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Coming to Terms with Death: Considering Lucretius's Symmetry Argument

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Coming to Terms with Death: Considering Lucretius's Symmetry Argument

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of the
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Introduction

Often when I was a child I would dream about my funeral. In my dreams I saw myself lying still in an open casket, arms crossed, eyes closed. In some dreams I was 16, in others I was very old. From every dream I awoke terrified, preoccupied with thoughts about my death. Every day I was a little closer to death and terrified of that fact.

My fear of death was not unique. Ironically, for myself and many others death may be one of the scariest things about life. As such, those concerned with helping people live good lives try to calm fears of death, whether through promises of an eternal, blissful afterlife, or by assuring people that they will be reincarnated. In this thesis I consider one ancient philosopher's attempt to quell this fear.

In his poem *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius, an ancient philosopher, argues that we should not fear death. Lucretius's argument against the fear of death is called the Symmetry Argument. The Symmetry Argument says that there was an eternal expanse of time before we were born, our prenatal nonexistence, that mirrors the eternal expanse of time to come after we die, our postmortem nonexistence. We do not feel badly about our prenatal nonexistence (the time before we were born) so we similarly should not feel badly about our postmortem nonexistence (the time after we die). Importantly, we should not feel badly about our prenatal and postmortem nonexistence *on account of* the symmetry between the two periods. This thesis centers around this argument Lucretius presents for the Symmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence; I consider and counter interpretive and substantive objections to the Symmetry Argument.

This thesis consists of three chapters. In the first chapter I outline the system on which Lucretius bases his argument. Lucretius ascribed to a philosophical system founded by Epicurus aptly called Epicureanism. In the first chapter I explain the three primary components of

Epicureanism—Epicurean physics, which describes what exists in nature, epistemology, which explains how we know what we know, and ethics which tells us what a good life consists in. After explaining the core components of Epicureanism, I explain how they influence the Epicurean view of death.

In the second chapter I explicate the two passages in which Lucretius presents the Symmetry Argument. After reconstructing Lucretius's argument, I consider two contemporary philosophers' interpretations of the text. I ultimately defend Lucretius's original Symmetry Argument, as I have reconstructed it, against these two contemporary misinterpretations.

In the third chapter, I consider two contemporary philosophers' objections to the Symmetry Argument. Thomas Nagel and Frederick Kaufman both argue that the time before we were born is *not* symmetrical with the time after we have died. Lucretius's Symmetry Argument relies on the similarity of these two periods. If the time before we were born is not symmetrical with the time after we die, then Lucretius's Symmetry Argument fails. In this final chapter, I primarily respond to Frederick Kaufman's extension of Nagel's argument, arguing that Kaufman fails to prove the argument on which his objection to Lucretius relies.

Chapter 1: Understanding Epicureanism

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I provide a brief overview of the core tenets of Epicureanism.¹ This chapter serves as a backdrop to the following chapters, which are focused on Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. Lucretius's Symmetry Argument (which is presented in *De Rerum Natura*) argues that the time before we were born is symmetrical with the time after we die and we ought to have similar attitudes toward the two periods on account of this fact. Understanding Epicureanism, the philosophical system to which Lucretius ascribed, is crucial to understanding how the Symmetry Argument is meant to function.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the three components of the Epicurean system, canonic (epistemology), ethics and physics. Canonic, as described in Epicurus's *Canon*, generally outlines Epicurean epistemology. Epicurean ethics are concerned with how we live a good life. Epicurean physics are meant to explain both what things make up the world and also how we describe events and processes that exist in nature.²

In this brief chapter on Epicureanism, I will pay most attention to Epicurean physics and the application of all three components of Epicureanism to their view of death in preparation for the discussion of the Symmetry Argument in the remainder of this thesis project.

¹ Epicureanism is a system of philosophical thought that originated with Epicurus, an ancient philosopher who lived from 341-270BC. Lucretius, who was born nearly 250 years after Epicurus, wrote *De Rerum Natura* on Epicureanism.

² In fact, the word physics is derived from the Greek word *phusis*, meaning nature.

1.2 Physics

Epicurean physics are crucial to the Epicurean system of thought because they describe what, at a most basic level, exists in nature. For Epicureans, what exists in nature are atoms and void. Epicureans, then, are atomists. The atomist believes that all that exists is atoms and void. Atoms are the smallest components of matter and void being the space between atoms.

Atomism, most broadly, is the theory that everything that exists in nature is composed of atoms and void. Atoms are small, indivisible “bodies”. These atoms are the basic building blocks of every being or object in existence. These beings and objects are called compounds. Atoms exist in void. Void is the space where there are not atoms.³ Void is present between atoms that are bound in a compound. If there is a box filled with round balls, there will be space between the balls. The balls are analogous with atoms and the space between them void. Void exists both between atoms that are bound in an object and as empty space between and around objects. For example, in a room furnished with only a table, both the empty space surrounding the table and the space *between* each of the atoms that composes the table are void.⁴

The Epicurean believes that along with atoms void must also exist. If void did not exist atoms would have no space through which to move—atoms do move, though.⁵ Void is the space compounds move through and exist in. If there were no void, all matter would exist in a solid, stationary mass because there would be no space (void) to move through or to exist in separated from other compounds.⁶ There is also evidence of atoms moving through the void, I argue. For example, though I can smell bread baking, I do not see atoms from the bread flying through the air. However, from my

³ In Pierre-Marie Morel’s chapter on atomism in the 2009 *Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, Morel clarifies that the belief that void includes not only the space between atoms but empty space *around* atoms (in which atoms move), as well is unique to Epicurean atomism. Early atomists argued that void only existed between atoms.

⁴ Though even in this supposedly empty space there are atoms floating about.

⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 10.40.

⁶ *De Rerum Natura*, 1.330-56.

sensual perceptions I can deduce that atoms must be in the air, the void. The unperceivably small atoms that carry the smell of the bread must be moving through the air, thinks the Epicurean.⁷

Though everything is made of atoms and void, objects may be made of compounds. For example, a table may consist of wood, varnish, glue, and nails. All of the parts that compose the chair, though, are composed of atoms and void. So while the table is made of all of its compound components (wood, varnish, glue, nails) it is essentially made of atoms and void insofar as each of its parts is made of atoms and void. Analogously, modern science teaches that though a person is made of her body parts, she is essentially composed of atoms.

For the Epicurean, the universe is infinite. Lucretius says that the universe is unbound and that which is unbound extends infinitely in every direction. Lucretius provides an example to prove the infinity of the universe. Lucretius supposes for the sake of argument that the universe is finite. If this were the case (the universe had limits) and someone threw an arrow from the edge of the universe, two things may happen. Either the arrow will proceed to glide through air or it will hit something, its motion halted. In the first case, there is void beyond the “limit” of the universe and in the second, matter. In both cases there is either atoms or void beyond the supposed limit of the universe, so the universe is, in fact, infinite.

Further, if the universe were bound, thinks Lucretius, all matter (composed of atoms and void) would collect at the bottom of the universe.⁸ Atoms have weight and, undisturbed, move downward. Should all the atoms of the world be confined, the sheer weight of them would drag all matter down into an indistinguishable mass. We know the universe is infinite though, because all things do not settle at the bottom of the universe. The sky lies above us and sunlight shine from the sky. Atomic suspension (for example, the sun’s light and the sky above the ground) occurs because the universe

⁷ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.221-30.

⁸ *De Rerum Natura*, 1.984-1007.

infinitely stretches in all directions. If the universe were bound, the light and the sky would sink through the depths toward the bottom of the universe, wherever that may be.

Next, Epicurus provides proof that matter (composed of atoms and void) too is infinite. The fact of all matter and void being infinite follows from the Epicurean belief argument that the universe is infinite. If matter were not infinite, there would be too little matter to fill the infinite expanse of the universe. Either atoms would be so widely dispersed that they would never compound, or, should they compound, the resulting matter would be ephemeral, unable to resist dissolving to (impossibly) fill the space of the universe.

Matter is infinite with respect to both the number of atoms and the magnitude of void. Because matter is infinite, either or both of its constituents (atoms and void) must also be infinite—either atoms *and* void or atoms *or* void must be unlimited. If void were unlimited and atoms limited, atoms would be in constant motion because they would neither be stabilized by other atoms nor slowed by colliding with other atoms. If atoms were unlimited and the void limited, there would not be enough space (enough void) for the unlimited atoms to exist within. Therefore, totality is unlimited with respect to both atoms and void.⁹

Epicurus provides further proof of totality's limitlessness. Epicurus argues that what is limited has an extreme. Further, says Epicurus, an extreme is such because it contrasts something else. For example, 0°F and 100°F are both extreme when compared with one another, but by themselves neither number is "extreme" because they are not being compared with anything. Epicurus concludes that totality has no extreme because it cannot be compared with anything. Because totality has no extreme, it has no limit; totality is unlimited.

⁹ Diogenes Laertius, 10.41-2.

All that exists in nature (totality) is not only limitless, but also eternal. For Epicurus, nothing comes to be from nothing and nothing passes away into nothing. For example, when a cloud forms it is composed of water molecules; it comes from water molecules (which in turn come to be in the air due to evaporation). When the cloud dissipates, the water molecules once more separate. A cloud comes to be from water molecules and returns to dispersed molecules when it ceases to be; a cloud does not come to be miraculously nor do its component parts disappear from the universe when they disperse.

If it were the case that things passed away into nothing, simply disappearing from the universe, then eventually nothing would be left in existence. Should everything pass away into nothing, then whenever an object disintegrated its atoms would not be once more free to attach themselves to other compounds, they would just cease to be entirely, apparently zapped from the universe. If this process happened indefinitely, everything would perish into nothing and eventually nothing would be left. All that exists in nature (totality) is eternal. Relatedly, totality is unchanging insofar as it is made of the same constitute parts (atoms and void) formed into different compounds over time.¹⁰

Though everything is composed of atoms and void, there is a diverse range of atoms that may make up any given object. Atoms have both shape and size. Lucretius says that there are a limited, but innumerable number of shapes that an atom may have. There is a vast array of shapes an atom may have, but there are not an infinite number of shapes an atom may be. If there were an infinite number of shapes that an atom could take, there would, in virtue of the infinite range of options, be an atom that was incredibly large.¹¹ Epicurus tells us though, that atoms are quite small. If such a large atom existed, it would diverge from the properties that the Epicurean sees as being inherent to *all* atoms. Therefore, there cannot be an infinite number of shapes an atom may be in.

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius, 10.39

¹¹ *De Rerum Natura*, 2.479-99.

While there are not an infinite number of shapes an atom may be in, there are an infinite number of atoms of each shape.¹² For each shape of atom, there are an infinite amount of replicates. Lucretius supports the claim that there are an infinite amount of atoms of each shape by reminding his reader that there are an infinite amount of atoms. If there were a finite amount of atoms of each shape, the sum of all atoms would also be finite. Again, there cannot be a finite amount of atoms because if there were, atoms would be in constant motion would have difficulty binding to each other to form compounds. Therefore, there must be an infinite amount of atoms of each shape.¹³

The speed at which a compound moves reflects the shape and size of its atoms. Notably, though, undisturbed atoms move at equal speed through the void.¹⁴ However, in reality, the ability for an atom to avoid a collision is what makes it move faster or slower through the void. For example, large atoms move more slowly through the void than small atoms because they (large atoms) are more likely to collide with other atoms as they move. The shape and size of atoms, in turn, determines how something will respond to movement. For example, Lucretius says that water atoms are made of small rolling shapes.¹⁵ Accordingly, water flows through and around the objects it meets.

Epicurus and Lucretius use evidence from our senses to prove atomic features.¹⁶ For example, Lucretius says that objects that are pleasurable to us have round and smooth atoms, while items that are not pleasurable to us are composed of rough and jagged atoms. Lucretius says, “For nothing whatsoever that soothes the senses is made without some smoothness in the first beginnings; but

¹² *De Rerum Natura*, 2.522-31.

¹³ Troublingly, neither Lucretius nor Epicurus address the case where there is an infinite amount of at least one shape of atom. If there were an infinite amount of at least one shape of atom, even if every other type of atom (shape of atom) was finite in number, there would still be an infinite amount of atoms. Any infinite amount of things added with a finite amount of things still yields an infinite amount of things.

¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius, 10.61.

¹⁵ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.189-90.

