d) the opposing conceptions of the good life implicit in deprivation theory and Epicureanism.

### 5.1 Death's alleged harm

Rosenbaum (1986:127) identifies a problem in the unusual nature of the alleged harm of death: "It is all right, I suppose, to *call* a person's death a loss for the person, but it is clearly not like paradigmatic cases of losses that are bad for persons". A loss, normally, is something that one suffers through, experiences, and possibly overcomes; death is not like this, for it is not experienced, not suffered through, not overcome.<sup>25</sup>

Mitsis (1996:807) observes that Epicurus, arguing that "something must exist for it to be the subject of a harm such as deprivation", is able to draw the conclusion "that death in no way harms the dead. And if the dead cannot be harmed generally, they certainly cannot be harmed by being deprived of anything". He also notes that in ordinary situations involving harm, it is possible to answer questions such as "When is someone harmed?" or "How is someone harmed?" or "Who or what is harmed?" (1996:807). Thus, we can determine *when* a person was injured (e.g., at 3 p.m. yesterday), how that person was injured (e.g., he fell off his bicycle), and who was injured (e.g., Guido was injured). Death, however, is different in that such questions become problematic: ". . . the Epicurean argues that to ask such questions about death is nonsensical", principally because the subject of harm (something which must be *experienced*) no longer exists. Mitsis (1996:808) points out that deprivation theorists, believing that death harms the deceased by depriving him of possible future goods, must be able to explain how, when, and to whom the loss occurs. This remains problematic for deprivation theorists and yet in attempting to do so, they depart radically from Epicurus' hedonistic ethical basis, by positing or assuming a different conception of the good life.<sup>26</sup>

The Epicurean argument, then, is attacked by deprivation theorists with conceptions of harm that are non-Epicurean, since for Epicurus harm is pain that is either physical or psychical and is expressed only through sense-experience. Hence, the expression "bad for one" or "bad for one's life" can, for Epicureans, mean only that one *experiences* a pain *before* death.

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25. In responding to Premiss A in Rosenbaum's outline of the Epicurean argument, Fischer (1993:20) comments: "What makes the things in question bads or evils for the relevant individuals has (intuitively speaking) nothing to do with whether the things are actually or even possibly experienced". Yet Fischer's concession "that it is only 'intuitively speaking' that harm has nothing to do with possible experience" is particularly interesting in view of the fact that it is precisely the normal intuitions people have about death's badness that Epicureans are questioning and rejecting (Braddock 2000:56).

26. Furley (1986:85) suggests that Epicurus' argument "depends on the premises of hedonism . . . If it is true that nothing is good or bad for a man except what gives him pleasure or pain, then the case is settled. . . But for one not committed to Epicurean hedonism, there is a case to be made against this proposition". Thus Furley, like other deprivation theorists, makes his case against Epicurus on the basis of a rejection of Epicurean hedonism, of the Epicurean conception of the good life — but at least he admits doing so, and he admits the consequences of not doing so.

## 5.2 Intention of Epicurean arguments

There is also contention over the exact nature of Epicurus' claims regarding fear of death. What, precisely, were Epicurean arguments meant to show regarding fear of death? We can see that with respect to Furley's first reason for fearing death, Epicurus would say that there is nothing bad for one in being dead. With respect to Furley's second reason, the one to which deprivation theorists have devoted so much time and energy, death brings no loss or harm to us, according to Epicurus, because we cannot experience a loss of goods. Furthermore, loss is nothing to us who live in the present moment and are capable of experiencing the highest pleasure, and a happiness that confers the completeness of life on man.<sup>27</sup> The possible exception to the second reason seems to be the premature death of one who has not yet risen to *ataraxia*; but then such a person is not yet the "us" in "nothing to us" (about which more will be said later).

Turning to the words of Epicurus, the main thrust of his argument is to be found at *Ep. Men.* 124-7, in which he tells us *who* he directs his message to and *what* the message is: to those who *fear the absence of life* — that is, the utter end of being — the message is that *there is nothing to fear in nothingness*. When the thought of nothingness leads to the fear of even existing (since after death nothing will remain, plans will have come to naught, etc.), we must realise that our only plan should be to imitate the blessed life of the gods, and this, Epicurus insists, we can do. Thus the desire for immortality is irrational (because unattainable) and therefore so is the fear that leads directly to this desire — that is, the fear of death as an utter end. In short, our lives are made *more* enjoyable, not less, by removing the desire for *athanasia* (Warren 2000:243).

