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*Lucretius, Symmetry arguments, and fearing death**

JAMES WARREN

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies two possible versions of the Epicurean 'Symmetry argument', both of which claim that *post mortem* non-existence is relevantly like prenatal non-existence and that therefore our attitude to the former should be the same as that towards the latter. One version addresses the fear of the state of being dead by making it equivalent to the state of not yet being born; the other addresses the prospective fear of dying by relating it to our present retrospective attitude to the time before birth. I argue that only the first of these is present in the relevant sections of Lucretius (*DRN* 3.832-42, 972-5). Therefore, this argument is not aimed at a prospective fear of death, or a fear of 'mortality'. That particular fear is instead addressed by the Epicureans through the additional premise (found in the *Letter to Menoeceus* 125) that it is irrational to fear in prospect an event which is known to be painless when present. This still leaves unaddressed the related fear of 'premature death', which is to be removed through the acceptance of Epicurean hedonism.

I

τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι τῷ θανεῖν ἴσον λέγω.
Euripides, *Troades* 636

The Epicureans' arguments against the fear of death have always generated a great deal of discussion and analysis. Here I detail one argument found in the third book of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*) and attempt to show that the exact form in which it appears in Lucretius' text is distinct from a related argument which is sometimes the focus of current debate. I hope that from this somewhat negative conclusion some positive

* This paper has benefited considerably from discussion with David Sedley and Dominic Scott. I would also like to thank the participants in a seminar on 'Epicurus on Death and Nature' held in Cambridge in the Lent term 2000 for their reactions to a preliminary presentation of these thoughts. A version was presented to the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy in September 2000, where the audience provided very helpful comments.

results might emerge. First, we should ask why the alternative formulation is not to be found in Lucretius, if indeed it is an argument which an Epicurean could have composed. This in turn may shed some light on what the Epicureans envisaged as the primary point of attack in their assault on the fear of death, and the overall structure formed by the various parts of that assault.

The two relevant passages of Lucretius, in which he invokes a symmetry of past and future non-existence, are the following. I call them Texts A and B for ease of reference.

Text A: Lucr. *DRN* 3.832-42

et velut anteacto nihil tempore sensimus aegri,
ad contigendum venientibus undique Poenis,
omnia cum belli trepido concussa tumultu
horrida contremuere sub altis aetheris auris,
in dubioque fuere utrorum ad regna cadendum
omnibus humanis esset terraque marique,
sic, ubi non erimus, cum corporis atque animai
discidium fuerit, quibus e sumus uniter apti,
scilicet haud nobis quicquam, qui non erimus tum,
accidere omnino poterit sensumque movere,
non si terra mari miscebitur et mare caelo.

And just as in the time that went before we felt no pain – when Carthaginians came from all sides to wage war, and the world struck by the disturbing upheaval of war shook and quivered under the high vaults of heaven, and it was unclear to whose kingdom should fall all men on the land and sea – so when we are (lit. 'will be') no more, when the body and soul from which combination we are formed have come apart, then no doubt there will be nothing to us (who will not be then) which will be able to move our senses in the slightest, not even if earth and sea and sea and sky are mixed together.

Text B: Lucr. *DRN* 3.972-5

respice item quam nil ad nos anteacta vetustas
temporis aeterni fuerit, quam nascimur ante.
hoc igitur speculum nobis natura futuri
temporis exponit post mortem denique nostram.

Look back, then, at how the stretch of unending time before we are born was nothing to us. Nature, therefore, offers this reflection to us of the future time after our eventual death.

The first step in establishing just what Lucretius' argument conveys is to distinguish two similar but different claims. I shall call them P (for 'past') i and ii.

- Pi. Our pre-natal non-existence was nothing to us before we were born.
- Pii. Looking back from within a lifetime, our pre-natal non-existence is nothing to us.

The first of these claims nothing about our present state of mind. Instead it deals with a state of affairs during the period before our birth, and asserts that *at that time* we felt no pain, loss, or distress. This relies on the generally accepted claim that since before our birth we are not, that is to say we have not (yet) come into existence, it makes absolutely no sense to consider our relative state of well- or ill-being at that time. There is no subject to consider.

The second proposition above makes a different claim. It considers a point of time within a life and asserts that looking back from the present we feel presently no distress or pain at the thought of the time before our birth.

The general form of what I shall call a 'Symmetry argument' is to take as a premise an assertion about pre-natal non-existence and then claim that there is no relevant difference between this period and its 'reflection' in the future, our *post mortem* non-existence. This latter is, of course, the period which must be the object of any fear of death. If it can be shown that we have no reason to take a different view to *post mortem* from pre-natal non-existence, and further that pre-natal non-existence is universally and justifiably not considered a source of distress, then it follows that to fear death is irrational and unjustifiable.

This general form holds whether the major premise is proposition Pi or Pii. However, the force of the argument and its conclusion are certainly affected by the choice of premise, since the symmetrical relation upon which the argument relies will generate conclusions about the rational attitude to take towards *post mortem* non-existence which are symmetrical to the starting premises and therefore distinct in the same way as those premises. In other words, if the premise is Pi, then the claim generated by the argument about the future will be F (for 'future') i:

- Fi. Our *post mortem* non-existence will be nothing to us after our death.

But if Pii is the premise, then the claim generated about the future will be this:

- Fii. Looking forward from within a lifetime, our *post mortem* non-existence is nothing to us.

Notice again the distinction between these claims. *Fi* deals with the period after our death and asserts that at that time we *will* feel no pain or distress. This, of course, is the conclusion also generated by the famous Epicurean *dictum* distilled into the second *Kyria Doxa*:

Kyria Doxa 2: ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ, τὸ δ' ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

Death is nothing to us; for what has been dissolved has no sensation, and what has no sensation is nothing to us.

In Epicurean terms, death is the disruption of the atomic complex of body and soul which constitute a person, and since no further sensation can be experienced, no pleasure and pain can be experienced and therefore no well- or ill-being in Epicurean terms. This is the argument, therefore, that in order for something to count for or against well-being there must be a subject of that well- or ill-being who stands in an appropriate relationship to the supposed good or bad.¹ For an Epicurean this relationship is the perception of pleasure or pain. In any case, after death there is no subject at all (just as before birth there was no subject) and therefore death can be nothing to us. If this is the force of the 'Symmetry argument', then it adds nothing significant to the major Epicurean claim about death. In fact, *Fi* might appear to make a weaker claim than *Kyria Doxa 2*, since it claims that death *will* not be bad, whereas *Kyria Doxa 2* famously says it *is* nothing to us. (The verb 'to be' is omitted from the version preserved in Diogenes Laertius, but in that case it is natural to supply the present tense rather than the future. Lucretius renders it as: *nil mors est ad nos* at 3.830.) Why *Kyria Doxa 2* should do this is a question to which we will return. For now let it be observed that the reasons for the conclusion given by the *Kyria Doxa* themselves are sufficient to justify only the conclusion that after death I will feel no pleasure or pain, and that therefore after death it makes no sense to talk about my well- or ill-being.