¹⁶ Sense perception, most clearly explained in the context of Epicurean epistemology, will be discussed in detail in the next section.

contrariwise, whatever is offensive and harsh has been found to be not without some roughness in its material.”¹⁷ From the fact that an object is displeasing to us we can deduce that it is composed of displeasing atoms.

Lucretius and Epicurus make many similar arguments in their discussion of atoms, urging the reader to recall properties of objects and from those properties deduce certain features of the constitution of the item (whether that be the density of atoms within a compound or the shape of the atoms). One example of the connection between the form of the atoms of a compound and the function of the compound is the soul (as conceptualized by an Epicurean). The soul, says Epicurus, is composed of very small atoms which resemble breath, dispersed throughout the body. The soul is a compound composed of both the spirit and the mind. The mind, the intelligent part of the soul, is congregated and rules the rest of the soul which is dispersed freely throughout the body.¹⁸ Lucretius helpfully explains the atoms of which the mind is composed. The mind, says Lucretius, “...is exceedingly delicate and formed of exceedingly minute particles.”¹⁹ Lucretius also posits that atoms of the mind must be both rounded and incredibly small because the process of thought occurs exceptionally fast.²⁰ Unlike our current association between the mind and the brain, early Epicureans (not unlike their contemporaries) believed the mind to be centered in the chest. The chest, Lucretius argues, is where we feel emotions originate from.²¹ This justification is unsurprising considering the Epicurean reliance on sense perception to explain phenomena. We feel rage, for example, rising hot from our chests, therefore our minds must be centered there.

¹⁷ *De Rerum Natura*, 2.422-25.

¹⁸ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.136-44.

¹⁹ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.179-80.

²⁰ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.182-207.

²¹ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.140-2.

The soul can only function when held within the body. Just as my leg, if severed from my body, would putrefy, so too would my soul die absent my body. Unlike my leg, whose atoms would slowly come apart as it rots, the atoms of the soul are very fine and would disperse immediately when the soul leaves the body. The atoms of the soul are too delicate to stay bound together absent the body. When the soul leaves the body, the atoms, untethered, will scatter into the vast void. Relatedly, the mind and spirit must be bodily because the mind causes changes within the body. For example, my mind roused my body from sleep this morning and causes my fingers to type now. In order for the mind to cause change in the body, it must be touching the body, argues Lucretius.²² The things over which the mind governs are in part bodily, thus the two are related.²³ Further, it must be touching the body.

Further proving the connection between the body and soul, Lucretius says that the mind grows with the body. Babies, for example, are not intelligent, insofar as they are unable to speak and control their bodies. As they physically age, though, so too do their minds. As children age they become more intelligent. Conversely, as the body falls into decline with old age, so too does the mind. Lucretius poetically explains, “Afterwards, when the body is now wrecked with the mighty strength of time, and the frame has succumbed with blunted strength, the intellect limps, the tongue babbles, the intelligence totters, all is wanting and fails at the same time.”²⁴ When the body declines, the mind follows.

Along with having shape and size, atoms are constantly in motion. Atoms move by colliding with other atoms. Atoms that are bound in a compound move more subtly, vibrating. Atoms in compounds vibrate because they are constantly colliding with other atoms, but because they are bound so closely

²² *De Rerum Natura*, 3.161-7.

²³ I recognize that this is not always the case, though. If a person has advanced Lou Gehrig’s disease, for example, the connection between her mind and body is damaged.

²⁴ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.451-4.

with them, have little void to escape to when they come into contact with one another.²⁵ Further evidence of atoms' motion is that compounds become smaller and larger over time.²⁶ For example, an iceberg waxes and wanes over the course of many years. When an iceberg becomes larger, atoms move onto it, when an iceberg become smaller, atoms leave from it. For an object to change in size atoms must leave or attach themselves to it.

According to the Epicurean, atoms come to collide in the first case by a phenomenon called swerve. Undisturbed, atoms all fall directly downward at the same speed through the void.²⁷ However, atoms diverge slightly from their downward path "at time quite uncertain and uncertain places", causing them to collide with other atoms.²⁸ This divergence that causes atoms to collide with other atoms is called swerve. Swerve leads to atomic collision which in turn results in the formation of compounds.²⁹ If not for swerve, Lucretius argues, "all [atoms] would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place...thus nature would never have produced anything."³⁰ In other words, swerve is responsible for the collision of atoms that results in the formation of compounds. If atoms did not collide with each other nature would not have yielded any compounds, thus no objects would exist in the world.

The Epicurean system of physics is primarily based on one concept, everything in nature is composed of atoms and void. Both the universe and matter are infinite and matter is formed when atoms swerve, colliding into one another. The soul, composed of very fine atoms, is inextricably connected with the body; when the body fails, so does the soul.

²⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 10.43-4.

²⁶ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.67-79.

²⁷ *De Rerum Natura*, 2.225-42.

²⁸ *De Rerum Natura*, 2.218-19.

²⁹ *De Rerum Natura*, 2.216-39.

³⁰ *De Rerum Natura*. 2.221-224.

1.3 Canonic (Epistemology)

Intertwined with a discussion of the properties of atoms is a discussion of sense perception. The Epicurean believes that film-like outlines composed of very fine atoms are continuously shed from objects. These film-like images, called *eidola*, move through the void effortlessly. The atoms that compose *eidola* may still collide with other atoms as they move through the void, just much less often than larger atoms. Given their fineness, *eidola* also move incredibly fast through the void.³¹ When we perceive the *eidola* of objects, we see and think only about the general shapes of the objects; *eidola* do not and cannot carry the complete shape of an object from object itself to our eyes. As the atoms of the *eidola* collide with other atoms on its path from the object its shed from to our eyes, its shape becomes less distinct. By the time the *eidola* reach our eyes, the shape of the objects is slightly distorted or damaged.³²

For each perceiver of an object, the *eidola* are different. For example, if my friend and I are both sitting on opposite sides of a movie theater, the *eidola* we perceive being shed from the screen are different because we are viewing the movie from different perspectives. If my friend and I were sitting next to each other, we similarly would see different *eidola*. Even if my friend and I were, impossibly, watching the movie from identical perspectives, we would still not perceive the exact same *eidola* because each individual *eidola* cannot be in two places at once.

All sensations, says the Epicurean, are true. All sensations accurately convey information about the world. For example, *eidola* convey correct information about the general shape of an object to a person's eyes. Importantly, while the sensations themselves convey correct information, our judgement of that information may well be incorrect. For example, if I see Rose from a distance and take her to be Amina, the error is not in my sensation (in this case the sight of Rose). My mistaking

³¹ Diogenes Laertius, 10.48.

³² Diogenes Laertius, 10.49.

Rose for Amina is due to an error in my judgement, the way I have processed the correct information that I received.

Each sense has a different object, and thus the sensations that we receive from each cannot be contradictory.³³ For example, a particular cheese may seem to my nose unpleasant, but to my tongue, pleasant. The object of my nose is smell, and my tongue taste, so the two sensations of the cheese are not contradictory as they describe completely different attributes of the cheese.

The unfailing truth of our sensations may seem questionable. For example, from a distance I may mistake a raccoon for a cat. My sense, vision, inaccurately perceived one animal for another. It seems that in this case my sensations are false. An Epicurean would respond that my sensation is true, my mind is responsible for my inability to properly judge my sensations.³⁴ Epicurus succinctly notes, “Falsehood or error *always* resides in the added opinion...”³⁵

Preconceptions occur when we have repeated sense perceptions of the same thing or the same kind of thing. From these repeated experiences, we form a memory of what we have often seen. This memory is our preconception of a particular object.³⁶ In the case of the raccoon mistaken for a cat, I have seen so many cats that I have a memory of what a cat looks like, a preconception, that clouded my ability to interpret my perception accurately. Had I not presupposed the animal before me to be a cat based on my preconception of cats, I would likely not have misidentified it. Further, Epicurus argues that we must trust that our sense perceptions are true because if we question all of our sense perceptions we have no true reference to compare our sense perceptions with. If there are no true sense

³³ *De Rerum Natura*, 4.486-96.

³⁴ *De Rerum Natura*, 4.379-86.

³⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 10.50.

³⁶ Diogenes Laertius, 10.51.

perceptions with which to compare supposedly false sense perceptions, it is impossible to prove their falsity.³⁷

1.4 Ethics

In understanding Epicureanism, it is important to understand Epicurean ethics. Epicureans are hedonists. Hedonism is a teleological ethical system, meaning there is an ultimate goal that we are to pursue in life. Hedonists hold that this ultimate good is pleasure and the ultimate bad, pain and that we should seek to live pleasurable lives. The ultimate good is intrinsically good. An intrinsic good is pursued for its own sake. Opposite intrinsic goods are instrumental goods. Instrumental goods are sought for the sake of something beyond themselves. For example, getting vaccinated is instrumentally good. Getting vaccinated is only good insofar as it protects us from disease. Getting vaccinated is not intrinsically good, because it is not good for its own sake—getting vaccinated is not good for the sake of getting vaccinated. The object of any hedonic ethical system (pleasure) is, according to that system, necessarily intrinsically good.

For the Epicurean, the ultimate goal of life is pleasure.³⁸ There are two desirable states, one mental, *ataraxia* and one bodily, *aponia*. *Ataraxia* is the absence of mental pain—*ataraxia* may also be translated to mean something like tranquility—and *aponia* is the absence of physical pain. Mental pain is distress that a person experiences that is not a result of physical harm. For example, depression constitutes mental pain. According to an Epicurean, *ataraxia* is the supreme state of pleasure—achieving *ataraxia* is preferable to achieving *aponia*.³⁹ While Epicurus acknowledges that we avoid physical pain, the absence of physical pain, *aponia*, is not sufficient for reaching ultimate pleasure. In

³⁷ Epicurus, “The Principle Doctrines.” In Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, XXIII, translated by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson.

³⁸ Diogenes Laertius, 10.126.

³⁹ *The Principal Doctrines*, III.

short, the ultimate goal of the Epicurean life is to be free of mental pain, *ataraxia*, not physical pain, *aponia*. Epicurus emphatically proves this point, saying, “And even if the wise man is tortured on the rack, he is happy.”⁴⁰ Even if a person is in extreme physical pain if she somehow remains in a state of *ataraxia* she is happy.⁴¹ Along those lines, while Epicurus argues that all pleasures are good whether they contribute to *ataraxia* or *aponia*, he stresses that some pleasures are just better than others.⁴² For example, the pleasure I get from eating a slice of carrot cake is less good than the pleasure I get from having a stimulating discussion.

We often derive pleasure from fulfilling our desires. For the Epicurean, there are three types of desire, natural necessary desires, natural unnecessary desires, and groundless desires.⁴³ Natural, necessary desires are those which are necessary for happiness and survival.⁴⁴ Natural unnecessary desires are those for things which are extravagant, but fulfill the same needs as necessary desires. For example, Epicurus urges us to eat simply, not extravagantly.⁴⁵ While I may be equally satiated by a gold-plated ice cream sundae as I would a bowl of oatmeal, my desire for the sundae is unnecessary while my desire for the oatmeal is necessary. Both desires, insofar as they are, at their core, desires to eat, are natural desires.

Groundless desires are those which are neither natural nor necessary. These desires do not contribute to our happiness and need not be met in order for us to survive. For example, a desire for

⁴⁰ Diogenes Laertius, 10.118.

⁴¹ Epicurus does not address the concern that it may be impossible or, at the very least, rare for a person who is being tortured to be in a state of *ataraxia*. If someone is in a state of extreme physical pain her mental state will likely be affected by her physical pain.

⁴² *The Principal Doctrines*, VIII, Diogenes Laertius 10.129.

⁴³ *The Principal Doctrines*, XXIV.

⁴⁴ Diogenes Laertius, 10.127.

⁴⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 10.131.

fame (so long as fame is not crucial for a person's achieving a state of *ataraxia*) is a groundless desire. Given their uselessness, we should not have groundless desires.⁴⁶

1.5 Death

In this section I briefly explain the Epicurean account of death and how each of the three components of the Epicurean system (physics, epistemology and ethics) inform the Epicurean view of death.

