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Defending Lucretius' Symmetry Argument against the Fear of Death

by

Kun Lei

Under the direction of Tim O'Keefe

Abstract

Lucretius' symmetry argument is always understood as a simple addition to Epicurus' deprivation argument. Both are based on same presuppositions and both are referring to the state of being dead. However, by closer examination, we can see that they are using different perspectives. The symmetry argument adopts a first-person perspective, whereas the deprivation argument adopts a third-person perspective. According to this difference, it can be further inferred that the symmetry argument actually provides a very important supplemental argument for the deprivation argument by trying to bridge the potential gap in the deprivation argument.

INDEX WORDS: Symmetry argument, Deprivation argument, Fear of death, Harm of death, good of life, personal identity

DEFENDING LUCRETIUS' SYMMETRY ARGUMENT AGAINST THE FEAR OF DEATH

by

Kun Lei

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Master of Arts

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus claims that death is nothing to us by providing the deprivation argument, which says that "Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us."[1] So the deprivation argument is mainly based on the idea that death cannot deprive us of anything since it is the privation of sense-experience. To support this claim, he proposes the existence argument which says that "when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. So death is nothing to us."[2] In other words, the existence argument points out that there is no subject to be harmed when one is dead. These two arguments constitute Epicurus' main reasons against the fear of death. Later, his follower Lucretius provides a further argument—the symmetry argument—to argue against the fear of death. The basic idea of the symmetry argument is that post-mortem non-existence is not fearful because it is relevantly similar to pre-natal non-existence, and pre-natal non-existence is not fearful. There are many critics of these arguments. My thesis will focus on the analysis of Lucretius' symmetry argument and its role in supporting Epicurus' deprivation argument. My conclusion is that the symmetry argument provides a supplemental argument for Epicurus' deprivation argument.

[1] KD 2. Also, the basic idea of the deprivation argument can be found in Epicurus' claim that "for all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience." See *Ep. Men.* 124. All translations of Epicurus are from Inwood and Gerson (1994).
[2] *Ep. Men.* 124.

Furthermore, the main objections to the symmetry argument are not convincing because they can be rebutted by appealing to Epicurus' and Lucretius' arguments.

Chapter 2 Different Types of Harm of Death and Fear of Death

Epicurus' ethics is based on his metaphysics, and his metaphysics is materialistic. For instance, according to Epicurus and Lucretius, the only things that exist *per se* are atoms and void. Both body and soul are made up of atoms, and the soul is a material organ within the body which is responsible for mental functions.[3] What is more, when death is coming, the atoms that make up the body and the soul disassemble.[4] Hence, when Epicureans are asked "what is death", their only answer is "death is annihilation".[5] In other words, death is nothing because there is no existence at all and a subject is necessary for something to be harmed.

Before any specific analysis of the argument against fear of death, it would be helpful to examine various meanings of the phrase 'harm of death', its difference from the phrase 'fear of death' and Epicurus' possible answers against them. This doesn't provide Epicurus' full argument, but just an introduction to his view on death.

Although there are many interpretations of "harm of death", it is still possible to classify them into several categories. The first interpretation is the harm that one will die. By saying that after death the soul will dissolve and there will be no self at all at that time, one might think it is harmful because we are mortal and mortality deprives the meaning

[3] See *DRN* 3 161-176. All translations of Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* are from Martin F. Smith (2001).
[4] See *DRN* 3 425-444.
[5] All of the subsequent argument will proceed on the assumption that Epicurus is right that death leads to the decomposition of the body and the soul and an existing subject is needed for harm.

of life. When we know that human beings are mortal, some people may assume that whatever they do, they will finally arrive at the same result—death; hence, life loses its meaning in the sense that different living processes ultimately lead to the same result. However, we can also say that it is the mortality that gives life meaning. Just because human beings are mortal, we should cherish our life and long for accomplishing something. The Epicureans hold the view that once we acknowledge the correct beliefs and attitudes about life's mortality, this sort of harm and fear can be removed from our life. As Epicurus says:

> Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter of contentment, not by adding a limitless time to life but by removing the longing for immortality.[6]

The second interpretation is the harm of the process of dying. Some people believe that there is no afterlife at all but still fear death because it will be painful during the process of dying. Under most circumstances, people depart because of age, accident, or disease. People assume that these ways of dying are often painful. Epicureans admit that there may be pain during the process of dying; however, they think when it is present, the wise man can still mitigate this sort of pain by learning the correct knowledge about death and recalling the happiness of life. Epicurus himself is such a wise man. He peacefully passed away after having suffered for a long time, firm to his own teachings about tolerating pain.[7]

The third interpretation is the harm of being dead, which refers to the status after death.