Striker (1989:328) suggests that "all the Epicurean arguments were meant to show is that we should not ruin our lives by worrying about being mortal".<sup>28</sup> Certainly they were meant to show that, but is that all? Preuss (1994:67), sympathetic to Striker's comment, and a defender of Epicurus, charges that the deprivation theorists are not addressing the fear Epicurus meant to dispel. Preuss suggests that Epicurus' argument is directed only at Furley's first reason. Regarding Furley's characterization of the true object of fear in death, Preuss (1994:66) concedes that "Furley has identified a real fear here, but it is not the fear of death . . . Make a list of your important projects, of the kinds of things Furley is likely to have had in mind. It seems incredible that if an insurance company could somehow guarantee their completion in the event of death they would have relieved you of your fear of death". Thus, Preuss focusses on death *itself*, rather than consequential losses, as the object of fear, arguing forcefully that this is the intent of the Epicurean argument.<sup>29</sup> He reinforces his point by considering that

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27. Lucretius' Symmetry Argument is capable of showing that in death, *qua* non-being, there is nothing different for us than in prenatal non-being; thus we need not fear the state of being "in death". This point covers death as feared because we might be punished, etc. and death as feared because it is pure nothingness. It doesn't cover death as feared because it is a loss of goods. This can be adequately countered only by the Epicurean notion of the good life, with desires regulated so as to avoid living always in anticipation of a future fulfillment.

28. "The Epicurean argument is designed primarily to keep people from allowing the fear of death to play a debilitating role in their lives. If fear cannot keep death away but can only serve to ruin a life, then a person who fears death is irrational, *even if death can be considered a case of deprivation*" (Braddock 2000:60; my emphasis).

29. Preuss (1994:67) treats premature death in the same way: "Epicurus is not concerned with any special features of death . . . with death so far as it may be premature, or violent or painful, etc., but he is concerned simply with our mortality, with the fact that we must die and be no more. The elderly notoriously revive

accounts of those “who have had a ‘near-death experience’” include the admission that “they no longer fear death. No mention is made of the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of present possibilities for good reason: such possibilities are a different matter, irrelevant to (or, at most, only incidentally relevant to) the fear of death” (1994:66-7).

If this is so, then Epicurus is on stronger ground than otherwise, and yet if the deprivation theorists are right in focussing on the alleged loss in death (it is certainly *possible* to fear death as a harbinger of loss of goods — not death *per se*, but loss), Epicurus must, and can, still be defended.

### 5.3 Duration and the complete life

Furley’s two reasons for fearing death are related to Epicurean argument by Striker (1989:327): “It seems to me that [Epicurus’] argument might have some merit if it were meant to address the fear of mortality, but it will not serve to establish that it makes no difference whether we have a very short or a very long life, simply because a very short life could not possibly be complete”. The completeness of life, for Striker, — as well as for deprivation theorists in general — has something to do, as we have seen, with the shape of a life, its projects, etc. For Epicureans, however, completeness of a life has to do with achieving the highest level of pleasure — *ataraxia* — which is not the kind of thing that is augmented by duration. The “Us” in “Nothing to Us”.

The irrelevance of duration for happiness (*eudaimonia*) is reflected in Barigazzi’s (1983:55) comment on the felicity of the immortal gods: “Happiness is independent of duration and the gods are immortal because they are happy rather than happy because they are immortal” [my translation]. In the same way man can live like the immortal gods by acceding to a eudaimonistic life through *ataraxia*.<sup>30</sup> Referring to *KD* 10 and 19, Barigazzi (1955:41) again notes the independence of happiness and duration in Epicurean ethical thinking: “The gods have as essential attributes immortality and blessedness. Their principal advantage with respect to man is cancelled by the fact that happiness is independent of time, because pleasure is already perfect in the moment . . . so that it becomes senseless to desire infinite time” [my translation]. In the Epicurean quest for, and attainment of, *eudaimonia* through *ataraxia*, man can imitate the blessedness of the gods. Thus, dying at one point rather than another may be seen as irrelevant to (i.e., no better or worse with respect to) the goodness of one’s life.<sup>31</sup>