Epicurus and Lucretius both spend a great deal of time addressing death, Epicurus most notably in his *Letter to Menoeceus* and Lucretius in the third book of *De Rerum Natura*. Recalling atomism, the Epicurean argues that death is the annihilation of an individual. Given that there is no subject that persists after death (*we* do not exist when we die), there is no subject of experience to which to attribute pain and pleasure. Thus, death is nothing to us. In addition to its clear use of atomism, Epicurus's explanation of death employs both Epicurean understandings of epistemological and ethical systems, as well. First, there is no subject to experience sensations. Further, pain and pleasure, what make life go well or badly for a person, are both experiences. Absent a subject, pain and pleasure cannot be experienced. I will explain the Epicurean account of death in far more detail in the second chapter.

Atomism and the Epicurean conception of the soul inform the Epicurean view of what happens upon death. The soul, like the body, dies. After death, the soul leaves the body. Lucretius analogizes, just as when broken, water spills from its vessel, the soul, upon the death of the body, its vessel, seeps out.⁴⁷ Just as a hand severed from an arm is unable to act (touch anything) or feel (perceive anything), the soul when separated from the body has no sensation. Again, the ability to sense is necessary for experiencing anything, so upon loss of sensation, there can be no subject of experience. Upon death,

⁴⁶ The distinction between the three types of desires is difficult to determine. However, nailing down this distinction is neither necessary for nor within the scope of this thesis project.

⁴⁷ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.425-44.

the mind escapes into open air which is too vast for the mind's atoms to continue to cohere. Similarly, without the soul, guided by the mind, the body is unable to act, as well. While the mind is confined to the center of the chest, the rest of the spirit is dispersed throughout the body. When the soul, composed of both the mind and this dispersed spirit, leaves the body, it disrupts the foundation of the physical body.⁴⁸ The body without the soul is like a house constructed without nails. A house, stripped of nails, will collapse. Similarly, when the body and soul separate, neither may survive.

When the atoms of one's soul and body disperse, she ceases to exist, both in body and spirit. Lucretius says further that even if our minds were to survive death intact (as in, the atoms of the mind remain compacted), *we* would not survive because we are defined by the relationship of our bodies with our souls. That is, personal identity is dependent upon the union of body and soul. Lucretius further strengthens his view of personal identity arguing that even if the atoms that I am currently composed of were to come together in the exact configuration they are in now at a different point in time, that reconfigured being would not be *me*. That reconfigured being could not possibly recall her previous life, my life, because the memories and experiences associated with that life have since dispersed separate from the atoms that both I and this reconfigured being are composed of.⁴⁹ All of the sensations that a person has had in her lifetime would differ from those of the person who is composed at a different point in time. Thus, the being to whom I am identically composed could not be me. The implication of the failure to be reconfigured and retain personal identity is that when we die, we cease to exist *eternally*.

Epicurus's views of death are most clearly expressed in his *Letter to Menoeceus*. Epicurus tells us that death is nothing to us. Epicurus bases his argument on the fact that the soul and body disperse upon death and the person they composed ceases to exist upon their dispersal. Specifically, in his

⁴⁸ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.548-91.

⁴⁹ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.847-61.

Letter to Menoeceus he says, “So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since 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.”⁵⁰ When we are alive we are, necessarily, not dead. The living cannot experience being dead. When we are dead we no longer exist because our atoms irreparably separate. Given that after death we are nonexistent, death is nothing to us.

Epicurus also argues that upon our deaths we are not capable of having sense experience. Our inability to have sense experiences upon death is significant for two reasons. First, without sense perception we are unable to make judgements about anything in the world; we are unable to interact with the world.⁵¹ Second, and more importantly, without sense experience, we cannot have pleasurable or painful experiences. Again Epicurus argues then, death *cannot be* anything to us.

Following Epicurus, Lucretius, too says that death is nothing to us. Those who fear death simply do not understand or accept that upon death they *will* cease to exist.⁵² If those who fear death would accept their impending nonexistence, Lucretius argues, they would see that there is no reason to fear. In a particularly emphatic moment, Lucretius imagines a mourner’s lamentation, crying for what could have been of their lost loved one’s life. Lucretius responds that for the one who has died there is nothing to be lost *in virtue of their being dead*.⁵³ Using Epicurean logic, Lucretius implies here that because one’s atoms disperse upon her death, no subject of pain and pleasure remains thus the subject who did exist cannot experience anything. All that is good or bad for a person, pleasure and pain, are dependent upon a subject’s ability to have experiences. After a person ceases to exist, then, there is no subject of either pleasure or pain (or anything at all).

⁵⁰ Diogenes Laertius, 10.124.

⁵¹ Diogenes Laertius, 10.124-5.

⁵² *De Rerum Natura*, 3.870-87.

⁵³ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.894-903.

Upon reiterating that the dead person herself cannot be harmed, Lucretius addresses the mourner. The mourner pledges to grieve for their loved one forever. To the mourner, Lucretius responds that she need only recognize that her loved one is at peace, and she too will be calmed. Lucretius reminds the mourner that there is nothing to grieve if the person they are grieving for no longer exists and thus cannot be harmed by her death or the events following her death.

Lucretius's engagement with common arguments against the fear of death show that he is committed to quelling that fear. Lucretius is very concerned with assisting individuals in ridding themselves of the fear of death and helping them change their attitudes toward death. Lucretius informs us of his intention to calm the fear of death in the first book of *De Rerum Natura*, saying that the reason that people are afraid of death is because they do not have the tools to understand why the common narratives they have heard about death are wrong.⁵⁴ The fear of death is based on a false belief that death is harmful for a person. Lucretius says that "there is ignorance what is the nature of the soul", naming common false beliefs about death.⁵⁵ Lucretius then says that his account of physics is meant to calm this fear, concluding, "This terror of mind therefore and this gloom must be dispelled...by the aspect and law of nature."⁵⁶ Lucretius clearly is concerned with presenting an account of Epicureanism to help people achieve *ataraxia*, freedom from mental disturbance. Part of this project, for Lucretius, is calming a large source of distress in peoples' lives, the fear of death.

In this chapter I have explained the three parts of the Epicurean system, physics, canonic (epistemology) and ethics. Epicurean Physics are based on the fact of all things in nature being composed of atoms and void. Epicurean Epistemology teaches that all sense perceptions are true, even

⁵⁴ *De Rerum Natura*, 1.110-11.

⁵⁵ *De Rerum Natura*, 1.112-26.

⁵⁶ *De Rerum Natura*, 1.146-8.

if our judgement of those perceptions is false. Finally, on an Epicurean ethical system, hedonism, the greatest pleasure is achieving *ataraxia*, freedom from mental disturbance. From an understanding of Epicureanism we can understand Epicurus and Lucretius's view that death is nothing to us; death is nothing to us because no conscious subject exists to enjoy pleasure or suffer pain upon death. In the chapter that follows I will explain Lucretius's Symmetry Argument and engage with two contemporary philosophers' interpretations of the Symmetry Argument.

Chapter 2: The Symmetry Argument

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. In his *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius argues that the time before a person is born, her prenatal nonexistence, is symmetrical with the time after she has died, her postmortem nonexistence. From the fact of their symmetry, Lucretius argues, we ought to have similar attitudes toward the two periods.

This chapter consists of three sections. In the first section I explain Lucretius's Symmetry Argument as articulated in *De Rerum Natura*. Before discussing the Symmetry Argument itself, I clarify what death is according to the Epicurean. I explain how death, in the Epicurean sense, differs from related conditions like the process of dying and the event of death. Second, I present Lucretius's Symmetry Argument which urges us to hold the same attitude toward postmortem nonexistence (the time after we have died) as we do toward prenatal nonexistence (the time before we were born) on account of the symmetry of the periods. The two periods are relevantly similar, says Lucretius; and, given that we do not feel badly about not having been born sooner (thus having *less* prenatal nonexistence), we should symmetrically not feel badly about our impending postmortem nonexistence.

After explaining the Symmetry Argument, I identify what I take to be its three goals; the Symmetry Argument is meant to first, prove the symmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence and second, argue that we ought to have similar attitudes toward the two periods *in virtue of* their symmetry. Third, nonexistence is not harmful for a person, therefore fear that a person has toward death is based on a false belief.

In the second and third sections of this chapter I consider two contemporary philosophers' interpretations of the Symmetry Argument. First, I consider James Warren's interpretations of the argument. Warren presents two possible interpretations of the Symmetry Argument that he gleans from the text. Warren argues that Lucretius is committed to defending the weaker of the two

interpretations he presents. I object to Warren's claim, arguing both that Lucretius could have been arguing, at least at some points in the text, for the stronger version of the argument and also that the two interpretations of the text are not mutually exclusive. In the final section, I consider Steven Luper's attempt to expand the scope of the Symmetry Argument. Luper suggests that, consistent with his goal to help others achieve *ataraxia* (freedom from mental disturbance), Lucretius attempts not just to calm people's fear of death alone, but also calm our fear of the process of dying. I maintain that Lucretius did not intend to address the process of dying nor to calm one's fears stemming from the process of dying.

2.2 The Symmetry Argument and its Scope

Lucretius's Symmetry Argument is largely meant to assuage our fear of death. As such, understanding what death means for the Epicurean is crucial to understanding precisely the object of our fear that the Symmetry Argument attempts to account for. Misunderstanding the Epicurean account of death may cause one to misunderstand the Symmetry Argument entirely.

On the Epicurean account of death, the soul and mind are mortal. When the soul and the mind disperse upon death (along with the body) they cease to exist identically again because a person cannot perceive herself as she previously existed; she has no recollection of the person she once was.⁵⁷ The Epicurean argues that even if, after a person has died, the exact atoms that make up that person's body and soul are configured in the exact way were when she was alive, the resulting person cannot recall her past life.

⁵⁷ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.417-20.

There are three ways to consider death in relation to the Epicurean account of death—chronologically (in order of occurrence for any individual) they are the process of dying, the event of death, and postmortem nonexistence.

As discussed in the first chapter, a person’s soul ages as the body ages and the two are inextricably linked. As the body approaches its biological limits, regardless of the cause (e.g. age, disease, injury), a person begins to die. The process of dying, in my view, is roughly the time between infliction of a terminal event that will result in a person’s death and the event of death. The process of dying differs in both length and kind from case to case. For example, the process of dying would be longer, and likely more painful for a person in the late stages of a terminal illness than for a person who dies on impact in a car accident. The Epicurean is not much concerned with the process of dying, beyond explaining that as the body ages, so does the soul. Understanding the process of dying is only important insofar as it is distinguished from two concepts that the Epicurean *is* concerned with, the event of death and the period after the event of death, postmortem nonexistence.

The event of death follows the process of dying. As articulated in the discussion of atomism, upon the event of death the body and soul disentangle and their atoms swiftly disperse into the air. At the moment when the body expires, the soul escapes; the atoms of the soul disperse. Lucretius says, “...when we shall no longer be, when the parting shall have come about between body and spirit from which we are compacted into one whole...”⁵⁸ This separation of the body and soul upon bodily death is the event of death. The event of death describes the exact moment at which a person ceases to exist.

Following the event of death, a person ceases to exist. The period following one’s existence is her postmortem nonexistence. Lucretius explains the Symmetry Argument in terms of postmortem nonexistence. Upon death, a person ceases to exist. If a person ceases to exist, there can be no subject

⁵⁸ *De Rerum Natura*, 837-9.

of pain or pleasure because pain and pleasure are attributed to conscious subjects of experience. Lucretius compares our deaths with the time *before* we came to exist. To make a symmetrical argument about death, then, Lucretius must be referring to the time *after* we cease to exist when speaking of death. If Lucretius were concerned with the event of death, he would compare it with the moment we came into existence, for example. Similarly, if Lucretius were concerned with the process of dying, he would compare it with the process of coming into existence. Lucretius instead talks of the time before we were born (prenatal nonexistence) so he must be concerned with its symmetrical period, the time after we have died (postmortem nonexistence).

Identifying the differences between the process of dying, the event of death and postmortem nonexistence is important both to understand what the Epicurean account of death, and, more importantly for our purposes, what Lucretius's Symmetry Argument attempts to account for.

Lucretius rephrases and bolsters Epicurus's claim that death is nothing to us by arguing that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are symmetrical; prenatal nonexistence being the time before one's life and postmortem nonexistence being the time following one's death. The Symmetry Argument serves three purposes; First and crucially, to show that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are, in fact, parallel to one another. That is, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence share relevant similarities that allow us to compare to the two periods (and our attitudes toward them) to one another. Second, the Symmetry Argument argues that our attitudes toward postmortem nonexistence ought to parallel our attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence. Third, prenatal nonexistence was not harmful to us, and postmortem nonexistence will not be harmful to us. Given that neither period is harmful, if a person believes death to be harmful she holds a false belief. Debunking false beliefs about death in order that a person may achieve *ataraxia*, freedom from disturbance, is the third function of the Symmetry Argument.