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[6] *Ep. Men.* 124.
[7] See D.L. 10.15-16.

According to Epicurus, a necessary condition on being harmed is that there must be a subject to endure it. When one is dead, the soul and the body have divided and their atoms separated. Hence, death has no subject because there is no "me" who still exists to suffer any harm. The existence condition is not satisfied after death. Therefore, if death is annihilation, then it is not reasonable to believe that there will be harm of being dead. And we'll see later that Lucretius' symmetry argument actually is concerned with this category of harm.

Corresponding to these three interpretations of the harm of death, there are three fears of death—fear that one's life is mortal, fear of the process of dying and fear of being dead.[8] Obviously, harm of death and fear of death are different concepts with deep connections. For instance, it may be reasonable to say that death is not a harm after the person dies since there is no subject at that time; however, one might still fear death even if he admits that death is not a harm after he dies. Or, although it is hard to negate the harm of death during the process of dying, this harm does not necessarily lead to the fear of the process of dying. If we are told that after death we can go to another world which is more beautiful and comfortable, then we might even anticipate the process of dying even if we know it is painful, rather than fear it.

The difference between the harm of death and fear of death relies on their different essences. Strictly speaking, whether something is harmful or not refers to facts. As a

[8] In his book *Facing Death*, James Warren classifies fear of death into four categories. Other than these three fears, he adds the fear of premature death. p. 4.

result, if one accepts the belief that death is annihilation, the belief that there will be any harm after death will seem ridiculous. At least, if one believes that there will be no subject after death, further belief in the harm after death would be self-contradictory.[9] Beliefs of fact can sometimes be changed by providing proofs concerning the matter of fact itself. On the other hand, whether something should be feared or not refers to our attitudes toward those facts. And attitudes involve emotional significance and value judgment within themselves. Hence, even if one believes that being dead won't be harmful, she might still feel fearful about that status. Since fear is included in our psychology, appealing only to facts may not mitigate it. Rhetorical language and persuasion may be helpful to get rid of fear of death.[10]

Chapter 3 Lucretius' Symmetry Argument

When interpreting his master's argument against fear of death, Lucretius proposes a supplemental argument, which is called the symmetry argument. In the whole Epicurean system against fear of death, I think there are at least two levels. The first level focuses on the question "what does death lead to", and the Epicurean answer relies on their physics and atomism. Either death leads to annihilation or a sort of afterlife and Epicurus thinks that death leads to the former. The soul is wrenched from the body, and those original atoms begin to recombine randomly. There is no 'self' anymore, which is called by Lucretius "deathless death".[11] The second level question is that if death is annihilation,

[9] But one might still be incapable of eliminating the fear of death even if he knows that death should not be feared.
[10] I think that is why Lucretius' argument is especially useful in assuaging the fear of death by his poetical style and emotional language.
[11] *DRN* 3 869.

is it good or bad? Epicurus replies that death is neither good nor bad; it is just annihilation and nothing. The symmetry argument tries to answer why death is not bad based on the symmetry between our pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence.

As far as I am concerned, there are two places in which Lucretius tries to provide the symmetry argument. When Lucretius intends to explain why death is nothing to us, he says:

> As in time past we felt no distress when the advancing Punic hosts were threatening Rome on every side, when the whole earth, rocked by the terrifying tumult of war, shudderingly quaked beneath the coasts of high heaven, while the entire human race was doubtful into whose possession the sovereignty of the land and the sea was destined to fall; so, when we are no more, when body and soul, upon whose union our being depends, are divorced, you may be sure that nothing at all will have the power to affect us or awaken sensation in us, who shall not then exist—not even if the earth be confounded with the sea, and the sea with the sky.[12]

By referring to the Punic wars, Lucretius tries to show us the fact that we did not fear ancient periods even if there were important affairs. The reason that we did not feel pain or distress at those historical affairs is that we did not exist at that time and had no sensation or experience. Similarly, even if the world will come to an end in the future, once we cease to exist, we will feel nothing and of course should not fear anything at all.