Philodemus, too, reiterates Epicurus’ position on the attainment of completeness in a finite time. Warren (2000:238-9) notes that “Philodemus, *De morte* XII.30-XIII, after quoting the example of Pythocles, who prodigiously attained happiness at the age of eighteen, speaks of:

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their interest in religion when there is no longer a question of the prematurity of death. They are fanning their hope of immortality . . . Epicurus argues that this hope of immortality is an unjustified and irrational hope, and the point of his discussion of death is to show how we can face our mortality, how we can live a lucidly mortal life, without resorting to the irrational hope of immortality”.

30. See *Sent. vat.* 33, where Epicurus tells us how little it takes to rival Zeus in happiness.

31. This does not mean that dying at one point rather than another is of no concern *whatsoever* to the Epicurean. Purinton (1993:317-18) comments on precisely this point: “Epicurus would say that it is *rational* to prolong one’s life *especially* when one has attained the *telos*, for to have attained the *telos* is to be living pleasantly. And if one is going to go on living, it is rational to desire to continue to enjoy the highest pleasure (though it is *not* rational to fear that death might prevent one from doing so, since, if one dies, one will lose one’s *desire* to enjoy this pleasure together with the enjoyment itself)”.



'It being possible both to achieve and enjoy the greatest [goods] in some certain [sc. finite] period of time . . .'"<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the much-touted "goods of life" referred to constantly by deprivation theorists, and the time required to realise them, assume a contrasting insignificance for Epicureans, as Warren (2000:241) observes:

Once it has been realized that the addition of more goods, or more time in which to acquire more goods, is irrelevant to happiness, which is understood as a state of satiety, then desire for more goods, and more time in which to accumulate goods, disappears. Temporal duration becomes irrelevant to my assessment of my life and its goodness . . ."

It is not duration, therefore, but the attainment of the highest state of happiness that determines a complete life.<sup>33</sup>

Quoting Cicero's assertion that Epicureans deny that time adds to the highest good, Furley (1986:81) claims that the Epicurean position "is just dogma, without argument, and the surviving Epicurean texts offer nothing in the way of argument". This latter comment, of course, may be true, if by "argument" is meant an explicit step-by-step reasoning leading to the Epicurean notion of a complete life. But it is possible to adumbrate a tentative route to the conclusion concerning duration and completeness implicit in Epicurean writings, as follows:

- (a) The gods are the highest beings — perfect, in fact;
- (b) *Eudaimonia* through *ataraxia* (tranquillity) is the essential state of the gods, permeating and defining their existence;
- (c) Therefore, *ataraxia* (leading to *eudaimonia*) is the highest state of being;
- (d) Man is capable of achieving the state of *ataraxia*;
- (e) Therefore, man is capable of acceding to the eudaimonistic state of the gods;
- (f) *Ataraxia* does not increase with duration: once achieved, it is perfect;
- (g) Therefore, man's blessed state, which permeates his being and defines his life, does not increase (become more complete) with duration;
- (h). A complete life is one which needs no further duration to make it complete;
- (i). THEREFORE, man's life is complete if he accedes to *eudaimonia* through *ataraxia*.

Thus, for Epicureans, whose goal is the achievement of *ataraxia*, it is possible to experience in a finite time a complete life.

#### 5.4 The "Us" in "Nothing to Us"

At this point it is worth reminding ourselves to whom Epicurus addresses his letters and precepts: principally to a community of like-minded philosophers, and disciples striving to

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32. A modern version of the same message is found in Warren (2000:237): "If we remember that for an Epicurean the only criterion of value is (perceived) pleasantness (*Ep. Men.* 124), then a longer period of enjoyment is no better (i.e. more pleasant) in any way than a shorter period enjoying the same degree of pleasure".