Lucretius explicitly outlines the Symmetry Argument at two points in *De Rerum Natura*. First he says,

“Therefore death is nothing to us, it matters not one jot, since the nature of the mind is understood to be mortal; and as in time past we felt no distress, while from all quarters the Carthaginians were coming to the conflict, when the whole world, shaken by the terrifying tumult, shivered and quaked under the lofty and breezy heaven, and was in doubt under which domination all men were destined to fall by land and sea; so, when we shall no longer be, when the parting shall have come about between body and spirit from which we are compacted into one whole, then sure enough nothing at all will be able to happen to us, who will then no longer be, or to make us feel, not if earth be commingled with sea and sea with sky.”⁵⁹

Shortly following this first passage, Lucretius again presents the Symmetry Argument, saying, “Look back also and see how the ages of everlasting time past before we were born have been to us nothing. This therefore is a mirror which nature holds up to us, showing the time to come after we at length shall die.”⁶⁰

Lucretius’s Symmetry Argument argues three points. First, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly symmetrical. Second, nonexistence is not harmful to us, therefore fear of death is based on false beliefs or irrational attitudes about death. Third, we ought to have the same attitude toward both periods in virtue of their symmetry.

Lucretius most clearly establishes the relevant symmetry of prenatal and postmortem existence in the second passage. Prenatal nonexistence is described as “a mirror which nature holds up to us” which reflects what is to come after our deaths. Prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are symmetrical in that they are both periods of eternal nonexistence on either side of one one’s life—prenatal nonexistence before one begins to exist, postmortem nonexistence after one ceases to exist. For Lucretius, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are symmetrical in that they are each eternal and occur when one is either coming into or exiting existence. Again, the mirror metaphor suggests that

⁵⁹ *De Rerum Natura* 3.830-42.

⁶⁰ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.972-5.

one's coming into existence and ceasing to exist are mirror processes. In the first passage, too, Lucretius establishes the symmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence by comparing time past before we existed with the time to come when we shall again cease to exist.

Along with establishing, at the very least, similarity between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, Lucretius argues that we will not be harmed postmortem; “nothing at all will happen to us.” Appealing to Epicurean atomism, Lucretius reminds us that we will not feel at all upon our deaths because when we die our atoms disperse—as Lucretius puts it, a “parting shall have come about between body and spirit.” When we die we cease to exist and “we” cannot feel because the existence of a conscious subject of experience is a precondition to the presence of pain and pleasure. Thus, we will not be harmed postmortem.

We should not fear death because we cannot be harmed postmortem so there is nothing to have fear about⁶¹. Lucretius's inclusion of language indicating the eternity of time after the event of our postmortem nonexistence was intentional. He explicitly refers to the eternity of postmortem and prenatal nonexistence to prove the irrationality of the fear of death. He says, “*respice item quam nil ad nos anteacta vetustas temporis aeterni fuerit, quam nascimur ante*”, “Look back also and see how the ages of *everlasting* time past before we were born and have been nothing to us.”⁶² Our lives are a drop in the bucket. So too are the lives of those we care most about. We all exist for such a short amount of time that ultimately each of our lives is just not very important.

Other alleged fears of death are not fears of death at all, but rather fears based on myth. Lucretius tells his reader, “There is no wretched Tantalus...rather it is in this life that the fear of gods oppresses mortals without cause...”⁶³ Even if the afterlife exists, when we do not exist, there is no

⁶¹ I argue shortly that for Lucretius “death” in the context of the Symmetry Argument refers to postmortem nonexistence.

⁶² *De Rerum Natura*. 3.971-2.

⁶³ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.980-3.

subject to be harmed in the afterlife; neither our souls nor our bodies exist for harm to be inflicted upon or experienced by; therefore, a fear of “death” in this case is irrational both because it is not a fear of death itself and also because even if there were an afterworld, there would be no subject to experience harm in it because when we die we cease to exist entirely.

While fear is an irrational attitude to have toward death, Lucretius does suggest an attitude that we should have toward death. From the fact of their relevant symmetry Lucretius says that we *ought to* have similar attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. Just as we were not distressed by events that occurred before our births, when we cease to exist (when we die) we again should not be distressed. We should base our attitude toward postmortem nonexistence on our attitude toward prenatal nonexistence. Our prenatal nonexistence was nothing to us. Thus postmortem nonexistence also will be nothing to us. What is nothing to us cannot be bad for us. On account of its not being bad for us, we do not feel badly about our prenatal nonexistence, so we should not feel badly about our postmortem nonexistence, on account of *its* not being bad for us; we should not fear death.

Lucretius argues that we ought to have symmetrical attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. One may wonder, though, why we ought to base our attitude toward postmortem nonexistence on our attitude toward prenatal nonexistence. In other words, why is the reverse of Lucretius’s Symmetry Argument not also true? The reverse Symmetry Argument is the same as Lucretius’s Symmetry Argument but it runs in the opposite direction. The argument goes something like we feel badly about our impending prenatal nonexistence so we should also feel badly about our prenatal nonexistence on account of the symmetry between the two periods.

The Symmetry Argument, in my view, cannot be run in its reverse because while postmortem nonexistence is in the future, prenatal nonexistence is behind us. The Symmetry Argument asks us to call upon an attitude toward a period we have already known (though we did not experience it on

account of our being nonexistent). While we may base our attitudes toward future events on past events, it is unwarranted to retroactively attribute attitudes toward past events on account of our attitudes toward future events. For example, if a person is fearful of the dentist but has had a good experience with the dentist in the past, one would not urge her to be retroactively fearful of the dentist on account of her current fear. We may base our attitudes toward future events on our attitudes toward events that have already occurred, but it does not make sense to base our attitudes toward events that have already occurred on events that have yet to occur.

When taken together, Lucretius argues through his two versions of the Symmetry Argument that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly symmetrical periods. From this fact of the symmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence we ought to have a relevantly similar attitude toward postmortem nonexistence as we do toward prenatal nonexistence. Further, given that neither period is harmful to us, fear of death is based on a false belief about death.

One worry one may have about the Symmetry Argument is that it is impossible to have the same attitude toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. We cannot fear prenatal nonexistence. Fear is a future directed emotion in that we fear things that are yet to come, one cannot fear something an event which has already occurred. We cannot “fear,” for example, not having been born sooner. We did not exist prior to our prenatal nonexistence; thus we could not have feared it. Conversely, we may presently fear our approaching postmortem nonexistence. If not symmetrical, one may wonder, what attitude ought we have toward postmortem nonexistence on account our nonchalance toward our prenatal nonexistence?

It is possible that, symmetrical to our fear of postmortem nonexistence, we may feel something like *lament* toward our prenatal nonexistence.⁶⁴ While not identical with fear, lament expresses that we feel badly about an event that has occurred. Fear and lament are relevantly similar to one another in that, at their core, they both are concerned with our feeling bad about an event—lament concerns feeling badly about an event that has already occurred while fear is concerned with feeling badly about an event that will occur in the future. Though I believe my argument successfully maintains the force of the Symmetry Argument, whether our inability to have identical attitudes toward the two periods of time bears on the success of the Symmetry Argument, while interesting, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

2.3 Warren's Interpretations of the Symmetry Argument

In this section, I will discuss James Warren's interpretation of the Symmetry Argument. James Warren argues that the Symmetry Argument fails to prove that one should not fear her impending death. The Symmetry Argument, Warren maintains, is but a restated general Epicurean argument against the fear of death. Warren argues that there are two ways Lucretius's symmetry argument can function. First (Version 1), prenatal nonexistence *was* nothing to us before we were born, thus postmortem nonexistence *will be* nothing to us when we die. Second (Version 2), presently our prenatal nonexistence is nothing to us now. Therefore, looking forward within our lifetimes presently, death *is* nothing to us *now*. On the former view, we will not be harmed by death when we die, on the latter we are not harmed by death presently, argues Warren. Warren concludes that the version that Lucretius actually endorses, Version 1, is far weaker than the version Warren himself proposes, Version 2. I argue first that Versions 1 and 2 are not mutually exclusive. Second, I argue that even if

⁶⁴ Lament may be the closest word in English to the sentiment symmetrical with fear. Really, what we feel toward prenatal nonexistence is wishing that something was not the case or wishing that things were other than they are. Lament is just the closest approximation to that concept that exists in English.

Lucretius does not prove Version 2, the Symmetry Argument still succeeds in calming the most fundamental of our fears of death, our fear of postmortem nonexistence.

Before offering varying interpretations of the Symmetry Argument, Warren offers what he believes to be the general goal of the Symmetry Argument. Warren takes Lucretius to argue that we should not fear death because we will shortly cease to exist. That is, our postmortem nonexistence, during which “we” feel neither pain nor pleasure is not the reason that Lucretius argues we should not fear death. Rather, we should not presently, *during our lifetimes*, feel anxious about our impending deaths. In the first case (Epicurus’s argument), we are instructed not to fear death because being dead is not harmful to us. In the second case (Warren’s understanding of Lucretius’s argument), we have no reason to fear death currently. Epicurus’s argument is concerned with how “we” will feel when we cease to exist while Lucretius’s argument aims to assuage our *current* fear of death. Notably then, Warren argues that the Symmetry Argument is meant to function differently than the general Epicurean argument against the fear of death; the Symmetry Argument is meant to be broader in scope than the original argument against the fear of death, assuaging more pressing fears related to death.

Warren and I agree that the success of the Symmetry Argument turns on the fact that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly similar. Both Versions 1 and 2 of his arguments retain this assumption. Further, Warren grants that our attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence are justified. Relatedly, Warren is primarily concerned with how the Symmetry Argument affects our present attitudes towards death and whether it effectively convinces us that we ought not hold those feelings—that we ought not fear death.

Referencing the two passage of text I cite earlier, Warren develops two distinct interpretations of the Symmetry Argument. First, he presents what he calls Version 1. In Version 1, prenatal nonexistence *was* nothing to us *before* our births. Therefore, postmortem nonexistence *will be* nothing

to us *after* our deaths. Version 1 is concerned with our attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence during the periods themselves—what our attitude toward prenatal nonexistence was *while* we were prenatally nonexistent and, symmetrically, what our attitude toward postmortem nonexistence will be when we cease to exist once more. On Version 1, it was impossible for our prenatal nonexistence to stir an emotional response in *us* because, at the time, there was no subject to attribute emotion to. It was in virtue of our nonexistence that our nonexistence itself was nothing to us. Similarly, our postmortem nonexistence *will be* nothing to us because when we cease to exist there will be no subject to experience distress (or pleasure).

The first issue Warren raises with Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument is that it is merely a restatement of Epicurus's or the Epicurean original argument against the fear of death. The general Epicurean argument is that we should not fear death because when death comes we will no longer be. Upon death our constituent atoms will disperse, our spirit among them. Our bodies and spirits dispersed, we fail to exist and cannot be subjects of pleasure or pain. Warren's Version 1, like the general Epicurean argument, holds that we should not fear death because we cannot possibly experience anything upon death. The arguments are concerned both with our attitudes toward death, and the attitudes that we ought to have, and also death's practical insignificance to us. That is, death just is nothing to us practically because our atoms disperse when we die. Also we should not *feel* badly (fear) about death precisely because it cannot cause us pain. Epicurus and Lucretius both establish a fact about death itself and, from that fact, suggest an attitude we ought to have toward death.

Though Warren equates Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument with the general Epicurean argument against fear of death, the two arguments, in my view, are quite different. Epicurus's argument is only concerned with postmortem nonexistence while Lucretius's argument relies on people's existing justified attitude toward prenatal nonexistence to argue that we should not fear

postmortem nonexistence. The Symmetry Argument is not simply that we should not fear postmortem nonexistence, but, rather, Lucretius urges the reader to think about her attitude toward her prenatal nonexistence. Assuming that she does not feel distress or resentment about her prenatal nonexistence, she should have the same attitude toward a symmetrical period, postmortem nonexistence. The comparison of the two periods does not require the reader to adopt the attitude the Epicurean favors about nonexistence. Rather, Lucretius asks the reader to recall her *own* attitude about nonexistence and apply that attitude to a symmetrical period. Lucretius does not suggest that his reader adopt an attitude that he suggests about death, he asks that she feel similarly about similar periods of time.⁶⁵ Perhaps Lucretius's strategy better convinces people to change their attitudes about death because it relies on their existing views. So though Lucretius relies on Epicurean argumentation to prove that we should not fear prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, the comparison of the two periods is important to the argument itself.