Fii, however, makes a different claim. It asserts something about our present attitudes as we look forward from the present to a point in time after death. It claims that just as when looking back we feel no distress at the thought of pre-natal non-existence, so we should in the present feel similarly about *post mortem* time. This offers a new dimension to the Epicurean discussion of the fear of death. Whereas *Kyria Doxa 2* and *Fi* dealt merely with the state of affairs after death, this argument deals

¹ Lucr. *DRN* 3.863-4.

directly with our present attitudes during our lifetime. It reflects on to the future the retrospective attitude we supposedly have now about the time before birth, asking us to take a symmetrical prospective attitude. So Pii and Fii essentially concern our present attitudes, while Pi and Fi concern what was the case before birth and will be the case after death. Let me call the version of the argument which starts with Pi and generates Fi, version 1, and the version which starts with Pii and generates Fii, version 2. I set them out here:

Version 1:

- Pi. Our pre-natal non-existence was nothing to us before we were born.
 SYM Pre-natal non-existence is relevantly like *post mortem* non-existence.
 Fi. Our *post mortem* non-existence will be nothing to us after our death.

Version 2:

- Pii. Looking back from within a lifetime, our pre-natal non-existence is nothing to us.
 SYM Pre-natal non-existence is relevantly like *post mortem* non-existence.
 Fii. Looking forward from within a lifetime, our *post mortem* non-existence is nothing to us.

II

There are at least two reasons why we might prefer Lucretius to be giving the second version of the Symmetry argument. First, as I have already suggested, version 1 concludes with little more than a restatement of the original assertion that death is annihilation and therefore since after death there is no subject, death cannot be a harm.² Second, a criticism is sometimes levelled at the Epicureans that they *ought to have* produced an argument

² Mitsis 1988, 306 n. 6 appears to disagree with Furley's 1986 assessment of the argument (see below n. 5), but in his own description of the argument at 306 expresses it clearly in the form Pi/Fi: 'We felt nothing in the time before we were born; just so, we will feel nothing when we are dead'. His general attitude throughout the article, however, is that this argument is part of an Epicurean concern to address worries about the duration of a life – and presumably this concern must be part of a prospective vision of one's lifetime from the point of view of the present. Sorabji 1983, 176 is uncertain whether Lucretius intends the 'more interesting' argument from Pii to Fii. Kamm 1993, 25 also offers version 2 as 'Lucretius' argument, distinct from 'Epicurus' argument in *Kyria Doxa 2*: 'Lucretius recognises that we *are* not disturbed much about the fact of our non-existence prior to our creation. If so, he asked, why *are* we so disturbed about our non-existence after death?' (my emphasis).

along the lines of the second form of the Symmetry argument. *Kyria Doxa* 2, it is claimed, is fine as far as it goes, but it fails to address the primary sense in which people fear death, namely the prospective fear that in the future they will die. Whether or not after death there will be a subject to experience pleasure or pain does not matter. What does matter is what can be called the fear of *mortality*, or alternatively ‘the prospective fear of death’. This fear can be distinguished from the fear of death addressed by *Kyria Doxa* 2, since it is entirely conceivable that someone might well agree that ‘being dead’ is neither pleasant nor painful, but nevertheless feel distress as he looks forward from some point in his life to a time when that life will cease.³ A critical reading of *Kyria Doxa* 2 would emphasise this error, and claim that Epicurus is wrong to state as his conclusion that ‘Death *is* nothing to us’. He is entitled to conclude only that death *will be* nothing to us – precisely when we are dead. He has said nothing so far to counter the prospective fear that my life will cease at some future time. The second form of the ‘Symmetry argument’, of course, does address this second type of fear, since it is concerned with a present prospective attitude to future non-existence.⁴ In that case, in a spirit of charity we should perhaps think that the occurrences of the Symmetry argument in Lucretius provide the extra and otherwise missing element in the Epicureans’ armoury against the fear of death.

Enough, then, of the alternatives. Which of them is to be found in our texts? Unfortunate as this might be for the assessment of the efficacy of Lucretius’ therapy, the two texts from the *DRN* tend to favour the first version of the Symmetry argument (namely $P_i \rightarrow F_i$). At least, text A certainly offers this argument and text B probably does.

That text A offers little beyond the familiar claim that death removes a possible subject for harm has been pointed out before, but should be restated.⁵ The tenses of the verbs which Lucretius employs are quite clear.

³ This distinction is arrived at by the characters A. and M. in Cicero’s first *Tusculan Disputation*. At *Tusc.* 1.14, A. asks: age iam concedo non esse miseros qui mortui sint quoniam extorsisti ut faterer, qui omnino non essent, eos ne miseros quidem esse posse. quid? qui vivimus, cum moriendum sit, nonne miseri sumus? quae enim iucunditas, cum dies et noctes cogitandum sit iam iamque esse moriendum?

⁴ Note, however, that this second ‘Symmetry argument’, although it addresses the prospective fear of death, still does not address the further fear of *premature* death. These two are well distinguished by Striker 1988.

⁵ Furley 1986, 76: ‘The tenses of the verbs are conclusive about this; there is no statement at all about our present attitudes’. Rosenbaum 1989, 358 takes issue with Furley, although he recognises that Furley is certainly correct about the tenses of the

First, Lucretius establishes Pi: *anteacto tempore nil sensimus aegri*. (3.832). The verb is clearly aorist. Lucretius might still be accused here of being loose in his expression in this line, though. We might be tempted to think that *nil sensimus* implies that we were there and had the potential to feel pain, but did not. But this cannot be Lucretius' claim, since the point he wishes to convey is of course not that we were present at that time and felt something *other than pain*, but that we were not there at all and therefore could not experience anything, a point he makes explicitly a little later (3.863-4). In any case, the period of time in question is clearly pre-natal: we did not suffer any pain *then*. Nothing is said about the present, nor about our present attitude to the past. Text A then goes on to invoke a symmetry between this period and the time *post mortem* (*sic* 838), and the symmetrical claim it produces about the future is clearly Fi, not Fii.

sic, ubi non erimus . /scilicet haud nobis quicquam, qui non erimus tum,/ accidere omnino poterit sensumque movere . . .

3.838-41

. . . just so when we are (lit. 'will be') no more, . . . then no doubt there *will be* nothing to us (who *will not be* then) which will be able to move our senses in the slightest, . . .

Lucretius is describing a state of affairs at a time after death (*non erimus tum; haud poterit*), not our present prospective attitude to our mortality. Text A, therefore, gives what I called version 1 of the Symmetry argument and confirms *Kyria Doxa 2*. It does not address a prospective fear of death.⁶

Text B is more complicated and its conclusions less clear, but ultimately it offers little if any more support for proponents of version 2 of the Symmetry argument (Pii→Fii). I repeat the Latin here (Lucr. *DRN* 3.972-5).

verbs in the relevant Lucretian texts. Nevertheless, he argues that Epicurus is certainly concerned with present attitudes since, for example, *Kyria Doxa 2* holds that 'death is nothing to us'. Rosenbaum goes on to offer a version of the Symmetry Argument (359-60) which has as its first premise: 'No one fears the time before which one existed'. and concludes 'Therefore it is not reasonable now for one to fear one's future non-existence'. These are clearly versions of Pii and Fii. If Rosenbaum is right that Epicurus was concerned with present attitudes, he is nevertheless wrong in claiming that this is the particular argument by which he set out to alleviate them.