33. Warren (2000:238) notes that Cicero, in *De finibus*, "finds this as unconvincing as most modern commentators . . . However, Cicero is thinking mainly of *kinetic*, not *katastematic*, pleasure, which Epicurus *would* allow to be a process and therefore to have duration. Once this misunderstanding is removed, Epicurus' theory appears much more coherent, even if it does not fit our intuitions about a 'complete' life".

emulate them. Hence, when he says, “Death is nothing to us”, he is in effect referring through the word “us” to anyone who has adopted the Epicurean way of life and, along with it, the various spiritual exercises used to prepare one to accede to progressively higher levels of *philosophia* and *phronesis*, and to the ultimate goal of *eudaimonia* through *ataraxia*. They are those who have accepted, memorized, and practised the Epicurean precepts, and thereby have begun to live the best possible life, one resembling that of the supreme models for man, the gods. Thus, while others may believe that death is something worth fretting over day and night, those who work at internalizing the essential message of Epicurean philosophy will not do so. They will live more fully than others, by living intensely in the present moment, which is where life always resides.

While the letters and precepts, as we have seen, were prepared by Epicurus as therapeutic aids to help Epicurean disciples to live a good life, emulating the gods, there was no barrier preventing anyone from realising the truth of Epicurus’ teachings and deciding to adopt the Epicurean way of life. To put it another way, the “us” in “nothing to us” is an open invitation to Epicurean philosophy as a rational way of life free from the fears and superstitions that plague so much of mankind.

#### 6. *Differing conceptions of the good life*

[T]here is clearly a connection to be made between the removal of one’s fear of death and the approximation to divine immortality held out as the goal of life. (Warren 2000:236).

In summarising the import of Furley’s argument, Nussbaum (1994:207) intimates the wide gulf between modern deprivation theorists and Epicureans:

Any death that frustrates hopes and plans is bad for the life it terminates, because it reflects retrospectively on that life, showing its hopes and projects to have been, at the very time the agent was forming them, empty and meaningless. Our interest in not dying is an interest in the meaning and integrity of our current projects. Our fear of death is a fear that, right now, our hopes and projects are vain and empty.

The hopes of deprivation theorists are ones waiting to be fulfilled at some time in the future, and they are ones which give meaning to life through their fulfillment.

For Epicureans, on the other hand, it is not the fulfillment of hopes that confers meaning on one’s life, but rather the way in which one’s life activities are carried out — that is, the way in which one lives at any given moment: “It is not that the completion of projects in the future is unimportant, but rather that being unimpededly engaged in the activity of completing them is the only essential aspect of their contribution to one’s well-being” (Rosenbaum 1990:37).<sup>34</sup> In other words, we are speaking here of a *philosophical* life rather than a life whose significance depends on a series of projects that can be completed before death. The completeness of the Epicurean life lies in one’s state of being, not in completion of projects, fulfillment of desires, etc.

The conscientious Epicurean can indeed enjoy full happiness in the moment, independent of successes or failures due to circumstances beyond his control:

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34. “If death ‘cuts short’ my enjoyment of life, then mortality is to be regretted. However, an Epicurean takes a much different view. Since once I have attained *ataraxia* nothing ‘better’ (i.e. more pleasant) will be achieved however much longer I live, there is no reason to fear death. Death cannot rob me of any further goods” (Warren 2000:239).

He may possess little that is good in his life, but there is no good he needs to supply contentment: his poverty is great wealth. This flexibility means that his life lacks nothing to make it the best possible — ideally adapted to the constraints imposed by nature. Of course, it is conceivable that at some given moment within it he might have been enjoying more pleasure than in fact he is. But that does not show that his *life* might have been better: for a life is to be conceived from the ethical point of view not as a set or sum of moments or episodes, but as the implementation of a strategy for living. (Erler and Schofield 1999:664).

The phrase "strategy for living", counterpoised to the deprivation theorists' notion of meaning through completion of projects, is useful in demarcating two distinct conceptions of the good life.<sup>35</sup>

The typical deprivation theorist's conception of the good life is characterized by Braddock (2000:61-2) as an existentialist-like view in which human life is "a perpetual work-in-progress . . . one is always, in a sense, outside of oneself as the story of one's life unfolds toward the future. Wrapped up with this view is a high regard for human desire". Death, on such a view, is seen as "*lost opportunity*" and "*no more chances*" (Murphy 1976:54-5), harm to "one's future-oriented interests" (Feinberg 1984:179), the "collapse of [one's] life's work" (McMahan 1988:240), etc. Murphy (1976:54) suggests that "[t]he death of a *person* . . . also represents the end of a conscious history that transcends itself in thought . . . [P]ersons define themselves in large measure in terms of their future-oriented *projects*. What I am is in large measure what I want to accomplish".