Beyond its similarity to the general Epicurean argument against the fear of death, Warren argues that Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument inaccurately identifies the source of our fear of death. Warren summarizes the Epicurean view, saying that we are not concerned with whether or not we will persist postmortem as subjects of pleasure and pain so much as we are concerned with our lives ending. Our fear of death is not caused by our fear of eternal nonexistence, but rather by our fear that our lives that we are currently enjoying will soon end. Accepting that this distress caused by the thought of our lives ending is what causes our fear of death presently, Warren says that Version 1 cannot calm this fear. Summarizing his view, Warren says that Version 1, as with the original Epicurean argument, only accounts for our attitudes toward postmortem (and prenatal) nonexistence,

⁶⁵ Again, Lucretius assumes that his reader has correct attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence. That is, Lucretius assumes his reader does not regret having been born later. That said, it is not clear that every reader does not regret having been born later and if this were the case, the Symmetry Argument would not be convincing. A discussion of this problem, while interesting, is beyond the scope of this project.

not our current attitude toward our lives shortly ending. Not only is Version 1 concerned with the wrong fear, it also accounts for a time in which we do not exist. Again, Version 1 describes what our attitude should be (and was) during periods of nonexistence, not the attitude we should (and do) hold presently about nonexistence. So, even if our fear of death was caused by a fear of postmortem nonexistence, thinks Warren, the argument would still not be able to offer a reason why we should not presently fear nonexistence; the argument only provides us a reason not to fear nonexistence while we are nonexistent.

Luckily for Lucretius, Warren provides a second, more charitable interpretation of the Symmetry Argument, Version 2. Version 2 of the Symmetry argument is that looking back from within our lifetimes our prenatal nonexistence is nothing to us now. Therefore, looking forward from within our lifetimes, postmortem nonexistence is also nothing to us now. Unlike Version 1, which is based on our past and future experiences, Version 2 is concerned with our present state. Warren argues that Version 2 is a much stronger argument than Version 1 because it can calm the fear of death while we exist—that is, while we may even experience fear. Unlike Version 1, which can only address our attitudes when we cease to exist, Version 2 is concerned with our attitudes while we are still able to form them (i.e. while we are alive). Given that Warren believes that fear of death stems from a present fear of life ending, Version 2 is better able to help calm our fear of death than Version 1. Further, even if the cause of our fear of death were caused by our fear of postmortem nonexistence Version 2 better calms the fear than Version 1. If one's fear of death is rooted in her fear of postmortem nonexistence, then calming her present fear is only possible should the Symmetry Argument be something like Version 2, which is concerned with a person's *present* attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence.

Unluckily for Lucretius, Warren argues that only Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument can be found in the text. Warren first looks to *De Rerum Natura* 3.832-9 for evidence of Lucretius's commitment to Version 1. In this first passage Lucretius argues that just as the Romans remained unafraid through the Second Punic War, so, too, we should be unafraid of death when it comes. Lucretius, Warren notes, uses the perfect tense verb, *sensimus*, then the future tense verb, *erimus*, to describe how one *felt* about prenatal nonexistence when she did not yet exist compared with how one *will feel* about postmortem nonexistence when she ceases to exist. Reading the tense into this passage, Warren argues that Lucretius is comparing how we did feel during our prenatal nonexistence with how we will feel during our postmortem nonexistence. This reading of the passage strongly supports that Warren's Version 1 correctly conveys the Symmetry Argument. That is, the passage is concerned with how we did feel in the past and how we will feel in the future, not how we currently feel. If Version 1 is truly how the Symmetry Argument is meant to be read then, the argument fails to calm our present fear of death, whether that fear be caused by our fear of the end of life or of postmortem nonexistence.

The second passage of text in which we find the Symmetry Argument is more ambiguous than the first. Lucretius offers another defense of symmetry between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. Lucretius invokes a metaphor, likening our retrospective attitude toward the time before we were born to looking in a mirror. On prenatal nonexistence he says, "This therefore is a mirror which nature holds up to us, showing the time to come after we at length shall die."⁶⁶ In other words, looking into a mirror we see a reflection of our prenatal nonexistence before us, our postmortem nonexistence. Before us we see only an expanse of time. Just as we did not exist, and therefore failed to experience anything prenatally, we see our pain-free nonexistence reflected postmortem. Knowing that what is to come is merely a reflection of prenatal nonexistence, a period during which there was

⁶⁶ *De Rerum Natura*, 3.974-975.

neither pain nor pleasure, we should not fear postmortem nonexistence. The mirror metaphor may suggest to some, Warren grants, that the reader is evaluating her present attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. The metaphor implies that the reader is looking into the mirror and reflecting the attitude she has while looking into the mirror to the attitude she has on what is reflected back. In this case, the reader is considering her present attitude toward prenatal nonexistence with her present attitude toward postmortem nonexistence. If the mirror metaphor does ask that we evaluate our present attitudes then the metaphor supports Version 2 of the Symmetry Argument.

Warren argues that the mirror metaphor too supports Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument. Warren again uses verb tense as evidence to support his argument. In the mirror passage Lucretius uses the verb *fuert*, a verb in the past tense, to describe our relationship to prenatal nonexistence. Lucretius says, according to Warren, that we should consider how prenatal nonexistence *was* nothing to us and this past attitude is reflected. Again, then, Lucretius is only suggesting that we should be concerned with our attitudes at the time of nonexistence not presently, supporting Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument.

After arguing that the mirror passage definitively supports Version 1, Warren concedes that, because the verb *fuert* is in fact perfect, it carries a meaning that is not quite as straightforward as past tense verb in the imperfect tense. If the verb were translated as simply “was” it would be in the imperfect case, *erat*. However, in the perfect tense, the verb “to be” is translated as “has been”. In this case, Lucretius is asking that we consider that our prenatal nonexistence *has been* nothing to us. Warren says that on this alternate reading it is possible that the mirror analogy asks us to think about our past attitudes have been *during our lifetimes* not during periods of nonexistence. Warren quickly concludes, though, that if Lucretius had meant to convey that we should be concerned with our current

attitudes— attitudes during our lifetimes—he could easily have used the present tense verb, *sit*, which describes what “is” currently.

I disagree with Warren. Version 2, which is concerned with our attitudes toward death during our lifetime, can, in fact, be read from the mirror analogy when the verb *fuertit* is correctly read in the perfect tense verb. Version 2 of the Symmetry Argument, when *fuertit* is correctly translated, is that our prenatal nonexistence has been nothing to us during our lifetimes. Therefore, our postmortem nonexistence has also been nothing to us during our lifetimes. When read this way, Version 2 does calm the fear that Warren is concerned with, our fear of mortality.

First, as Warren argues, though *fuertit* may be referring to our attitudes within our lifetimes, it is also just as likely referring to our previous attitudes during periods of nonexistence. “Has been” could be taken to mean what has been during our lifetimes or what has been before our lifetimes. There is no way to definitively tell whether *fuertit* is referring to our current attitudes or our attitudes during prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, so, at best, the use of the perfect tense verb *fuertit* equally supports the conclusions of both Versions 1 and 2. Second, even if *fuertit* is read in the perfect tense, referring to attitudes during our lifetimes, it is always referring to past attitudes (attitudes that have been). Given that the verb, whether read in the perfect or imperfect tense, is always past tense, it is not concerned with our present attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, therefore it cannot calm our present fear of death. We are once again left with the result that the mirror analogy cannot successfully quell fear of mortality, the source, in Warren’s view, of our fear of death.

Though I do not think that the mirror analogy can support what Warren identifies as the most successful result of the Symmetry Argument (that it calms our fear of mortality) I still ultimately think that the first two versions of the argument, when taken together *can* successfully calm our fear of death. Unlike Warren, I do not think that Versions 1 and 2 of the Symmetry Argument are mutually

exclusive. It is just true, as a matter of Epicurean thought, that we do not exist prenatally and postmortem, thus we are not subject to pain or pleasure nor can we experience anything during these periods of nonexistence. This fact about our status (or lack thereof) during periods of nonexistence is essentially all that Version 1 of the Symmetry Argument illuminates. We necessarily were not distressed prenatally, thus we will not be distressed postmortem, as well. Version 2 of the argument is compatible with this view. It is the case that we both felt nothing during periods of nonexistence, and feel nothing now about our prior period of nonexistence.

Warren may respond that yes, Lucretius definitely proves Version 1 of the argument, and yes, it is compatible with Version 2, but you still have not shown that Lucretius proves Version 2 of the Symmetry Argument. To this I respond that perhaps Warren is just wrong about the fear that Lucretius means to be calming. Though one certainly may fear the event of death, she may *also* fear postmortem nonexistence. Warren seems to merely assert that our fear of death is solely fueled by our fear of mortality without considering reasons why a person may fear death. While I understand Warren's desire for the Symmetry Argument to most effectively calm all fears associated with death, whether they be related to the process of dying, the event of death or postmortem nonexistence, he unnecessarily expands the scope of the Symmetry Argument in order to achieve this goal. Lucretius was concerned with calming one, large fear of death, the fear of postmortem nonexistence. Insofar as Lucretius succeeds in calming the fear of postmortem nonexistence, the Symmetry Argument is successful.

Further, Warren does not articulate how the fear of life ending is distinct from the fear of postmortem nonexistence.⁶⁷ People are afraid of their lives ending precisely because they will no

⁶⁷ A fear of life ending is related to the fear that one will no longer enjoy the goods which she may have only in virtue of being alive. On this view, death is bad for a person because it deprives her of certain goods. I will discuss this account of death's harm, the deprivation account of harm, in great detail in the third chapter.

longer exist; the fear of mortality stems from an underlying fear of postmortem nonexistence. The distress that one feels when she thinks about dying is caused by her false belief about postmortem nonexistence. For example, she may fear that Hell awaits her or that she will be in pain even after her death. If there is nothing to fear postmortem, though, there is no reason to fear death. In my view, Lucretius focuses on postmortem nonexistence because if he can prove that postmortem nonexistence is not harmful to us, then any secondary fear that we have that stems, at its root, from a fear of postmortem nonexistence, can also be quelled.

2.4 Luper's Take on the Symmetry Argument

Steven Luper, like Warren, argues that the scope of the Symmetry Argument goes beyond calming just our fear of postmortem nonexistence. In a brief discussion of the Symmetry Argument, Luper argues that Lucretius and Epicurus want to calm our fear of the process of dying in addition to the fear of being dead. The goal of the Epicurean life is *ataraxia*, freedom from mental disturbance. Given this, Luper argues that Lucretius must be attempting to calm our fears of the process of dying as well as postmortem nonexistence. Should we presently fear the process of dying, thinks Luper, we cannot achieve *ataraxia* in life.

Though, according to Luper, the Symmetry Argument is meant to account for our fear of the process of dying, in reality, it does not successfully do so. Luper first gives his reconstruction of the Symmetry Argument as can be deduced from *De Rerum Natura*. First, it is not bad for us that we did not exist earlier. Prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly similar. If two states are relevantly similar and one is not bad for us, the other is not bad for us either. Therefore, postmortem nonexistence is not bad for us.

Luper's reconstruction of the Symmetry Argument does not calm the fear of the process of dying, though Luper believes Lucretius meant it to. In order to account for the process of dying, Luper

adds two premises to extend the Symmetry Argument. He says, if the effect of a process puts us in a state that is not bad for us then the process itself is not bad for us. Therefore, the process of dying is not bad for us. Put another way, the effect of the process of dying is nonexistence. Nonexistence is not bad for us, therefore the process of dying is not bad for us.

I object to Luper's characterization of the Symmetry Argument and also his extension of it. First, it is telling that Luper had to supply premises to the Symmetry Argument in order for it to account for the process of dying. Clearly Lucretius was not concerned with the process of dying, otherwise he would have addressed it directly. Second, Luper's explanation of the Symmetry Argument centers around whether a state of being (or ceasing to be) is bad for us, not what our attitudes toward those states is or ought to be. Even the extension of the argument does not provide reason for us to not fear the process of dying, rather it just affirms that the process of dying is not bad for us. This understanding of the Symmetry Argument limits its scope substantially because it does not calm our attitudes about either postmortem nonexistence or the process of dying, it merely states a fact about their not being bad for us.