⁶ For my reading of the '*palingenesis*' argument which immediately follows this argument in *DRN* 3, see Warren 2001.

respice item quam nil ad nos anteacta vetustas
 temporis aeterni fuerit, quam nascimur ante.
 hoc igitur speculum nobis natura futuri
 temporis exponit post mortem denique nostram.

Initially we might think that this does indeed describe a present attitude to pre-natal time. At first glance, the metaphor of viewing sustained in these lines might be thought to invite just this interpretation. After all, in the first line of the argument we are invited to 'look back' towards the past, and presumably the only point from which we may currently look back to the past is the present. Further, the metaphor of a mirror which these lines introduce might also point in this direction. The image is of a viewer who looks back in time at a mirror in front of him.⁷ The mirror displays an image of what is behind the viewer, namely the future. So as the viewer looks back to his past non-existence, he is in fact seeing before him a mirror image of what is to come.⁸ And since nothing in the image causes any distress (976-7), the future presents nothing to fear.

A proponent of version 2 of the Symmetry argument must place a lot of weight on this metaphor, and must insist that it implies a viewer located in the present looking at a mirror image of what he could see clearly if he looked over his shoulder. On this understanding the viewer is considering the relationship between himself located in the present and the object in the mirror – a reflection of *post mortem* time. Hence the argument is thought to concern our present prospective attitude to death. This picture offers the strongest indication that Lucretius is concerned with our present

⁷ The image of someone looking backwards in time conforms to the ancient image of us 'backing into the future'. We can 'see' (i.e. remember) the past but the future is not visible. Compare the use of the Greek ὀπίσω to mean 'hereafter' (LSJ s.v. II). Also see Kenney 1971 *ad* 974. He insists that *speculum exponit* should be understood as 'shows a reflection', not 'holds up a mirror', since this allows *hoc* (974) to refer to *anteacta vetustas temporis aeterni*. '[T]hat is what Nature shows us as the mirror-image of *futurum tempus*, and it is, of course, a blank, a reflection of nothing. . . . Naturally there is nothing *horribile* or *triste* (976) to be seen, because there is nothing *at all* to be seen.' This last remark is an overstatement. Of course, Lucretius is not denying that nothing at all happened before our birth, merely that whatever did happen, it caused us no pain.

⁸ Lucretius explains in his discussion of mirrors at 4.269ff. why the image in the mirror appears to be twice as far away as the viewer is from the mirror itself. We need not think that in this passage in book 3 Lucretius wishes to imply that the subject is at a temporal point half-way through his life, equidistant between birth and death, although his vision in the mirror makes it look as though he is.

attitudes to past and future non-existence, rather than the state of affairs at some time before or after our lifetime.⁹

However, despite the intuitive attraction of such an understanding, the tenses of the verbs used here suggest that in fact – and despite the metaphor of viewing – Lucretius is again offering version 1 of the Symmetry argument. Above all, the tense of *fuert* (973) suggests that this is the case: ‘pre-natal time *was* nothing to us’. This is another expression of premise Pi of version 1 of the Symmetry argument. Admittedly, this phrase might also carry a perfect sense: ‘pre-natal time *has been* nothing to us’. In that case it might be understood as a form of premise Pii of version 2 of the Symmetry argument, if it is understood that ‘has been’ here means in effect: ‘pre-natal time has been [sc. during our life, up to the present] nothing to us’. But if Lucretius wished to make clear that he is talking about it presently being the case that our pre-natal non-existence causes us no distress, then he could have done so easily by writing the present tense of the verb: *sit*.¹⁰ This would have produced the following translation, which would convey the point without ambiguity:

Look back at how all the immense amount of time before we were born is nothing to us.

Whereas, with *fuert*, the translation is more naturally:

Look back at how all the immense amount of time before we were born was nothing to us.

Both these version construe *quam nascimur ante* as amplifying *ante-acta vetustas* in the previous line – and that is how most current translations construe the phrase.¹¹ This construal is compatible with both versions of the Symmetry argument. However, it is also possible, I think, to take *quam nascimur ante* as an adverbial phrase qualifying *fuert*, in which case the translation would read:

⁹ Feldman 1990, 23 points to this passage in order to produce an argument beginning from the premise: ‘The fact that he didn’t exist for an infinitely long period of time prior to his birth is not bad for anyone’ (a species of Pii).

¹⁰ I assume that, although *sit* may be less easily incorporated into a hexameter, Lucretius would not modify an argument merely *metri causa*. *nascimur* is, of course, present tense, but this offers no support for version 2. Kenney 1971 *ad loc.*: ‘The tense shows that *nascimur* refers to all successive generations, not merely this one’.

¹¹ This is certainly the case for translations into English. Latham’s 1951 Penguin translation gives: ‘Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and

Look back at how all the previous immense amount of time was nothing to us before we were born.

This is incompatible with a version 2 understanding of the argument, since in this case it is made clear that the time being considered at which prenatal non-existence caused no harm is precisely the time before birth. On this construal Lucretius gives a clear version of proposition Pi. Of course, I need not rest my case on any controversial understanding on *quam nascimur ante*. My preferred version 1 reading is in any case strongly supported by the tense of *fuert*.

It is also possible to understand the metaphor of looking into a mirror in a way which is consistent with version 1 of the Symmetry argument. Rather than focusing on the relationship between the viewer, located in the present, and the period of time at which he is looking (namely a reflection of future time), we should instead focus solely on the image in the mirror. Version 1 of the Symmetry argument is not concerned with present attitudes to past and future non-existence. Rather it is concerned with the past and future absence of ills. So we could understand Lucretius to be asking us simply to look at the picture in the mirror. Is there anything to fear in it? No. But it is merely a reflection of how things will be after death. So since we are happy to accept that at that time before birth there was nothing which could cause any pain, we must agree that there *will be* nothing which can cause pain after death. Therefore, although Lucretius' striking image of the mirror perhaps tempts us towards version 2 of the Symmetry argument, it does not require us to think along those lines.¹²

Neither of the two texts which might be offered by proponents of version 2 of the Symmetry argument can sustain such a reading. Text A certainly cannot, and Text B certainly does not in any unambiguous way. I

mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing.' Smith's 1975 revised Loeb has: 'Look back also and see how the ages of everlasting time past before we were born have been to us nothing.' Bailey (Oxford, 1947): 'Look back again to see how the past ages of everlasting time, before we are born, have been as nought to us.' Brown (Warminster, 1997): 'Look back in turn and see how the eternity of everlasting time that elapsed of old before our birth was absolutely nothing to us.' Melville (Oxford, 1997): 'Look back upon the ages of time past/Eternal, before we were born, and see/That they have been nothing to us, nothing at all.'

¹² Bailey 1947 *ad* 974 comments that this section is merely reinforcing what was said in 3.832ff., and by doing so rounds off a particular set of arguments in this book, before Lucretius goes on to offer his thoughts on the genesis of particular myths about punishments in the Underworld.

conclude, therefore, that Lucretius does not in these passages offer a clear argument against the fear of mortality, if this is distinguished from the fear of 'being dead'.¹³

III

This conclusion can be reinforced by considering other texts in which similar arguments appear. The first of these (and probably the earliest surviving example of a Symmetry argument)¹⁴ comes from the Pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus* (365d7-e2).