When we inquire into the constitution of death's badness, we find expressions like the "lost opportunity" mentioned above. And what are "lost opportunities" for Murphy (and deprivation theorists generally)? "Opportunities" such as "the desire to accomplish something in one's profession, to provide for one's family, to achieve certain satisfactions" (Murphy 1976:53-4). Here we see the typical emphasis of deprivation theorists on such future-oriented fulfilments as one's "life's work".

An Epicurean's "life's work", by contrast, is to be found not in something which can collapse (as, for example, in an architect's plans for a project that will bring him renown), but rather in the day to day living of a blessed life among friends.<sup>36</sup> Note how the very

35. Cf. Braddock (2000:48), who concludes that "what is really at issue in this debate is not so much the proper attitude toward death as the proper attitude toward life. Implicit in the Epicurean view and in the deprivation theory are *differing conceptions of the human good*" (my emphasis). It is also worth bearing in mind that the two views of the good life and its relation to death are reflections of the two distinct cultures from which they have emerged: modern industrial capitalist "consumer" culture and Hellenistic culture, within which the Epicurean Garden was a distinct sub-culture. Murphy (1976:54) intimates the cultural conditioning of the deprivation theory when he states that it may be "a very 'bourgeois' conception of personality, for it is a definition in terms of individual agency".

36. The Epicurean view of death stands out in bold relief against ancient Greek attitudes in general, which, like those of deprivation theorists, stress the tragic nature of an "untimely" (*aôros*) or premature death. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, for example, what distresses Hekabe most is that the infant prince Astyanax has not known "youth or marriage or godlike sovereignty" (Garland 2001:84); a fourth century inscription from Kotiaion depicts parents lamenting their daughter's "most untimely and unwedded youth" (Alexiou 1974:106-7). Here we sense the special sadness surrounding the fate of those "to whom death came in the place of that marriage which was regarded as the consummation of earthly happiness" (Gardner 1896:115). Also particularly tragic is the death of a Greek child, "a painful and disturbing event" (Garland 2001:86); a fourth century BC Halikarnassos inscription portrays such premature death as a matter of injustice: ". . . / Eukleitos died first, a boy of eighteen years, / and his mother beat her breast for him; / after him she wept for twelve-year-old Theodoros, / Alas for those who are gone beneath the earth unjustly!" (Alexiou 1974:106). The notion of an appropriate age for death — that a proper life, in other words, must be sufficiently long to encompass certain fulfilling elements: youth, sexual maturity, marriage, children,

existentialist notion of projecting oneself into the future is the antithesis of living intensely in the present moment, as envisioned by Epicureans.<sup>37</sup> Of course, it is true that the practice of spiritual exercises aimed at improving the individual Epicurean is itself future-directed, in a sense; but the emphasis is always on the present — the exercises are performed with an intense concentration on the present moment, and if and when the future comes, the individual will have undergone change for the better and, at that time, will continue to live intensely in *that* present.

A passage from Philodemus, quoted by Warren (2000:241), expresses well the Epicurean perspective on the good life and the good death: “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 buried, and enjoys the single day as if it were eternity”. This understanding, coupled with the Epicurean mode of living-in-the-present, is what enables the same individual both to live well and to die well.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, although there is contention permeating the issue of fear of death, Epicureans can legitimately claim that their opponents are positing, consciously or unconsciously, a different conception of the good life, one which includes *necessarily* the completion of projects, fulfilment of desires, etc. — a life, in other words, that is future-directed in a way in which the Epicurean good life is not. In rejecting Epicurus’ hedonism, the basis of Epicurean ethics, the deprivation theorists are essentially arguing amongst themselves about the specific nature of death’s badness while Epicureans continue to live a simple life of mild hedonism, striving to emulate the gods.