The original Symmetry Argument not only identifies that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are each not bad for us, but also argues that we ought to have similar attitudes toward the two periods on account of their symmetry. Luper's interpretation of the Symmetry Argument fails to provide any guidance as to the attitudes we should have toward prenatal or postmortem nonexistence. Since Luper's argument says nothing about our attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, he cannot provide a reason for us not to fear death; Luper can only tell us that the process of dying will not harm us. Perhaps from this claim that death will not harm us Luper can hope that we will conclude that we ought not to fear a state that will not (and perhaps does not) harm us, but Lucretius's original Symmetry Argument better convinces us not to fear death.

Along with inaccurately representing the Symmetry Argument, Luper's extension of the Symmetry Argument is faulty. As mentioned in the discussion of Warren, the Symmetry Argument is only meant to calm the fear of being dead (postmortem nonexistence) which is at the heart of most other fears of death. Further, the fear of a painful death, while perhaps harmful to a person, is short lived. Luper may argue that it is impossible for a person to achieve *ataraxia* if she is in constant mental pain because she fears a painful death. I argue that Lucretius may bite this bullet, conceding that a person may fear a painful death, but she ought not to because it culminates in death itself which is of no harm to her. Further, if she works hard to be mentally at ease, her bodily pain will be nothing to her. Lucretius may also argue, more convincingly, that the Symmetry Argument just is not meant to account for this fear of dying and perhaps some other feature of the Epicurean system can address this fear.

Though ultimately I disagree with Luper's attempt to account for the process of dying within both Epicurus's and Lucretius's arguments against fearing death, I acknowledge that Luper extends the arguments in order to strengthen them. Fear of the process of dying causes a person anxiety and prevents her from achieving *ataraxia*. Luper's attempt to do away with the fear of the process of dying seeks to promote *ataraxia*, the goal of Epicureans' philosophical endeavors.

While I am sympathetic to Luper's argument, it does not succeed in proving that the process of dying is not bad for us. For Luper's argument to succeed he would have to prove that the state that death puts one in is not bad for us. If the state that death puts a person in, on Luper's view, is not bad for a person then the process for her to arrive at that event is not bad for her. The state that death puts a person in, though, is neither good nor bad for her. Luper concedes this point, saying that the state death puts one in, postmortem nonexistence, is neither good nor bad for her; it is nothing to her. The process of dying, then, is a potentially painful experience that culminates in nothing—an absence of

any experience. This nothingness does not justify the pain we may experience while dying, which is necessary on Luper's view for the process to not be harmful. Therefore, even given that our nonexistence is nothing to us, the process of dying may still be painful for us, and, thus, bad for us on the Epicurean view of harm.

Even if Luper successfully proves that the process of dying is not bad for us because it culminates in an event that is not bad for us, I maintain that formulating a version of the Symmetry Argument that centers on the process of dying misrepresents the goals of the argument itself. Epicurus and Lucretius were primarily concerned with combatting our fear of postmortem nonexistence, not our fear of dying. Given that Luper had to supply premises to create an argument explaining the process of dying on an Epicurean view, it seems clear that they were not, as I say, concerned with the process of dying in the context of the Symmetry Argument.

In this chapter I have presented Lucretius's Symmetry Argument as argued at two places in his *De Rerum Natura*. I take the Symmetry Argument to be making three claims. First, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are symmetrical periods. Second, neither prenatal nor postmortem nonexistence are bad for us and any fear that we have toward postmortem nonexistence is ill-founded. Finally, we ought not to fear postmortem nonexistence on account of our attitude toward its symmetrical period, prenatal nonexistence.

After clarifying the Symmetry Argument, I presented James Warren's two interpretations of the Symmetry Argument. I countered Warren, arguing that the two versions Warren presents are not mutually exclusive. Finally, I objected to Luper's account of the Symmetry Argument which attempts to account for the fear of the process of dying. I argued that Luper's construction of the Symmetry argument does not support the conclusion that the process of dying is not bad for us. Further, I

reiterated that the Symmetry Argument is meant to account for the fear of postmortem nonexistence, not the process of dying.

In the next chapter, I consider two contemporary philosophers' objections to the Symmetry Argument which center on their argument that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical periods.

Chapter 3: Objections to the Symmetry Argument

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss an objection to the Symmetry Argument. First, I summarize Thomas Nagel's article *Death* in which Nagel presents the objection to the Symmetry Argument on which this chapter is based.⁶⁸ Nagel argues that it is impossible for a person to have existed earlier than she did and be essentially the same person, though one may die sooner or later than she would have and remain the same person through time; thus, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical periods.

Having presented Nagel's objection, I explain Frederick Kaufman's version of the argument.⁶⁹ Kaufman, like Nagel, argues that a person could not have been born any sooner than she was and this fact is the basis for the asymmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. Kaufman's objection to the Symmetry Argument centers on his essence based account of personal identity. For Kaufman, personal identity consists in a certain "essence" that each person has. This particular essence is dependent on a person's biography. If a person had been born at a different time, her biography would be different and thus the person that resulted would have been different. A person's biography does not change, though, in virtue of her time of death. Therefore, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical.

In the final section of this chapter, I argue that Kaufman does not prove his account of personal identity upon which his objection to the Symmetry Argument relies. I counter Kaufman's argument for the asymmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, arguing that death is just

⁶⁸ Nagel, Thomas. "Death." *Nous* 4, no. 1 (1970): 73–80.

⁶⁹ Kaufman, Frederick. "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence". *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (January, 1999): 1-19.

as important to one's biography as birth, and thus prenatal and postmortem nonexistence remain symmetrical periods.

3.2 Nagel's *Death*

The primary concern of Nagel's article is whether or not it is bad to die. If it is bad to die, *how* bad is death when compared with other harms? Nagel begins his investigation of death's badness by asserting that death can only be a harm to us insofar as it deprives us of something.⁷⁰ In this case, death is a harm because it deprives us of goods we would have had *had we not died*. For example, I enjoy having discussions. If I were to die, I would no longer be able to have discussions. Death is responsible for my inability to discuss (death *deprives* me of the ability to discuss). Importantly, death is bad for us because it deprives us of goods, not in virtue of *its* being bad or harmful. Death is not harmful in itself, it's harm is in deprivation. For example, it is that I am being deprived of the capacity to discuss that my death is a harm to me, not death alone. Moreover, *if I had lived longer* I would have been able to discuss more. The longer the life, the more goods that one is able to enjoy. Therefore, a longer life is preferable to a shorter life.

Life is good insofar as it allows us to enjoy certain goods. Nagel does not think, though, life's value comes from simply surviving. Nagel elaborates by arguing that to die now would be no worse for someone than to fall into a prolonged coma and die immediately following. Nagel uses this example to prove that there is nothing about life itself, absent experience, that makes it inherently worth pursuing. Biological life is not inherently good for us. Life is good for us insofar as it allows us to have goods.

⁷⁰ Nagel notes that when he refers to death he means permanent death marked by the complete annihilation of a conscious subject.

It is not possible to experience *more* or *less* death. For example, while it is possible that I may have more discussions should I live longer, it is not possible that I have more death or be ultimately more dead if I die in 50 years rather than 60. Whether I die in 50 or 60 years does not affect how *dead* I am upon my death—if I die sooner I will not be more dead than if I had died later.

Nagel counters a view of death's harm that centers on nonexistence as both the source of death's harm and the source of our attitudes and beliefs about death. First, Nagel argues that the fact of death's harm comes from its deprivation of life's goods. Deprivation alone makes death bad for us, argues Nagel, our impending nonexistence is not the source of death's harm. Further, our attitudes toward death are caused by deprivation. We feel badly about death because death will prevent us from acquiring goods. Any fear that we have about our impending nonexistence is generated by our fear of death's depriving us of goods that we otherwise would have had (had we lived longer). A fear of nonexistence is indicative of a fear of deprivation, not nonexistence itself.

Nagel proves that nonexistence is neither the source of death's badness nor the cause of our attitudes and beliefs about death. Nonexistence, says Nagel, is not itself frightening to us. To further prove his point, Nagel that temporary nonexistence proves that nonexistence itself is not necessarily bad for us. A two-day coma (from which I awake with full knowledge of myself and my past) would not be particularly bad for me. Even to be temporarily nonexistent for long periods of time, says Nagel, would not in itself be harmful to us.

Nagel endorses the view that a person's having come from a particular sperm and egg is essential to her being her. A person is the product of a particular egg and a particular sperm cell. A particular egg and a particular sperm could only have met during a very short window of time,

thus the fertilized egg that results in a particular person could only have existed at a particular time.⁷¹ If had a person had been born much sooner or later than she in fact was, she would be an entirely different person because the fertilized egg that she resulted from would be different from the fertilized egg she in fact resulted from.

The upshot of Nagel's view that a particular person could only have come from a particular sperm and egg is that prenatal nonexistence could not have been bad for a particular person, because, any person who had been born any sooner or later than her would not be her. Relatedly, postmortem nonexistence, death, *is* bad for a particular person (in virtue of its depriving her of life). Unlike prenatal nonexistence, where a person born sooner or later would be distinct from that particular person, a person remains the same through time whether she dies sooner or later. Prenatal nonexistence cannot be bad for a person while postmortem nonexistence can. Therefore, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical periods. Nagel is concerned with our postmortem nonexistence because we can be harmed postmortem. We cannot, however, be harmed prenatally according to Nagel.

Nagel does not speculate as to what our attitudes are or ought to be toward prenatal nonexistence. Presumably, Nagel would think that we cannot have attitudes toward our prenatal nonexistence because "we" would not have been us had we been born at a different time.

Whether a person is harmed depends upon whether she was deprived of goods in virtue of the event which purportedly caused her harm. For example, someone who suffers loss of a limb is harmed because she is deprived of the ability to do activities she otherwise would have been able

⁷¹ Nagel does not consider cases in which a particular egg could have existed at a different time, his view assumes only the conditions that exist now are possible. However, it is certainly the case that a particular sperm and egg could exist (or could have existed) at a different time if human biological constraints were different or if a particular egg and particular sperm could be zapped into a different century or any other number of things could have happened.

to do had she not lost a limb. Whether something is bad for a person requires that counterfactual cases in which the event that purportedly harmed her are considered. For example, to determine whether or not limb loss is bad for a particular person consider her current state (deprived of a limb) with a counterfactual state in which she still had not her lost limb.

Importantly, any alternate possible world considered must be one that is reasonably close to the world in which the person did not suffer the event that purportedly caused an individual harm. For example, it is reasonable to compare a world in which a person loses a limb to one in which, aside from her having lost a limb, is the same. In both worlds, the person has the same relationships and she holds the same job, her biography is the same. It is possible in this case to determine whether or not a person was harmed by her limb loss. If she would have been better off had she not lost her limb, her limb loss harms her. By contrast, it would be a poor comparison to compare the world in which she lost her limb with a world in which she lost her limb but it could be immediately and seamlessly reattached. In this case, the counterfactual case is incredibly unlikely and thus should not be compared with the world in which a person currently exists. To determine whether a person suffers a harm relevantly possible worlds considered should be as similar to the world in which the harmed person exists as possible. The deprivation account is meant to prove that harm occurs when a person fares more poorly than she otherwise would have. If a relevantly similar alternative possible world does not yield a result that otherwise would have happened had she not been harmed; thus it should not be compared with the world in which a person exists. Comparing a relevantly similar possible world to the world in which a person exists, by contrast, reveals what a person is deprived of in virtue of the harm she has suffered. Ideally, in assessing harm as deprivation, a counterfactual is meant to show what would have happened if the

only event initially differentiating the existing world and the close possible world is the harm that a person has suffered. In doing so, the effect of harm can be most accurately determined.

Nagel believes that a person can suffer a harm that she is unaware of. Nagel gives a compelling example, asking us to imagine that an intelligent person, by some unfortunate injury, has been reduced to the state of an infant (in both intelligence and ability). Before her injury, this person was able to care for herself and meaningfully contribute to her profession. Following her accident, though, she is not able to independently care for her most basic needs and her thoughts do not extend far from her desire to be fed and dry. For this person, to have been reduced to a state similar to an infant's is bad. In a close possible world in which she had not been reduced to the state of an infant her life would have gone better for her than it in fact has. We know our victim's history so we know that before her injury she was able to care for herself and contribute to her profession—we also reasonably assume that in coming years, she had the potential to continue contributing to her profession. We may believe that had she not been injured the victim could have done groundbreaking work in her profession or assumed a prestigious position within her profession. Given that had our victim not have been injured her life would have likely been better for her than it is after her accident, her having been reduced to the state of an infant is bad for her. Our victim's accident has deprived her of goods that she would have experienced had she not been injured.