ὡς οὖν ἐπὶ τῆς Δράκοντος ἢ Κλεισθένης πολιτείας οὐδὲν περὶ σὲ κακὸν ἦν – ἀρχὴν γὰρ οὐκ ἦς, περὶ ὃν ἂν ἦν – οὕτως οὐδὲ μετὰ τὴν τελευταίην γενήσεται· σὺ γὰρ οὐκ ἔση περὶ ὃν ἔσται.

Just as during the government of Draco or Cleisthenes there was nothing bad at all that concerned you (because you did not exist then for it to concern you), nor will anything bad happen to you after your death (because you will not exist later for it to concern you). (trans. J. Herschbell)

It clearly supports version 1 of the argument, and explicitly offers as a reason for the conclusion that these periods of prenatal and *post mortem* time are 'nothing to us' the fact that *at those times* we do not exist. A similarly clear version 1 of the Symmetry argument appears in an extremely brief form in Cicero's *Tusculans* 1.91:

*ut nihil pertinuit ad nos ante ortum, sic nihil post mortem pertinebit.*¹⁵

Just as nothing was of concern to us before birth, so nothing will concern us after death.¹⁶

¹³ Lucretius also points out the irrationality of those who, while protesting that they do not fear being dead, are nevertheless concerned about the treatment of their corpse: *DRN* 3.870-5. Cf. Ps. Pl. *Axioch.* 370a7-b1, where this is cast as a *peritropê* argument. Again, the focus is on the appropriate attitude for a state of affairs after death.

¹⁴ There is a chance that the argument was anticipated by Anaxagoras, if this report in Stobaeus 4.52b.39 (DK 59 A34) is accurate: Ἀναξαγόρας δύο ἔλεγε διδασκαλίας εἶναι θανάτου, τὸν τε πρὸ τοῦ γενέσθαι χρόνον καὶ τὸν ὕπνον. This differs from texts which assert that death is similar or identical to not being born (such as Andromache in Euripides *Troades* 636) insofar as Anaxagoras appears explicitly to make pre-natal time *instructive* for how we ought to view death.

¹⁵ Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 1.49: sic robustus animus et excelsus omni est liber cura et angore, cum et mortem contemnit, qua qui adfecti sunt in eadem causa sunt qua antequam nati . . .

¹⁶ J. King's 1927 Loeb edition gives the peculiar translation: 'as we brought nothing into the world at birth, so we take nothing out of the world at death'.

Seneca uses similar arguments on a number of occasions, most of which also conform to my version 1 of the Symmetry argument.¹⁷ There is, however, a related passage in *Epistula Moralis* 77.11 which offers a rather different perspective on these issues.

nonne tibi videtur stultissimus omnium qui flevit quod ante annos mille non vixerat? aequè stultus est qui flet quod post annos mille non vivet. haec paria sunt: non eris nec fuisti; utrumque tempus alienum est.

Would you not think him an utter fool who wept because he was not alive a thousand years ago? And is he not just as much a fool who weeps because he will not be alive a thousand years from now? It is all the same; you will not be and you were not. Neither of these periods of time belongs to you. (trans. R.M. Gummere).

Rather than a single subject or addressee as in the Lucretian texts, two characters are described, one concerned with past non-existence and one with future. The tenses of the verbs used also complicate the issue, since Seneca does not maintain a strict equivalence between the two characters he is comparing. The first wept (*flevit*) because he had not been alive (*vixerat*) a thousand years previously;¹⁸ the second weeps now (*flet*) because he will not be alive a thousand years in the future. This suggests that in this passage at least Seneca is indeed interested in retro- and prospective attitudes, but not so much in a strict *symmetry* between past- and future-directed attitudes. It is therefore difficult to tell whether Seneca is indeed making a specific claim about the exact relationship between retrospective and prospective attitudes.¹⁹ What is more evident is that Seneca intends here to portray two *absurd* examples of regret. It is important that these two characters are weeping over the thought of not experiencing things in the very distant past and the far future.

Even those who wish to accept that death can be a harm since it robs us of goods might shrink from the claim that death robs us of goods

¹⁷ *De Cons. ad Marc.* 19.5: mors dolorum omnium exsolutio est et finis, ultra quem mala nostra non exeunt, quae nos in illam tranquillitatem, in qua antequam nasceremur iacimus, reponit. si mortuorum aliquis miseretur et non natorum misereatur. Ep. Mor. 54.4: si quid in hac re [sc. morte] tormenti est, necesse est et fuisse antequam prodiremus in lucem; atqui nullam sensimus tunc vexationem. Ep. Mor. 65.24: nec desinere timeo (idem est enim quod non coepisse).

¹⁸ Madvig emended to: *flebit quod ante annos mille non vixerit*. *vixerit* appears in one of the codices.

¹⁹ Cf. Rosenbaum 1989, 357: 'For Seneca, the thought is clearly directed against negative feelings about future nonexistence.' This may be so, but it remains to be explained exactly how the example of an absurd retrospective attitude is meant to be instructive.

located a thousand years in the future. (This extreme position is a possibility, however. In Cicero's *Tusculans* 1.9, A. begins with the claim that both the dead and those who are going to die are *miseri*. It is pointed out that this would lead to the radical conclusion that everyone is always subject to eternal misery.) A more moderate position will concede that death is only a harm insofar as it robs us of time and goods we could reasonably have been expected to experience. This trades on the idea that we can reasonably expect to live a full life of perhaps eighty years or so, and so dying before this time is up robs us of something to which we should feel entitled. Such a counterfactual account of the harm of death obviously loses its force in the far future, since we cannot reasonably hope to live for a thousand years. While it might be right for a twenty-year-old to feel regret if he is assured he will die before the age of thirty, it is less plausible to claim that a Roman senator of the first century AD should have felt aggrieved at the thought that he would not participate in the millennial celebrations on 31 December 1999.²⁰ There is considerable room between accepting that Seneca's examples of regret are absurd and the conclusion that it is absurd to weep at the thought of non-existence *however near or far* in the past or future that non-existence may be.²¹

Seneca does close this gap, and the crucial step in his argument comes in the final phrase of the section just cited: *utrumque tempus alienum est*. On this basis Seneca grounds his assertion that such feelings about future non-existence are not justifiable. This Stoic premise is rather stronger than the Epicurean claim that before birth and after death we 'are not', since not only do the Stoics think that before birth and after death we are not, but they also are adamant that that time does not *belong* to us (since our time of birth and death are fated), and therefore its absence from our lifetime cannot in any way be a loss to us.²² Those times were never ours to lose. Seneca uses the Stoic notion of fate to underline his point (77.12).

²⁰ Cf. Striker 1988, 327. Lucretius himself emphasises that the period of *post mortem* non-existence will extend indefinitely far into the future, no matter when we actually die (3.1073-5).