Furley (1986:90) even admits that in order to eliminate the fear of death, “it would be necessary to be in a state in which future possibilities were of no concern. This is indeed the state of one who follows to the letter Epicurus’ advice to confine one’s desires to the bare essentials for avoiding present pain. If Epicurus’ case that death is nothing to us is to be persuasive, one must accept the hedonist premiss of Epicurean morality in its fullest strength”. Of course, this is precisely what Epicureans do and deprivation theorists do not do.<sup>39</sup>

We have given the deprivation theorists the benefit of doubt as to their claim that the real fear in death is not death *qua* nonexistence (Furley’s first reason for fearing death), but the consequent loss of goods suffered in death (Furley’s second reason). In spite of doing so, we find Epicureans able to surmount even this obstacle, through their achievement of *ataraxia* via the wide range of spiritual exercises at their disposal, to which we shall now turn.

grandchildren, etc. — is implicit also in Andromache’s lament at Hector’s wake: “Husband, you were too young to die . . . !” (Alexiou 1974:183). Garland (2001:78) notes that “According to Solon . . . seventy was the age at which ‘a man could receive the apportionment of death, not being *aōros*’”. These examples suggest the background against which the radical nature of Epicurus’ thanatology, symbolised by the dictum “Death is nothing to us”, must be measured.

37. “This emphasis on possibilities, opportunities, and great achievements is in direct opposition to the Epicurean ideal of an uncomplicated life spent enjoying static pleasure” (Braddock 2000:63-4).
38. Warren (2000:241) comments on this passage from *De morte* 38, as follows: “The wise man is always ready for death. He walks about ‘already buried’ because once he has achieved *eudaimonia*, to die at any point would be no better or worse than dying at another. His attitude towards time and duration is also significantly different from that of those who do not view their mortality correctly. The single day becomes for him eternity, not in the sense that he lives life ‘slowly’, but, presumably, because he has recognized that a single day offers him the chance of absolute fulfilment”.
39. “The Epicurean point stands against the deprivation theorists as long as one accepts the Epicurean view of the good life” (Braddock 2000:59).

### 7. *Spiritual exercises on death*

[M]editation on death . . . is to become self-aware by means of the thought of death, for the self which thinks of its death always, in one way or another, thinks of itself in the atemporality of the Spirit or of being. We can therefore say that, in this sense, the exercise of death is one of the most fundamental philosophical exercises. (Hadot 2002:198).

Acquaintance with Epicurean philosophical discourse, while an important aspect of *therapeia*, is not sufficient by itself: spiritual exercises are an integral part of a consolatory programme vis-à-vis the fear of death (Hadot 2002:122). The Epicureans and others "trained for death".<sup>40</sup> *KD* 2, the second remedy of the *tetrapharmakos*, is the condensed substance of the Epicurean meditation on death (*meditare mortem*).<sup>41</sup> "Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us" [IG I-5]. This, in conjunction with Epicurus' letter to Menoeceus, constitutes the principal focus for meditation on death: "Do and practise what I constantly told you to do, believing these to be the elements of living well . . . Get used to believing that death is nothing to us" (*Ep. Men.* 123-4). Here Epicurus exhorts the disciple to engage in *practice* as a transformative activity. Again, at *Ep. Men.* 135, he urges engagement: "Practise these and the related precepts day and night, by yourself and with a like-minded friend". And such practice will bring about the desired conversion to *philosophia* and *phronesis*, and allow the Epicurean follower to live in utter peace, without fear of death: "[Y]ou will never be disturbed either when awake or in sleep, and you will live as a god among men" (*Ep. Men.* 135). This is the ultimate goal, for when one lives like the gods, sharing in their blessedness, one is no longer in any respect "like a mere mortal animal" (*Ep. Men.* 135). Thus, the *meditare mortem*, carried out in the finite, present moment, is the basis of the Epicurean elevation to the infinite: "For the Epicurean, the thought of death is the same as the consciousness of the finite nature of existence, and it is this which gives an infinite value to each instant. Each of life's moments surges forth laden with incommensurable value" (Hadot 1995:95-6). We may ask, with respect to death: "Is this not *consolatio*? Is it not *therapeia*?"