To further illustrate this similarity, Lucretius then gives us a general argument—the Symmetry Argument. Lucretius says:

> Life is granted to no one for permanent ownership, to all on lease. Look back now and consider how the bygone ages of eternity that

[12] *DRN* 3 831-842.

> elapsed before our birth were nothing to us. Here, then, is a mirror in which nature shows us the time to come after our death. Do you see anything fearful in it? Do you perceive anything grim? Does it not appear more peaceful than the deepest sleep?[13]

This passage, which receives more discussion than the previous passage, is always viewed as the basic text for the symmetry argument. We can simplify the symmetry argument into a formal argument:

Premise 1: There is a symmetrical relationship between pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence.

Premise 2: The period of pre-natal non-existence is nothing to us (during our life span) and should not be feared.

Conclusion 1: The period of post-mortem non-existence is also nothing to us (during our life span) and should not be feared.

Conclusion 2: Death is nothing to us (during our life span) and should not be feared since death leads to post-mortem non-existence.

In the argument above, Lucretius makes a switchover between post-mortem non-existence and death. So here in the symmetry argument, he is talking about death in the sense of the status of after death, or the status of being dead. Obviously, among the various kinds of fear of death, Lucretius' symmetry argument focuses on the last one, that is, the fear of being dead. The status of being dead refers to the eternal time period after one's death. And the symmetry argument basically depends on the analogy between this period and the period before one's birth.

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[13] *DRN* 3 971-976.

Also we can further change this argument into a modus ponens:

Premise 1: If the period of pre-natal non-existence should not be feared, then the period of post-mortem non-existence should not be feared. (Based on the similarity between them)

Premise 2: The period of pre-natal non-existence should not be feared.

Conclusion: The period of post-mortem non-existence should not be feared.[14]

This argument now is in a valid deductive form, although there is still a difference between Lucretius' words and the first premise in the modus ponens above. The second premise is quite reasonable. It seems we really do not feel distress about our pre-natal period, although we still need to justify this attitude. So to prove its soundness, we have to focus on the truth value of the first premise at first.

Let us see how Lucretius proves the similarity between pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence. He implies this similarity with several potential premises.

First of all, both of these two time periods are limitless. Lucretius uses the term "eternity" to describe the period before our birth. And just like through a mirror, the period after our death is also eternal. The first passage above can be viewed as a sub-argument for supporting this premise. Even during the ancient Punic wars, we did not feel pain or distress. Similarly, when it comes to the future period after our death, we will not have any feeling including fear. The only time period we reasonably care about

[14] In some sense, past events might be fearful, but it is not right to say that we fear past bad events, at least not in the exactly same way that we fear future events. Sometimes our attitudes toward past bad events can be described as a feeling of distress. However, when it comes to the issue of past nonexistence and future nonexistence, since it is not about our experience any more, our attitudes toward them might be similar. I'll discuss this point specifically later.

should be our life span.

Secondly, in both of these two periods, we do not exist and can feel nothing. Therefore, both of these two time periods are not harmful to us. In the eternal period before our birth, we were not present and our sensation was not present. We can imagine that at that time, those atoms that were going to constitute our body and soul were actually the components of other bodies and hence, there was no self-consciousness. At the same time, in the everlasting time after our death, we will not exist and our sensation or consciousness will disappear. This disappearance will last forever as time passes by, even to the end of this world. As a result, since we did not and will not possess sensation during our pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence, we had or will have no experience, and these two periods cannot harm us in the least.

Based on the first two claims above, thirdly, we should not feel distress or fear toward either the pre-natal non-existence or the post-mortem non-existence. There is a big gap here from the claim “something is not harmful” to the claim “something should not be feared”. Obviously, there is a further presupposition in Lucretius’ symmetry argument. That is, once something is not harmful, it should not be feared. And this gap from the claim that something is not harmful to the claim that something should not be feared is quite hard to bridge. As shown in the first chapter, whether something is harmful is about facts—whether the post-mortem non-existence is harmful to us based on the harmlessness of the pre-natal non-existence; whereas something should be feared concerns on our psychology or the emotional significance of facts—whether we should

fear the post-mortem non-existence based on the precondition that we do not fear our pre-natal non-existence.