²¹ Malcolm Schofield suggested to me that it might be possible to perform a *sortes*-like argument beginning with the acceptance that it is absurd to weep at far-future non-existence and ending with the conclusion that it is equally absurd to weep at any future non-existence. However, there is no suggestion that Seneca has such an additional move in mind.

²² These two periods of time are *aliena*. In some Latin Stoic texts this word describes objects which are the object of the opposite of *oikeiôsis* (e.g. Cic *Fin.* 3.16: *alienari*).

in hoc punctum coniectus es, quod ut extendas, quousque extendes? quid fles? quid optas? perdis operam. desine fata deum flecti sperare precando (= *Virg. Aen.* 6.376). rata et fixa sunt et magna et aeterna necessitate ducuntur: eo ibis quo omnia eunt.

You have been cast upon this point of time; if you would make it longer how much longer shall you make it? Why weep? Why pray? You are taking pains to no purpose. 'Give over thinking that your prayers can bend/Divine decrees from their predestined end'. These decrees are unalterable and fixed; they are governed by a mighty and everlasting compulsion. Your goal will be the goal of all things. (trans. R.M. Gummere)

This additional move provides the missing extra step. Not only is it absurd to weep at non-existence in the far future, it is equally absurd to feel the loss of any lifetime which one does not in fact enjoy. Given Stoic determinism, Seneca can head off any residual possibility that death at some particular time might be thought a harm by depriving the person of time he might have expected to live.²³ The period immediately following someone's death is no more theirs to be deprived of than some time a thousand years into the future. Given that the time of one's death is predestined, death cannot deprive one of anything – not even a second.

The next example comes from Plutarch's *Consolatio ad Apollonium*. At 107D Plutarch outlines three possibilities for the nature of death, and attributes the identification of these possibilities to Socrates. Death is either like a deep and dreamless sleep, or it is like a journey, or it is the extinction of body and soul. Each possibility is then examined in turn, and it is shown that on each account death is not to be feared. The first two possibilities are familiar from Socrates' final address in Plato's *Apology* (40c5ff.), and the third – the destruction of body and soul – may simply be an expansion from the idea of death as a complete lack of perception, which is of course the major force of the analogy with a dreamless sleep. The *Apology* is unconcerned to make a distinction between death as annihilation and death as the absence of sensation.²⁴ Nevertheless, Plutarch

²³ Such arguments that death is an evil tend to trade on the idea that while the time of a subject's birth must be fixed (since date of birth is essential to that subject's identity), the time of death is contingent and therefore a counterfactual account of the harm of death is possible. If in addition the time of death is agreed to be necessary (as in Stoicism), then this possibility is removed. See Sedley 1993, 316-8.

²⁴ Pl. *Apol.* 40c6: ἢ γὰρ οἶον μηδὲν εἶναι μηδὲ αἴσθησιν μηδεμίαν μηδενὸς ἔχειν τὸν τεθνεῶτα, . . . Of course, the *Phaedo* characterises death as a διάλυσις or ἀπαλλαγὴ of body and soul (e.g. 64c4-8, 88a10-b2) and as a release from care and pain, but it most certainly does not allow that death involves the φθορά of the soul.

treats the two as distinct positions and in his discussion of death as annihilation uses arguments familiar from Epicurean contexts.

εἴ γε μὴν ὁ θάνατος τελεία τις ἐστι φθορὰ καὶ διάλυσις τοῦ τε σώματος καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς (τὸ τρίτον γὰρ ἦν τοῦτο τῆς Σωκρατικῆς εἰκασίας), οὐδ' οὕτω κακὸν ἐστίν· ἀναισθησία γάρ τις κατ' αὐτὸν γίνεται καὶ πάσης ἀπαλλαγῆ λύπης καὶ φροντίδος. ὥσπερ γὰρ οὐτ' ἀγαθὸν ἡμῖν ἔπεστιν οὕτως οὐδὲ κακὸν· περὶ γὰρ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ὑφ' ἔσθης καθάπερ τὸ ἀγαθὸν πέφυκε γίγνεσθαι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ τὸ κακὸν· περὶ δὲ τὸ μὴ ὄν ἀλλ' ἡρμένον ἐκ τῶν ὄντων οὐδέτερον τούτων ὑπάρχει. εἰς τὴν αὐτὴν οὖν τάξιν οἱ τελευτήσαντες καθίστανται τῇ πρὸ τῆς γενέσεως. ὥσπερ οὖν οὐδὲν ἦν ἡμῖν πρὸ τῆς γενέσεως οὐτ' ἀγαθὸν οὔτε κακὸν, οὕτως οὐδὲ μετὰ τὴν τελευτήν. καὶ καθάπερ τὰ πρὸ ἡμῶν οὐδὲν ἦν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, οὕτως οὐδὲ τὰ μεθ' ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ἔσται πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

If, however, death is a complete destruction and dissolution of both body and soul (for this was the third of Socrates' conjectures) even so it is not an evil. For, according to him, there ensues a sort of insensibility and a liberation from all pain and anxiety. For just as no good can attach to us in such a state, so also can no evil; for just as the good, from its nature, can exist only in the case of that which is and has substantiality, so it is also with the evil. But in the case of that which is not, but has been removed from the sphere of being, neither of them can have any real existence. Now those who have died return to the same state in which they were before birth; therefore, as nothing was either good or evil for us before birth, even so will it be with us after death. And just as all events before our lifetime were nothing to us, even so will all events subsequent to our lifetime be nothing to us. (trans. F.C. Babbitt)

The section in italics contains Plutarch's version of the 'Symmetry argument', and this again is cast in terms of version 1, not in terms of retro- and prospective attitudes.

We can now add to the conclusion that there is no sign in Lucretius of a clear statement of version 2 of the Symmetry argument. We have no clear example in any other ancient source of version 2 of the Symmetry argument – of an argument concerning the symmetry of prospective and retrospective attitudes to past and future non-existence. Given the likelihood that even the texts written by non-Epicureans may have turned to Epicurean sources to construct their arguments against the fear of death, it therefore seems very unlikely that the Epicureans themselves ever offered any such argument stressing symmetrical prospective and retrospective attitudes. In that case we can restate and stress the criticism that Epicureans omitted to give an argument against the most debilitating species of fearing death – the prospective fear of death.

IV

All is not lost so far as the Epicureans are concerned, however, since although there is an important distinction between the conclusions I have labelled Fi and Fii, they are nevertheless related. Indeed, Fi can be used as a premise in a secondary argument which then produces Fii, so long as a further premise is inserted. And that premise, while missing from Lucretius, is prominent in Epicurus' brief summary of his ethical teachings, the *Letter to Menoeceus*. This will allow the Epicureans to offer an argument against the prospective fear of death. Here again are the two claims.

Fi: Our *post mortem* non-existence will be nothing to us after our death.

Fii: Looking forward from within a lifetime, our *post mortem* non-existence is nothing to us.

Fii can be derived from Fi by using the following principle:

Whatever causes no pain when present, causes only empty distress when anticipated.²⁵

This principle can be extracted from a section of Epicurus' letter which explicitly deduces that a fear of future non-existence is irrational since, when it comes, death is annihilation. It is worth quoting this in full.