Nagel's case is meant to demonstrate that a person need not be cognizant of harm for it to harm her. Though the injured woman cannot comprehend her deprivation, she is harmed nonetheless because her life would have gone better for her had she not been injured. Similarly, a person need not *exist* in order for her death to harm her. Death deprives a person of goods that she

would have had had she not died. Death harms the person who existed prior to her death. I am harmed in that I am deprived of goods I would have had should I not die, for example.

In addition to Nagel's example, I am interested in an alternate version of this case in which the woman has a degenerative disease that will eventually result in her being reduced to an infantile state. Before the disease has taken full effect though, the woman is injured and is immediately reduced to an infantile state. This case is more analogous with death than Nagel's original example. Just as the woman's eventual reduction to an infantile state is inevitable, so too is death. In this case the woman is harmed before her disease, that would have also resulted in her being in an infantile state, has run its full course. In this case too, the woman is harmed by her injury. Unlike the first case, her injury results in something that, like death, was eventual. The harm in this case is similar in kind to the harm of premature death. Had the woman been injured later, even though she would eventually succumb to her disease, she would have enjoyed more goods than she was able to (as a result of having been injured) just as a person would have enjoyed more goods had she died later than she in fact did.

In contrast with case of the injured intelligent woman (Nagel's original case), a baby in the same state has not suffered a harm. The baby, unlike the woman, does not have the potential (in her very near future) to do much beyond what she is doing now. The baby also does not have a history of doing anything more exceptional than what she is currently doing. Thus, for the baby to remain in a state of infancy is not bad for her while she is an infant.

Considering another case, if in all near possible worlds the baby would have remained in an infantile state throughout her lifetime, then her infantile state is not harmful to her. The baby is not deprived of goods in virtue of her being in an infantile state because, when compared to all

near possible worlds, she acquires roughly as many goods as she otherwise would have. One may be tempted to say, then, that the baby is harmed because she is deprived of goods that she would have had had she not remained in an infantile state. However, again, a baby who had not remained in an infantile state would not be the same baby, according to Nagel, because one's biological makeup is essential to her identity.

The subject of harm in the case of the injured woman is clear. But who is the object of death's harm? Nagel argues that just as the accident victim is the object of harm because her life could have gone differently for her had she not been injured, those who die are the object of death's harm because they died.⁷²

After briefly outlining how death is harmful, Nagel directly refutes Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. Death, says Nagel, is harmful because it deprives us of goods that we otherwise could have enjoyed. By contrast, the time before we were born does not deprive us of life that we otherwise could have lived for *we* could not have been born any sooner than we were.⁷³ Anyone born at a significantly different time than me, for example, would not be *me*.

Nagel concludes that death is bad for us in virtue of what it deprives us of. Having defended this view, Nagel entertains objections. First, Nagel wonders whether a natural limitation of a species, in this case mortality, can be harmful. He provides a useful example, saying, "Blindness is not a misfortune for a mole, nor would it be for a man, if that were the natural condition of the human race."⁷⁴ A mole cannot be deprived of sight, thinks Nagel, because it never had the capacity for sight in the first place. In all near possible worlds the mole is still blind. Similarly, in all near

⁷² I will shortly elaborate on and challenge that the object of death's harm is the person who has died.

⁷³ Nagel says that we could have been born *slightly* earlier than we were in fact born, though. For example, if my mother had had a C-section four hours before her C-section actually occurred, I would still have been me.

⁷⁴ Nagel, 80.

possible worlds to that which we, humans, are in now, we will all die. Just as the mole cannot be harmed by her blindness, humans cannot be harmed by their deaths. This is also similar to the case in which the baby is an infantile state throughout her life. The infant in this case, I have argued earlier, is not harmed by being in an infantile state throughout her lifetime because in all near possible worlds she would have remained in an infantile state throughout her lifetime. Similarly, death is inevitable across (near) possible worlds and, thus, we cannot be harmed by death.

Nagel notes, though, that there is a difference between a mole's blindness and a human's mortality. Blindness's opposite is sight, death's is life. While moles are never able to see, and thus cannot be deprived of sight, humans live, and thus can be deprived of life. For humans, death is bad because it is a loss of life, a good which we are well acquainted with. Just as having the capacities of an infant is bad for the formerly intelligent woman but not for an infant, losing life is bad for a human. While the intelligent woman is harmed by her condition, as we are harmed by our impending deaths, the infant is not presently harmed by her condition, just as the mole is not harmed by its blindness.

Nagel need not defend that death is a harm in all cases. Just as the mole is not harmed by its blindness because it is not deprived of goods (in virtue of its blindness) a person can fail to be harmed by her death if she is not deprived of life's goods as a result of her death. If a person is enjoying none of life's goods (and has not enjoyed life's goods for most of the most recent portion of her life) then death cannot harm her. She cannot be deprived of life's goods because she is not enjoying them, therefore death does not result in deprivation. Deprivation is a necessary condition for an event's being a harm. Therefore, a person who is not enjoying life's goods cannot be harmed by death.

Perhaps a person would counter that there is some value in life itself, even absent any goods. Nagel just objects to this on the face of it. For Nagel, life is not inherently good, it is the goods that a person is able to have in virtue of being alive that make life worth living. Nagel's opponent may then argue that even if a person is not enjoying life's goods now, she may in the future. To this I first respond that the person in this example has not been enjoying life's goods for a long time. If she were to suffer a deprivation, her life would have to have gone better for her had the harm (in this case death) not occurred in order for her death to be bad for her. In all near possible worlds though, this person's life does not go well for her. Therefore, her life would have been just as awful had she not died as it is presently. Therefore, death does not cause her harm. Second, I argue simply that if this person would enjoy life's goods in a near possible world, then her death would be a harm for her. But, so long as she cannot and would not, in a close possible world, enjoy life's goods, death is not a harm for her.

Nagel successfully argues in favor of the deprivation account of harm. On the deprivation account of harm, death, in most cases results in a harm to the person who has died. Death deprives a person of goods she otherwise would have had had she not died; therefore, death harms her. Further, Nagel argues that while death can harm a person, prenatal nonexistence cannot. Had a person been born sooner or later than she was, she would not be the same person because the fertilized egg that resulted in her would have been different. By contrast, a person's identity does not change in response to her time of death. If prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, as Nagel argues, are asymmetrical, this presents a challenge for the Symmetry Argument. If the two periods, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, are asymmetrical, then we cannot base our attitude toward one on our attitude toward the other *in virtue of their symmetry*.

In the next section, I consider Frederick Kaufman's extension of Nagel's objection to the Symmetry Argument, and argue that the argument, as both Kaufman and Nagel have constructed it, fails to effectively counter the Symmetry Argument.

3.3 Kaufman's Response to the Symmetry Argument

In this section I will explicate Frederick Kaufman's objection to Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. Frederick Kaufman, like Nagel, attempts to counter Lucretius's Symmetry Argument. This section will proceed as follows. First, Kaufman explains and defends the deprivation account of death's harm.

I then consider Kaufman's objection to the Symmetry Argument. Again following Nagel's lead, Kaufman argues that a person could not have been born sooner than she was but a person can die sooner or later than she in fact does. Thus, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical. I argue that Kaufman relies on but does not prove that his account of personal identity is correct and therefore his argument fails to effectively refute the Symmetry Argument.

Kaufman argues that death's harm is in deprivation. Like Nagel, he argues that death is bad for us in virtue of what it deprives us of.⁷⁵ Uniquely, Kaufman suggests that the deprivation account of harm is not merely a single account, but rather a type of account of death's harm. Deprivation accounts of harm all require that we be deprived of something in order to be harmed. Deprivation accounts differ from one another in that they each have a different object of deprivation. For example, on the desire account of harm, death is bad for us because we are deprived of the goods we desire to have. Our deprivation (of goods we desire) is a necessary

⁷⁵ Interestingly, Kaufman notes that death is not necessarily evil, though. If, had an individual not died, a person's life gone poorly for her, death is not necessarily bad for her because it is not depriving her of goods. This clarification signals that Kaufman, unlike Nagel, may not believe that life alone has some inherent value, rather it is the goods life allows us have that make life worth living.

condition for the frustration of our desire's being bad for us. Similarly, an account of harm that says harm consists in the frustration of our future plans is a type of deprivation account. On this account we are harmed by our deaths in virtue of being deprived of the ability to see our future plans to fruition. Much like the desire frustration case, the frustration of our future plans is bad for us, at its core, because death *deprives* us of the ability to complete our plans. Kaufman neatly concludes that insofar as death is the annihilation of a person, all accounts of death's badness must focus on what a person (once she has died) is no longer able to get. Any account of death of the same kind as those I have described, then, is merely a different iteration of the deprivation account.

Lucretius's Symmetry Argument, argues Kaufman, is a particularly compelling challenge to the deprivation account of death's harm. To reiterate, the Symmetry Argument argues that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly symmetrical periods of time. As such, we ought to have similar attitudes toward the two periods. We do not regret our prenatal nonexistence, thus we should also not lament our postmortem nonexistence. This argument presents a problem for the deprivation account. If death deprives us of goods that we otherwise would have had had we lived longer, then it seems that our prenatal nonexistence deprives us of goods we would have had had we been born sooner. Death, then, is not uniquely bad for us, our prenatal nonexistence is bad for us, as well.

To counter the Symmetry Argument, Kaufman develops an argument that Nagel briefly presents.⁷⁶ Although it is possible for a person to die later than she in fact dies (and still retain her continuous personhood) it is not possible for a person to have been born earlier than she in fact was and still have been the same person. If a person remains the same through time should one

⁷⁶ Kaufman also considers Derek Parfit's argument that we are biased toward the future, thus prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical. I have chosen not to address future bias in this project given its scope.

live longer but not if one had been born sooner, then prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly asymmetrical, and the Symmetry Argument fails. Importantly, Kaufman is most concerned with proving that the two periods of time, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, are asymmetrical, not whether our attitudes toward the two periods are asymmetrical. If prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical, then there is no basis for our having symmetrical attitudes toward them (in virtue of their symmetry). For Lucretius, our attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence follow from the symmetry of the two periods of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. Though we certainly may hold attitudes toward one period in virtue of our attitude toward the other, we *ought* to hold identical attitudes toward the two periods *in virtue of their symmetry* with one another. The symmetry between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence is crucial to the success of Lucretius's argument, on which our attitude toward postmortem nonexistence ought to be identical to that toward our prenatal nonexistence *in virtue of the symmetry of the two periods*. Thus, it is crucial that the symmetry (or in Kaufman's attempt to counter the Symmetry Argument, asymmetry) be established between the two periods.

Though Kaufman defends Nagel's core argument, that we could not have been born sooner than we were, he does not endorse Nagel's account of what makes a person who she is. A fertilized egg could not have come into existence any earlier than it did, so the person that results from that fertilized egg could not have existed any earlier than she did.⁷⁷ Kaufman shies away from Nagel's account of what makes a person who she is, noting that while it is physically impossible for a fertilized egg to have existed earlier, it is not conceptually impossible for a particular fertilized egg

⁷⁷ In his later book *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel shifts his view, arguing that a person's brain is her essence. However, clearly he still argues that one's essence is physical.

to have existed earlier. Nagel provides no clear relation between a fertilized egg and a person.⁷⁸ A person does not necessarily result from a particular fertilized egg, thus it is possible for a particular person to have existed earlier even if the fertilized egg that she biologically resulted from (her body) had not existed earlier.

Kaufman endorses Nagel's claim—that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical—stripped of its justifications; it is not possible for a person to have existed earlier than she did. Kaufman introduces a distinct account of personal identity.

Kaufman's account of personal identity is central to his argument. An account of personal identity explains what makes it the case that a person remains the same person through time. An account of personal identity is meant to explain, for example, why I am the same person as I was when I was an infant. An account of personal identity can also explain what remains the same about people through time. For example, though I have gone through many changes throughout my life, I have essentially the same genetic makeup that I did as an infant (my genetic makeup remains constant through time) and that genetic makeup is unique to me. On this gene based account of personal identity, a person's remaining constant through time is due to her having the same genetic makeup through time.