In his book *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics*, James Warren differentiates two ways to interpret Lucretius' symmetry argument. The first way is that since our pre-natal non-existence was nothing to us before we were born, our post-mortem non-existence will be nothing to us after our death based on the similarity between these two time periods. The second way is that since looking back from within a lifetime, our pre-natal non-existence is nothing to us in our life time; our post-mortem non-existence is nothing to us in our life time as well based on the same similarity.[15] Apparently, these two interpretations are quite different. Their basic difference depends on our perspectives when considering the symmetry between those two periods.

The first interpretation comes from a third-person perspective, or, an objective perspective. By saying that death was nothing to us before our birth, it is clear that we are talking about it from the point of view referring to the time period before our birth; meanwhile, when we say that death will be nothing to us after our death, it is from the point of view referring to the time period after our death.

The second interpretation serves a different purpose. It comes from the first-person perspective, or, a subjective perspective. To say something is harmful or not harmful is one thing, whereas to say something should be thought to be harmful or not harmful is another thing. So when we are looking back to the period before our birth and looking

[15] Warren (2004) 58-60.

forward to the period after our death and we consider whether these two time periods affect us during our lifetime, it is a matter of our mental trouble or emotion.

I agree with James Warren that the first interpretation is compatible with Epicurus' argument against death. In the existence argument, when Epicurus says that when death is present, we do not exist, he intends to prove that death will not harm us during the post-mortem non-existence (because there will be no sensation and no experience). A similar perspective is used in the deprivation argument. The deprivation argument can be simply put in this way:

Premise 1: What has been dissolved has no sense-experience.

Premise 2: What has no sense-experience is nothing to us.

Conclusion: Death is nothing to us.

However, it is still dubious whether this sort of argument can really mitigate our fear of death, or, more specifically, fear of the status of being dead. The reasons Epicurus provides here can be interpreted as there will be no sense-experience after death and hence, it will not harm us. No sense-experience and no harm here require a third-person perspective which refers to a future status. The deprivation argument would be more consistent if we change it into something like "there will be no sense-experience after death and there will be no harm after death. Hence, death will be nothing to us". However, it seems that Epicurus intends to change our present attitudes toward death by providing the deprivation argument. Obviously, there is a gap here that weakens the deprivation argument. Even if we accept the view that death will lead to annihilation and

we will have no experience from then on, we can still ask for further justifications to remove our fear of that status during our lifetime. Surely Epicureans not only want to prove that death will be nothing to us, but also want to teach people that death should not be feared. Actually, in the *letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus says that "he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come."[16] This important claim shows Epicurus' effort to move from mere facts to the justification of our attitudes. It seems he wants to claim that it is irrational to fear something if it will not be painful when present. However, only adding this claim is not enough to alter our present attitudes toward death. To persuade people that death "is" nothing to us during our lifetime, Epicureans have to adopt the first-person perspective argument.

So the question is whether Lucretius' symmetry argument adopts a first-person perspective or a third-person perspective. Or, we can say, whether Lucretius aims to provide a similar argument to further explain Epicurus' deprivation argument or he actually proposes a supplemental argument to fill in blank left by Epicurus. I prefer to choose the latter answer as Lucretius' purpose.[17] There are two reasons supporting my preference.

First of all, as we have already seen in those two passages above, Lucretius adopts different perspectives. In the first passage, Lucretius uses a similar 'third' person

[16] *Ep. Men*, 124.
[17] In "Lucretius on Death and Anxiety", Segal holds a similar view. As he says: "His (Lucretius') argument is indirect and allusive, perhaps because he is aware that he is dealing with a subject generally avoided by the Master…Lucretius is not necessarily contradicting the teachings of Epicurus. Rather, he is supplementing them." See Segal (1990) 26-27.

perspective as the deprivation argument when he is talking about whether the ancient wars were bad for us. So we can understand this passage as an additional premise to support Epicurus' argument. However, it has the same problem as the deprivation argument, that is, even if something was not bad for us, why fearing it now is irrational? On the other hand, in the second passage, Lucretius uses the term "look back" to start his symmetry argument. That means he wants his reader to consider the pre-natal non-existence period from the present time, or, he is asking us to consider our present attitudes towards those past time. Also, when we talk about the post-mortem non-existence period, we should look forward to consider it from the present time.