ὥστε μάταιος ὁ λέγων δεδιέναι τὸν θάνατον οὐχ ὅτι λυπήσει παρών, ἀλλ' ὅτι λυπεῖ μέλλον. ὃ γὰρ παρὸν οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖ, προσδοκώμενον κενῶς λυπεῖ.
Letter to Menoeceus 125²⁶

²⁵ Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.16: M.: quia, quoniam post mortem mali nihil est, ne mors quidem est malum, cui proximum tempus est post mortem, in quo mali nihil esse concedis: ita ne moriendum quidem esse malum est: id est enim, perveniendum esse ad id, quod non esse malum confitemur.

²⁶ The combination κενός – ματαίος recurs in Epicurus' works. In the letter to Anaxarchus, quoted in Plutarch *Adv. Col.* 1117A, Epicurus uses both adjectives to describe the virtues, which 'filling us with hope of rewards, are empty (κενάς) and pointless (ματαίος) and bring us trouble'. The force of *kenos* seems to be 'empty' in the sense of irrational, or without justification – as in the Epicurean term *kenodoxia*, used of ill-founded beliefs which tend to cause suffering. The sense of ματαίος is 'foolish' or 'vain' and when used of persons generally means that what they are doing is futile. Compare *Letter to Menoeceus* 127 where an imagined objector claims that it is bad to be born, but, when one is born, it is best to die as quickly as possible. Epicurus claims that if this is said with conviction, the person should immediately commit suicide. If it is said in mockery, then the person is ματαίος since no one would believe him.

So, foolish is he who says that he fears death not because it will cause pain when present but because it causes pain as a prospect. For that which when present causes no distress produces only empty pain when anticipated.²⁷

An imagined objector says to Epicurus that he agrees with *Kyria Doxa* 2 that being dead is no evil. Death ‘will not cause pain when it is present’. Nevertheless, he argues, this does not remove his fear since he feels distress *now* at its approach. Epicurus carefully distinguishes these claims with two similar verb + participle phrases (λυπήσει παρών; λυπεῖ μέλλων), but in doing so makes clear how small is the distance to be travelled between agreement with the first, and acceptance of the second. The transformation of one phrase to the other requires two changes. The tense of the verb must switch from present to future or *vice versa*, while the participle must change from παρών to μέλλων or *vice versa*. If the verb alters from present to future, then the participle changes in the opposite direction, from one which implies ‘presentness’ to the prospective μέλλων. The overall effect is to enact the confusion exhibited by the objector by making the two claims he is trying to keep so distinct as like each other as possible. Thereby Epicurus tries to point out that any pain caused by anticipating death is ‘empty’, since it is based on false opinions or faulty understanding and can and should easily be removed.

Of course, Epicurus is aware that there is a real distinction to be made between causing pain when present and causing pain through anticipation, and is not trying to obliterate this distinction. Rather, his concern is to show that someone trying to retain the distinction *and* agree to *Kyria Doxa* 2, cannot do so consistently. The reason for this is given in the second sentence of the quotation, which contains the principle required to pass from Fi to Fii. The argument in full is as follows:

Fi: Our *post mortem* non-existence will be nothing to us after our death.

Ep. Men. 125: Whatever causes no pain when present, causes only empty distress when anticipated.

²⁷ Compare this with the fragment of Arcesilaus, cited with approval by Plutarch at *Cons. ad Apoll.* 110A: τοῦτο τὸ λεγόμενον κακὸν ὁ θάνατος μόνον τῶν ἄλλων τῶν νενομισμένων κακῶν παρὸν μὲν οὐδένα πάποτ’ ἐλύπησεν, ἀπὸν δὲ καὶ προσδοκώμενον λυπεῖ. The closeness of the wording of the two passages suggests that Arcesilaus is echoing this Epicurean principle. Arcesilaus is presumably making the point that this general conception (νόμος) about death is indeed inconsistent.

Therefore: Since death causes no pain when present, it causes only empty distress when anticipated (and empty distress is no real distress at all).

Fii: Looking forward from within a lifetime, our *post mortem* non-existence is nothing to us.

A symmetrical argument could, if required, be constructed to derive Pii from Pi, by using the symmetrical principle: 'Whatever causes no pain when present, causes only empty pain in retrospect'. Nowhere is this principle evoked, since Pii is not controversial as is Fii. Pi is also uncontroversial. No one has argued seriously that pre-natal non-existence was an evil, although this thesis has been advanced as an absurd conclusion to a reverse form of the Symmetry argument. This reverse argument takes as a premise the claim that 'everyone fears future non-existence', and uses the symmetry of past and future sustained by both version 1 and 2 of the original argument to conclude that it is reasonable to regret one's past non-existence.²⁸

So far, I hope to have shown that Epicurus did provide an argument which concludes that our present fear of future non-existence is irrational, but he did so through this addition to his original claim of *Kyria Doxa 2*, not through the 'Symmetry argument', at least not in the form presented by Lucretius and other ancient authors.

Before I turn to discuss this new Epicurean argument (namely Fi or *Kyria Doxa 2* and *Letter to Menoecus 125*), let me conclude my discussion of the Symmetry arguments themselves. Those who object to Fi or Fii sometimes happily grant Pi and Pii. By doing so these objectors deny the very symmetry of past and future upon which both versions of the argument rely. There are two reasons which are generally given to support this denial. They are:

²⁸ Seneca *Cons. ad Marc.* 19.5 does offer the argument as a rhetorical support for the claim that fearing being dead is absurd: *si mortuorum aliquis miseretur et non natorum misereatur*. See also Rosenbaum 1989, 368-71, who thinks that a possible defence is available in Seneca's version of the argument at *Ep. Mor.* 77.11. This begins not with the simple claim that one does not regret one's past non-existence, but that it is not reasonable to do so. The relevant 'backfire' argument would then therefore have to begin by showing that it is reasonable to fear future non-existence. It is perhaps worth noting that in the *palingenesis* argument of 3.842-62 Lucretius also (at 852-8) uses the observation that in fact we feel at present no concern for past selves to bolster his claim that we should feel no concern for future selves. For my reading of this argument see Warren 2001.

- a. The time of birth is essential to personal identity, whereas the time of death is merely contingent (i.e. I could not have been born earlier than I was, but could die later than I will).²⁹
- b. Within a lifetime our attitudes to past and future experiences are inevitably asymmetrical.³⁰

The vast majority of the present literature devoted to this topic takes these two positions as starting points, and while much of interest and use has been produced which involves discussions of personal identity, and the rationality of future-biased reasoning, the discussion has drifted away from the original structure of the Epicurean argument. Indeed, if the Epicurean argument does not invoke present attitudes to past and future experiences, then the strand of objection encompassed by *b.* cannot strike directly at the heart of the Epicurean position, since that objection is clearly considering the attitudes of a subject from a 'temporally located perspective' to things which he did experience and will experience.³¹ Further, whatever conclusions are drawn about our general attitudes to past and future experiences, it remains to be seen how these are relevant to the question of whether it is rational to take a particular view about things which cannot be experienced, whether they are in the past or the future. Much of the discussion of this question is centred on the rationality or otherwise of an apparent intuitive preference for pains to be in the past and pleasures to be in the future, but the Symmetry argument, on either version, is considering not two experiences, but two absences of experience. We display equanimity with regard to pre-natal events not because, although they were distressing at the time, they are now in the past. They simply were not ever distressing to us because they happened when we did not (yet) exist. So, for example, the conclusion that we have a 'future bias' when it comes to our pleasures is not of direct relevance.³²

²⁹ The 'classic' statement of this position is offered (although tentatively) by Nagel 1979, 8. More recently see Glannon 1994, 240-1, Williams 1995, Brueckner and Fischer 1998.