Kaufman defends an essence account of personal identity. Kaufman distinguishes between two types of essences. First he describes metaphysical essences. Metaphysical essences are essences that every person has in virtue of being alive. Kaufman does not define what constitutes a metaphysical essence. Kaufman only says that a metaphysical essence could possibly be one's

⁷⁸ A person, in this case, being defined by Kaufman (someone self-aware of her psychological being with a particular biography).

body, genetic makeup, origin, brain, or Cartesian soul. Metaphysical essences exist across worlds. For example, if a person with my body (or whatever other trait determines metaphysical essence) existed in 1922, that person and me as I exist now are metaphysically identical.

Kaufman contrasts metaphysical essences with psychological essences. A person's psychological essence is her biography. One's psychological essence includes the details of her life, her ongoing projects, her beliefs and commitments and her relationships. Psychological essences are the basis of one's personhood. The traits that one's psychological essence consists in are "thick" traits, while the undefined traits that contribute to one's metaphysical essence are "thin" traits. Relatedly, when speaking of a particular individual (who has "thick" traits in virtue of her being alive and having inevitably had a personal history), we are speaking of a "thick" person. This "thick" person has both a psychological *and* a metaphysical essence. A "thin" person is one who only has a metaphysical essence. Importantly, a "thin" person does not exist in reality; each person who exists has a psychological essence. There are no two people across time or worlds who share the same psychological essence, argues Kaufman, because every individual has a different, unique biography.

Kaufman thinks that only thick persons (those with a psychological essence) can be deprived of goods. Desire, says Kaufman, is a necessary condition of deprivation. In order to be deprived of something, we must desire that which we are deprived of. For example, a person who dislikes apples cannot be deprived of apples, while a person who likes apples can. Only thick persons have the capacity to desire things. Thin persons are unable to desire things both because they do not exist in reality and also because thin persons do not have the necessary traits to desire things even if they did exist.

I object to Kaufman's argument because it seems that even if a person does not desire a thing she can be deprived of it because she desires the potential for that thing. For example, though I do not particularly enjoy swimming, and do not desire the experience of swimming, I would be upset if someone told me I would never swim again. Even though I do not desire to swim, I want to be able to swim should I change my mind.⁷⁹

Kaufman argues that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical for two reasons. First, even if a person had come into existence slightly earlier than she actually did, that person who was born sooner has a different psychological essence than her and is, as a result, an entirely different "thick" person. However, whether a person dies sooner or later than she actually dies does not change her personhood. Whether a person dies sooner or later, their psychological essence remains the same, thus in both cases, the person is the same. Though a person has the same psychological essence whether she dies sooner or later, the experiences she has differ. For example, whether a particular person dies before or after she has children is important to her psychological essence. If she dies before she has children her biography will be different (in terms of what is composed of) than if she dies after she has children. In both cases, she has the same psychological essence apparently in virtue of its having started at the same point. My biography should I have died as an infant would be very different from my biography now, but I still consider myself to be the same person through time. Similarly, Kaufman considers a person to be the same through time in virtue of her psychological essence.

If a person with a particular metaphysical essence were to come into existence at a different time than she did, the person that resulted would share her metaphysical essence, but not her

⁷⁹ I will provide a more thorough objection to Kaufman's desire condition in the following section.

psychological essence. By contrast, the time of a person's death does not disrupt her psychological continuity. Thus, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical.

Kaufman's argument that a person would not be the same if she came into existence even slightly earlier holds even if he does not conceive of personhood in the same way as Nagel—as having a fixed biological basis. What determines a person's psychological essence is her biography. If a person were born at a different time than she actually was, she would have a different biography, thus the time at which a person is born is essential to her thick identity.

3.4 Objections to Kaufman

In this section I will object first to Kaufman's claim that desire is a necessary condition of deprivation. Second and more substantially, I argue that Kaufman does not prove the complex account of personal identity upon which his objection to the Symmetry Argument relies. Given this, Kaufman's argument against the Symmetry Argument fails. I then explore a concern I have with Kaufman's account of personal identity. Even if psychological essence is constant through time, time of death may just as seriously affect a person's identity as her time of birth, thus prenatal and postmortem nonexistence remain symmetrical.

First, I disagree with Kaufman that desire is a necessary condition of deprivation. For example, though I do not want to go to medical school, should I be banned from going to medical school, I would be deprived of the opportunity. In a near possible world in which I was able to go to medical school, should I choose to, I am better off because I am still granted to opportunity to choose whether I want to go to medical school. Further, even if I do not change my mind, having the opportunity closed to me is distinct from my choosing not to take it. In the first case I am not deprived of the opportunity because it is within a range of options that I may partake in. In the second case, I am deprived of the opportunity because it is not even an option for me, therefore I

cannot even choose not to pursue it—my decision calculus changes in response to the opportunity being unavailable to me.

Dangerously, should desire be a necessary condition of deprivation, in many cases discrimination would not be harmful to its victims. As long as the victims of discrimination do not desire that which they are barred from having, they are not harmed by their discrimination. This result does not bode well for Kaufman. Discrimination seems obviously harmful to its victims because it forecloses opportunities that others who are not members the excluded group have access to. The deprivation is not a result of desire, but rather a result of being treated unequally. Kaufman's addition of desire as a necessary condition of his account of harm results in an account that cannot explain why discrimination, a harmful practice, results in harm to its victims. This problem greatly diminishes the ability of Kaufman's deprivation account to correctly identify harm.

In addition to the inadequacies of Kaufman's account of deprivation, Kaufman does not prove his account of personal identity. Kaufman claims that there just is such a thing as psychological essence that makes a person the same through time. Troublingly though, Kaufman does not identify *what* about psychological essence makes a person the same through time, merely that a person just is the same through time in virtue of having the same psychological essence. Asserting that a certain thing makes a person the same through time does not prove that a certain thing makes a person the same through time. For example, I may say that a person's name is what makes her the same through time. On this argument, my having had the same name all my life is what has made me the same person through time. Clearly, even though I have had the same name my whole life it is certainly not the case that my name is *what makes me* the same person through

time. Similarly, Kaufman just asserts that one's psychological essence makes her the same through time without proving this.

Kaufman's objection to the Symmetry Argument relies on his account of personal identity. Kaufman bases his objection the Symmetry Argument on the fact that one's psychological essence differs if one is born at a different time, but not if she dies at a different time. If a person was born at a different time than she in fact was, she would have a different psychological essence, but her psychological essence would not on account of her time of death. If, as I have suggested, a person's psychological essence is *not* what makes her the same through time, then an asymmetry between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence cannot be generated on account of one's psychological essence changing should she be born at a different time but not should she die at a different time. Kaufman has not proven his account of personal identity, therefore his objection to the Symmetry Argument fails.

Next, I consider a problem with Kaufman's account of personal identity. Here I will grant, for the sake of argument, that one's psychological essence is what makes her the same through time. Even granting this though, I think that birth certainly affects an individual's biography, but it is not a determinant of one's identity. Birth is one of many possible life events that may change an individual's biography such that her life goes differently than it otherwise would have.

While I certainly think that birth and death affect a person's identity, I also think that there are a number of conditions that are relevantly similar to birth and death, insofar as they are out of an individual's control, that affect a person's biography. For example, whether I had been born in Iceland or I moved to Iceland at two months of age, my biography would be virtually identical (all else being equal). The result of the two possible events, my having been born in Iceland or my

having moved to Iceland at two months old, is the same, therefore they should be considered to have equal effect on my biography. Kaufman does not account for events that have a similar effect on one's biography. Thus, given that a person's having been born sooner or later and dying sooner or later could have a similar effect on one's identity, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly symmetrical.

In this chapter I have presented Nagel and Kaufman's objections to the Symmetry Argument. Both authors argue that a person could not have been born at a time different from when she was actually born, thus she could not have acquired goods prenatally (because she would have been an entirely different person). While Nagel argues that biology constrains the time at which a person was born, Kaufman argues that one's psychological essence, her biography, is central to her identity. I have also combatted Kaufman's argument; Kaufman does not articulate what makes a person's psychological essence the same through time, nor why a person's time of birth is any more important than her time of death to influencing her biography. Having countered both of these arguments, I have shown that Nagel and Kaufman's objections to Lucretius's Symmetry Argument do not hold.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have presented the Symmetry Argument and defeated contemporary misinterpretations of it and objections to it. In the first chapter, I explained important parts of Epicureanism. Most notably, Epicureans are atomists, believing that everything consists solely of atoms and void. Epicureans also believe that all sense perceptions are true, though our judgement of those perceptions may be inaccurate. Finally, the good life consists in living a pleasurable life, a life free from mental disturbance. The Epicurean view of death follows from Epicurean physics, epistemology, and ethics. When death occurs the atoms of the soul disperse and the body disintegrates (its atoms slowly disperse as the body decomposes). Our sense perceptions include our perceptions of pain and pleasure, pleasure (*ataraxia*) being the best thing in life, pain the worst. When we die, we do not exist to experience, or sense, pain or pleasure. This lack of sense perception, our inability to experience pain or pleasure on account of our ceasing to exist, is precisely what makes death nothing to us, according to the Epicurean. The overview of the Epicurean system I provide in the first chapter contextualizes Lucretius's Symmetry Argument.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I present Lucretius's Symmetry Argument, as explained in two passages in *De Rerum Natura*. The Symmetry Argument responds to the fact that we may currently fear death or have wrong attitudes about death based on false beliefs. Lucretius first establishes that the time before we were born, prenatal nonexistence, is relevantly similar with the time after we die, postmortem nonexistence. In virtue of the similarity between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence, we ought to have the same attitudes toward the two periods. We do not feel badly about our prenatal nonexistence so we also should not feel badly about our postmortem nonexistence. Importantly, the reverse of the Symmetry Argument does not make sense because

we should not retroactively change the attitudes we have toward an event that has already occurred based on our feelings about events that have yet to transpire (or something)

In the second and third sections of the second chapter, I objected to James Warren and Steven Luper's interpretations of the Symmetry Argument. Warren says that Lucretius either has to defend a version of the Symmetry Argument that is concerned with our attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence *while we were nonexistent* prenatally or postmortem, or the Symmetry Argument is concerned with our attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence *right now*. Lucretius, argues Warren is committed to defending the former, weaker view that we feel badly about our prenatal and postmortem nonexistence during those periods. To Warren I respond that his two interpretations of the argument are not mutually exclusive. Further, I argue that Lucretius could, in fact, have been arguing in favor of Warren's stronger interpretation—that we presently should not feel badly about either our prenatal or our postmortem nonexistence.

Steven Luper argues that Lucretius meant to be calming not only our fear of postmortem nonexistence, but also our fear of the process of dying. Luper adds premises to the Symmetry Argument and reconstructs it such that it argues that if an event is not bad for a person, the process of arriving at that state is also not bad for her. I object to Luper first by arguing that insofar as he had to add premises in order for the Symmetry Argument to account for the process of dying, Lucretius did not mean for the Symmetry Argument to account for the process of dying. Next, I argue that death is neither good nor bad for a person, it is nothing to her, but the process of dying may harm a person because it causes her pain. The state that the process of dying puts one in, death, is neither good nor bad for a person, therefore a painful process of dying cannot be justified even on Luper's view.

In the third chapter, I primarily responded to Frederick Kaufman's extension of Thomas Nagel's objection to the Symmetry Argument. Nagel and Kaufman argue that death is bad because it deprives a person of life's goods. Further, a particular person could not have been born much sooner or later than she in fact was. Any person who was born sooner or later than a person would not be her. A particular person could not have gotten goods before she was born because a person born sooner than her would not be *her*. However, when a person *is* deprived of goods she is deprived of goods she could have had *had she not died*. Therefore, prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are asymmetrical periods. Kaufman goes farther, arguing that what makes a person the same through time is her psychological essence, which is the same for a person regardless of when she dies, but would be different had she been born at a time sooner or later than she in fact was. I argue that Kaufman fails to prove the account of what makes a person the same through time, which his asymmetry argument relies on.

Lucretius's Symmetry Argument has faced considerable opposition from contemporary objectors. In response, I have successfully defended Lucretius's Symmetry Argument against inaccurate interpretations and substantive objections.

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