Memory plays a varied role as spiritual exercise in Epicurean psychagogy. There is first of all the memorization of precepts as described above; and there is also the use of memory to preserve in the mind dear friends and fellow-philosophers. As Epicurus says, "Sweet is the memory of a dead friend" (Plut., *Suav. viv.* 1105E=IG I-121). When we hold fast to the memory of a friend, he lives within us, and, besides offering *consolatio*, even helps to transform us — perhaps more so than when he breathed and walked about in the world.<sup>42</sup>

When we consider such practices, we begin to sense the manifold nature of Epicurean spiritual exercises. Meditation on precepts constitutes the core of Epicurean transformative exercise, not only with respect to death, but in general. Augmenting this basic internalization of principles, however, are the fundamental spiritual exercises of friendship, physics, philosophy, etc., designed to bring *consolatio* to the disciple.

Friendship, which Epicurus deems "by far the greatest" of those things wisdom provides for a blessed life (*KD* 27=IG I-5), is a spiritual exercise of utmost importance with respect to

40. See Hadot (1995:93-101) for a discussion of spiritual exercises on "Learning to Die".

41. The expression comes from Epicurus through Seneca: "[T]he Stoic Seneca borrowed the maxim '*Meditare mortem*' from Epicurus" (Hadot 1995:120).

42. As Saint-Exupéry puts it, "He who has gone, so we but cherish his memory, abides with us, more potent, nay more present, than the living man" (1948:2).

death. Expanding Epicurus at *Sent. vat.* 78,<sup>43</sup> Rist (1972:136) makes explicit the functions of friendship within the Epicurean community:

In a sense friendship provides the immortality for the group which death removes from each of its individual members. Friendship can be passed on for ever within the Epicurean community; perhaps this is at least a part of the reason why Epicurus can believe that, while wisdom and friendship are what generate a noble man, it is not wisdom alone which outlives each individual who possesses it. Friendship too is deathless, for the community of the wise lives on. And even if the community of Epicurus were to die out, we should still have the gods to provide us with a paradigm of the life of friendship.

This explains, in part, why Epicurus proclaimed friendship as that which, in dancing around the world, wakes us up to blessedness (*Sent. vat.* 52=IG I-6).

Physics and philosophy also constitute spiritual exercises with respect to fear of death, for dread and darkness of the mind can be dispelled “by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature” (Lucretius *Rer. nat.* 3.90; trans. Latham 1951:98). As for the importance of studying philosophy, Epicurus points to death in suggesting that a young man may benefit from philosophy particularly in becoming “like an old man owing to his lack of fear of what is to come” (*Ep. Men.* 122=IG I-4). Here we see that the old are less likely than the young to fear death, especially if they have lived a good life.<sup>44</sup> The young, through the practice of philosophy, can emulate the wisdom of their elders.

The exercise of *avocatio-revocatio*, or of turning the mind away from unpleasant thoughts towards pleasant ones, also has a role with respect to fear of death. Such an exercise need not (though it can) be a last resort when all else fails to console; it can equally well function as an integral part of one’s thinking on a daily basis, from moment to moment, thus enhancing natural good — that is, pleasure — and dissuading natural evil, or pain. And from *avocatio-revocatio*, one can consciously move towards seeking the spiritual exercise of the highest pleasure: *ataraxia*, the gateway to *eudaimonia*.

We have seen that for the Epicurean there are no good reasons to regard the fear of death as rational. On the contrary, there are many reasons for declaring such a fear to be utterly irrational. For on the basis of Epicurean hedonism, in conjunction with the variety of spiritual exercises practised by the Epicureans, a good life can equal that of the gods, not in duration, but in completeness; there need be nothing lacking in such a life of simple pleasure and friendly good will:

If to be immortal is to live without thinking death relevant at all to one’s life, then the Epicurean sage is indeed “immortal”. Death is “nothing to him”. Absolutely nothing. Not only does it not cause him distress; it has no part to play in his conception of his life. He transcends his mortality as Epicurus did. *Deus ille fuit.* (Warren 2000:261)

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43. “The noble man is most involved with wisdom and friendship, of which one is a mortal good, the other immortal” (*Sent. vat.* 78=IG I-6).

44. On this point, Epicurus declares: “It is not the young man who is to be congratulated for his blessedness, but the old man who has lived well. For the young man at the full peak of his powers wanders senselessly, owing to chance. But the old man has let down anchor in old age as though in a harbour, since he has secured the goods about which he was previously not confident by means of his secure sense of gratitude” (*Sent. vat.* 17=IG I-6).

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