³⁰ The 'classic' statement of this position is by Parfit 1984, 165ff. Most recently see Brueckner and Fischer 1993, Kaufman 1999.

³¹ Fischer 1993, 26.

³² The cases considered by Parfit 1984, 165-7 by which he generates an intuitive 'future bias' are different from the case of death insofar as they are cases in which pain has been or will be experienced, although the memory of this pain is subsequently removed by induced amnesia. In this case, it would appear, Epicurus would happily concede that such future painful experiences might be feared. Death, however, is not painful when it is present.

Objection *a.*, therefore, seems to have a better chance against Epicurus, since it can also strike against version 1 of the Symmetry argument. It argues that *Pi* (or *Pii*) might be true, but that this attitude cannot be transferred to the future, because attitudes about prenatal non-existence can be explained by the bare fact that a particular individual could not have been born earlier than the actual date of birth. In other words, date of birth is essential to personal identity, whereas the date of death is not. This is offered as a relevant distinction between past and future non existence.³³

This objection is sometimes (as in Nagel, 1979) supplemented by a counterfactual account of the harm constituted by death. Death is an evil because it deprives one of goods which would have been enjoyed had death occurred later. But prenatal non-existence is not also an evil, because the relevant symmetrical claim about birth (namely that being born at a particular time deprives one of goods which would have been enjoyed had one been born earlier) does not express a real possibility; the *comparanda* (person born at t_1 and person born at t_2) are not the same person living two possible lives.³⁴ This counterfactual account can be disarmed given certain assumptions about personal identity. I have already shown, for example, how Seneca uses the Stoic notion of strictly determined times for birth and death in *Epistula Moralis* 77.11 to remove the possibility of death being a deprivation of goods. The Epicureans' position on the question of what constitutes personal identity is less clear, but there is no reason to think they would not resist objection *a.*'s claim.³⁵

I shall return to the counterfactual account of the harm of death below and will try to show how this can be countered by the Epicureans. As far as the symmetry of prenatal and *post mortem* time is concerned, if my interpretation is correct, the Epicureans themselves did not see the Symmetry principle as an independent argument against the fear of death. In version 1 this argument merely generates the same conclusion as *Kyria Doxa* 2. This conclusion, therefore, can be reached by a route which does not invoke the symmetry of past and future non-existence, and any counter

³³ This is sometimes called the 'Zygotic principle'. See Parfit 1984, 351ff., where he terms this the 'Time dependence claim' or the 'Origin view', and Williams 1995.

³⁴ Feldman 1992, 154-6 has an interesting discussion of these issues, and resists assuming a 'time-dependent' view of personal identity. He concludes that if someone were to live a happy life of equal length in each of the possibilities canvassed (different birth- and death-dates), then there is no difference in value between them.

³⁵ For relevant discussion see Alberti 1990, Warren 2001.

argument which does deny this symmetry is presumably offered on the mistaken understanding that the Epicureans are offering version 2 of the argument as their only available attack on the prospective fear of death. Perhaps it might therefore be asked at this point just why Lucretius provided a Symmetry argument, if it produced a conclusion no different from that of *Kyria Doxa 2*, and if in doing so it has to invoke the principle of the symmetry of past and future non-existence – which would need to be defended against a number of strong objections. In the structure of the argument against the fear of death, version 1 of the Symmetry argument produces no new conclusions. However, it does produce the same conclusion as *Kyria Doxa 2* on different grounds, namely on the basis what was the case during pre-natal time, and therefore perhaps should be seen as playing a rôle in Lucretius' attempts to persuade us of those conclusions. It points to a particular view we have of the time before we were born which is thought to be sufficiently robust as to be unquestionable, and asks us to view the future state of non-existence in the same way. By doing so, it is providing further evidence for someone who is trying to 'accustom himself' (as Epicurus tells us we must) to the thought of *Kyria Doxa 2*. The Symmetry argument plays a confirmatory and persuasive role in the Epicureans' overall project rather than seeking to establish a new and independent conclusion.

V

It remains to be observed that most recent discussions of the Symmetry argument tend not to tackle explicitly the principle evoked in *Letter to Menoeceus* 125, which, if my interpretation is correct, must stand as an important part of Epicurus' argument against the prospective fear of death.³⁶ The principle must surely be true in the sense that if someone

³⁶ Furley (1986) 76 is again a notable exception. Nussbaum 1994, 202 and n. 9, 203 and n. 11 rightly sees that this is the crucial premise for Epicurus' argument, although she seems to agree with Mitsis that my text B deals with present attitudes to death, whereas text A does not. Cf. Alberti 1990, 170-1. Rosenbaum 1989, 370 entertains the idea that this might be the basis for Epicurean arguments against fearing death, but later rejects it since then (371) 'the symmetry argument would not really be the ingenious, novel contribution to Epicurean thanatology which many have thought . . . [It] would at bottom rely logically on already well-established and defensible Epicurean ideals and would quite simply be superfluous, except perhaps as a rhetorical flourish'. This begs the question. Cockburn 1997, 138 also makes this principle a central part of Lucretius' argument, but goes on to object to it, claiming that '[t]he sense

truly thinks that when some state of affairs comes about, it will not cause any pain, it is indeed irrational nevertheless to fear in anticipation being in that state. If this person persists in fearing going to the dentist, say, then this surely must be because he thinks that when he is in the dentist's chair he will experience pain. If he knew that there would be no pain, then it does not seem rational to fear in anticipation painless dental work. This allows, of course, that one might mistakenly believe that some future state of affairs will be painful and therefore fear it in anticipation, but this simply underlines how crucial it is for Epicurus to convince us of the truth of *Kyria Doxa 2*.

By bridging the distance between fearing being dead and fearing future non-existence in the way I have suggested here, Epicurus can try to force the discussion back to his central claim that the state of being dead is not painful in any way (and is therefore not an evil). Perhaps this explains what might otherwise seem a strange omission on Lucretius' part, namely the lack of the further argument against the present fear of future non-existence found in *Letter to Menoeceus* 125. If Epicurus saw this prospective fear as derivative from the fear of the state of being dead, and was convinced that it was on this latter fear that his attention should be concentrated, then Lucretius may well also have been so convinced that he went so far as to omit the brief argument retained in *Letter to Menoeceus* 125, thinking that it was merely an optional supplementary step. All his attention was directed, even in the supposed 'Symmetry arguments', towards establishing the conclusion of *Kyria Doxa 2*: *nil mors est ad nos nec pertinet hilum, quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur* (3.830-1). It might also be suggested that *Kyria Doxa 2* itself contains an implicit use of the principle invoked in *Letter to Menoeceus* 125. I noted above that a critical reading would object to Epicurus' conclusion that death is nothing to us, since what follows only shows that death *will be* nothing to us. A more charitable reading would invoke the idea contained in *Letter to Menoeceus* 125 as understood within the argumentation of *Kyria Doxa 2*

in which physical pain is an evil is revealed as fundamentally in our fear of future pain as in our aversion to present pain . . . Similarly, the sense in which death is thought of as an evil is revealed in a *fundamental* way in a person's fear of her own death.' This objection is related to Cockburn's general concern about a particular approach to such questions, an approach which Epicurus seems to endorse (140): '[I]f we do not think of the transformation from one tense to another as being a common operator on a range of different propositional cores we will find no incongruity in the idea that something which is a matter of complete indifference when it lies in the past should be a matter of deep concern when it lies in the future.'

to generate a conclusion about how we presently should view the period of our future non-existence.

Again, however, it should be emphasised just what Epicurus has shown so far – and what he has not. The combination of *Kyria Doxa 2* and the argument of *Letter to Menoeceus 125* shows that the state of being dead is not to be feared even in prospect since it will not be painful. But this still does not tackle directly the fear of mortality – the fear which some critics of Epicureanism found left intact by *Kyria Doxa 2*. The critic might claim that by talking of a fear of death, he is not claiming to justify the fear of not-being (and so could allow Epicurus the claim in *Kyria Doxa 2*), but rather this fear of mortality. In other words, the fear is not based on an inconsistent dread of ‘being dead’, but rather in the prospective concern that one’s life, plans, and projects might be curtailed prematurely.³⁷ If this is a criticism specifically of the argument of *Kyria Doxa 2*, and of the Symmetry argument as I have interpreted it, then it is a reasonable one. Nothing here explicitly tackles the problem of fearing that a life will end incomplete. The critic of Epicureanism might also complain that even with the addition of the argument of *Letter to Menoeceus 125*, Epicurus again misses the point. He might well claim that fearing death is not at all like fearing an impending painful event – it is rather a concern with the shape and completeness of a life.

This could even be expressed in hedonistic terms, again using the counterfactual account of the harm of death. Someone might be quite happy with the conclusion that being dead is not painful, and therefore agree that they should not fear in anticipation the state of being dead (in other words, they might agree whole-heartedly with *Kyria Doxa 2* and *Letter to Menoeceus 125*), but nevertheless feel anxious at the thought that dying at some point in time will rob them of pleasure that they would have experienced had they died at a later time. Their life might be better than it will turn out to be. Their death might be *premature*.³⁸

There are good reasons to think that the Epicureans did concern themselves with the question of the completeness of a life and therefore with the question of whether and when a death can be premature. But they did this via their own particular brand of eudaimonistic hedonism, not through

³⁷ See Striker 1988.

³⁸ Indeed, if expressed in hedonistic terms it appears that any death, even one in advanced old age may rob me of possible pleasures. Of course, on such an account death could also be counted as a good – provided it releases me from inevitable future pains.

the specific arguments surveyed here. In short, the Epicureans try to dissociate the idea of a complete life from notions of temporal duration and attempt to deny any cumulative notion of pleasures. They therefore would argue that so long as you achieve katastematic pleasure, death cannot rob you of any further good which you 'would have experienced had you died later'. They try to argue that complete pleasure can be experienced in a finite time. This is not the place to delve into or criticise this particular facet of Epicurean hedonism, but this concern to provide an Epicurean story about what constitutes a complete life should therefore be seen as the second complementary strand of reasoning in Epicurean discussions of the fear of death. Once Epicurus has reduced as much as possible of the complex of anxieties about death to the fear of being dead, and has countered these with *Kyria Doxa* 2 and the Symmetry argument, he can set about putting in place his own positive account of a complete life which, he hopes, is immune to fears of premature death.³⁹

One remaining objection should be outlined. It may be argued that the attitude we normally take towards death can be justified on grounds other than its rationality, namely on its utility. While it might certainly be the case that the state of being dead involves nothing which should be feared even in prospect, nevertheless we could claim that it is best for us to try to avoid that state for as long as possible. We might even call this instrumental fear of death an evolutionary product. It is best for each individual to live for as long as possible – perhaps in order to procreate as often and successfully as possible – and one way in which this aim might be achieved is through an innate aversion to death. This fear must be kept distinct from the fear of pain, which might of itself be said to make us avoid certain potentially fatal situations. The fear in question is not the fear of dying in some particular way; it is the very general and basic aversion to ceasing to be. Epicurus, of course, would wholeheartedly endorse any mechanism which allows us to avoid pain. But still he insists that life would be better, indeed more pleasant, if we were to stop fearing death. The question here is whether specifically fearing death can be seen to serve some function such that if it were not present our lives would be rendered

³⁹ For Epicurean views on complete lives and their relation to the particular Epicurean brand of hedonism see Mitsis 1988, 320-22, and Warren 2000, 236-44. Lucretius touches upon these themes at *DRN* 3.935-45. Note the metaphor of the leaky jar, borrowed from Plato's *Gorgias*, which also is used by Lucretius to describe the 'Danaids' at 3.1002-10.

unliveable. Much more could be said about this question,⁴⁰ but it is clear enough that Epicureans do not – or at least are not supposed to – become suicidal dare-devils. Presumably enough of the functional aversions to risk and pain remain, once the debilitating fear of being dead is abolished, to allow an Epicurean to navigate safely through the world.⁴¹ It seems to me therefore that the fear of pain can carry most of the weight supposed to be borne by the instrumental fear of death and that therefore there is no reason to believe that it is impossible to live a recognisably human life without fearing death. That is not to say, of course, that an Epicurean life is identical to those which others lead. It is not intended to be.

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⁴⁰ Rorty 1983 has a good discussion of the 'functional fears' of death, and concludes that there is an irreconcilable dilemma between the irrationality of the metaphysical fear of death, and the inevitable functional fear of death. This dilemma, however, is judged not to be debilitating. Cf. Oaklander 1994, 349. Haji 1991, 177 points out that this 'sociobiological conjecture' 'may provide the beginnings of an explanation about why, from moments *within* their lives, people care more about life's goods of which death could deprive them, than about life's goods they could have enjoyed had they not been conceived so late.' Nevertheless, Haji is quick to insist that from an *atemporal perspective* there is no relevant distinction to be made between pre-natal and *post mortem* times. Brueckner and Fischer 1993, 42, respond: '[W]e believe that the temporally situated perspective is at least as important as the atemporal with respect to the generation or recognition of values.'

⁴¹ Diogenes of Oinoanda fr. 35 Smith distinguishes two types of fearing death, one which is clear and another which is not. As an example of the first he offers the example of avoiding something harmful, a fire for example, since it might cause death. It is unclear, however, whether Diogenes wishes to endorse this as the *correct* reason for avoiding fire (i.e. the reason why an Epicurean sage would avoid fire) or on what grounds a committed Epicurean could do so without jeopardising the assertion that death is 'nothing to us'. Of course, it is perfectly acceptable – and surely plausible – for him to argue that we do and should avoid dying painfully if at all possible.

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