More importantly, right before Lucretius deals with the claim "death is nothing to us" there is a passage which in my opinion reveals the purpose of the symmetry argument. Lucretius spends almost one third of the book three of his DRN to explain why death is nothing to us. However, when we are speculating on his aim in giving the symmetry argument, we should go back to the paragraph right before line 830:

> Besides sharing the diseases of the body, the soul is often visited by feelings that torment it about the future, fret it with fear, and vex it with anxious cares, while consciousness of past misdeeds afflicts it with remorse. Remember also madness and loss of memory—afflictions peculiar to the mind; remember the back waves of coma into which it sinks.[18]

If by any chance Lucretius is a poet or philosopher with consistency, then it seems to me that next in text, he should deal with how to resolve these sorts of mental troubles, how to mitigate the feelings of fear and anxiety in our soul.

[18] *DRN* 3 824-826.

Therefore, I think that Lucretius' symmetry argument mainly tries to persuade people not to feel fear to death from a subjective point of view. As a result, the symmetry argument should not be viewed as having the same function as Epicurus' deprivation argument; rather, it should be viewed as a supplemental argument to fill in a gap that was not resolved by Epicurus. The role of the symmetry argument in the Epicurean theory of death is that it provides a very important support for Epicurus' argument against the fear of death. Once we understand the symmetry argument in an appropriate way, we will be able to further understand what Epicurus means by saying the "death is nothing to us". After clarifying Lucretius' intention, let us see whether his effort succeeds or not. Or, whether the symmetry argument really bridges the gap in Epicurus' argument? It will be easier to answer this question after analyzing possible objections to the symmetry argument and Lucretius' replies.[19]

There are many objections to Lucretius' symmetry argument. In general, there are two main kinds of objections. One focuses on the symmetry between the pre-natal non-existence period and post-mortem non-existence period. The other explores our psychology, including fear and anxiety and insists that even if we are persuaded that death is nothing to us, it cannot guarantee that we do not fear it. Thomas Nagel advances the first kind of objection, and Derek Parfit advances the second kind of objection.

[19] Warren thinks that both Epicurus and Lucretius fail despite invoking our present attitudes toward death. However, according to my analysis above, Lucretius' symmetry argument intends to invoke such an attitude by adopting a first-person perspective and later we'll see this way is successful as well.

Chapter 4 Nagel's Objection to the Symmetry Argument and Lucretius' Possible Response

Of the two main premises of the symmetry argument, Nagel focuses on the one that says pre-natal non-existence is symmetrical to post-mortem non-existence. He proposes two objections to this premise, and these two objections are associated with each other. One is that pre-natal non-existence doesn't deprive good from life whereas post-mortem non-existence does. The other says that it is possible for people to die later but impossible to be born earlier or later. The second one is a sub-argument for the first one. And we can generally call Nagel's objection "the deprivation approach". Nevertheless, I find that both of the objections are not convincing since they rely on misinterpretations of Lucretius' argument. More specifically, Nagel needs to clarify his concept of personal identity in order to argue against the symmetry argument.

Nagel answers the question whether it is a bad thing to die in "Death".[20] His argument presupposes that death is the permanent end of life. So Nagel actually talks about death based on the same assumption as Epicurus, that death is annihilation, and there is no conscious existence during the state of being dead. Also, Nagel mainly talks about death in the sense of the state of being dead, rather than the process of dying or premature death. His main conclusion is that we do not object to death merely because it involves long-term non-existence; rather, death is bad because it deprives us of the good of life. To

[20] Nagel, Thomas. 1972. "Death", in *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1-10.

support this conclusion, he provides three reasons. [21]

First of all, there is a relation between what is good about life and what is bad about death. According to Nagel, what is good about life depends on our experience and history. As Nagel claims:

> There are elements which, if added to one's experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one's experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely neutral: it is emphatically positive. Therefore life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful, and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than any of its contents.[22]

Nevertheless, what is bad about death does not refer to the experience of being dead or the state of being dead since there will be no subject to experience at all. Rather, this evil comes from its deprivation of the good of life. One presumption is that there is the good of life. The good of life does not depend on particular benefits or evils. Life is worthy even if there are many misfortunes. Being alive is emphatically positive and this positive property is supplied by experience itself. As Lucretius mentions:

> 'Never again,' mourners says, 'will your household receive you with joy; never again will the best of wives welcome your home; never again will your dear children race for the prize of your first kisses and touch your heart with pleasure too profound for words…[23]

Furthermore, as Nagel says, "most of us would not regard the temporary suspension of life, even for substantial intervals, as in itself a misfortune."[24] To illustrate this claim, he provides a discontinuous existence case. Imagine that one day we can separate our life

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[21] Nagel (1972) 3-4.
[22] Nagel (1972) 2.
[23] *DRN* 3 894-897.
[24] Nagel (1972) 3.

span into several phases, with long periods of suspended animation in between; without the consideration of desiring to be with friends and family members, many people might choose or at least would not fear to separate their life time into several phases. Here, the term "in itself" is quite important. Admittedly, such a discontinuous existence may be disadvantageous due to the disconnection of one's social relationships and cultural background. However, it can be viewed as advantageous in itself simply because life continues, even if this life continues after the periods of non-existence.[25] So the temporary suspension of life is not always considered as a tragedy in itself.

Then, Nagel argues for the asymmetry or the difference between pre-natal and posthumous non-existence:

> The time after his death is time of which his death deprives him. It is time in which, had he not died then, he would be alive. Therefore any death entails the loss of some life that its victim would have led had he not died at that or any earlier point.[26]

According to Nagel, the post-mortem non-existence time is bad not because it is everlasting; rather, its badness rests on its deprivation of the good of life. This claim presupposes three assumptions: death is the permanent end of life, life is in itself good, and the prolonged life can provide more goods of life. Among these three assumptions, the first two are consistent with Epicurus' philosophy. It is the third assumption that is apparently contradictory to Epicureans' philosophy since Epicurus thinks that pleasure is

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[25] As far as the importance of personal identity is concerned, many philosophers prefer to hold that personal identity requires psychological continuity; some of them also think that persons persist over time by being wholly present. However, these two requirements are not exactly same. Their difference are presented by some philosophers. See, for example, Michael C. Rea and David Silver, "Personal Identity and Psychological Continuity"; Trenton Merricks, "Endurance, Psychological Continuity, and the Importance of Personal Identity".

[26] Nagel (1972) 7-8.

limited and extending life cannot guarantee further pleasure.[27]

Then, even if we accept that death can deprive us the good of life, how can we make sure that the pre-natal non-existence time period does not deprive us the good of life? As Fred Feldman says:

> One puzzle that must be confronted is this: if early death is bad for us because it deprives us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had died later, then why isn't late birth just as bad for us? After all, it seems to deprive us of the goods we would have enjoyed if we had been born earlier.[28]

If by living longer, we can get more benefits from being alive, then why we cannot obtain the same result by being born earlier? Although Nagel admits that both of the prenatal and postmortem non-existence periods are times when we do not exist, he maintains that the mirror metaphor is wrong. Nagel tries to explain this difference by saying that:

> But we cannot say that the time prior to a man's birth is time in which he would have lived had he been born not then but earlier. For aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he could not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else. Therefore, the time prior to his birth is not time in which his subsequent birth prevents him from living. His birth, when it occurs, does not entail the loss to him of any life whatever.[29]

According to these relevant paragraphs above, we can put Nagel's main (chain) argument against the symmetry argument as follows:

Sub-premise: Anyone born earlier than he was would have been someone else.

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[27] KD 18-20.
[28] Feldman, Fred. 1991, "Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death", the *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2, pp. 205-207.
[29] Nagel (1972) 8.

Premise 1 (sub-conclusion): Being born at time *t* does not deprive one of goods one would have enjoyed if one had been born earlier than *t*;

Premise 2: Dying at time *t* does deprive one of the goods one would have enjoyed if one had died after *t*.

Conclusion 1: Pre-natal non-existence and posthumous non-existence are asymmetrical.

Conclusion 2: We should have different attitudes toward pre-natal non-existence and posthumous non-existence.

For the sub-premise above, Nagel further explains that personal identity relies on the direction of time. As he says:

> Distinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings….Given an identifiable individual, countless possibilities for his continued existence are imaginable, and we can clearly conceive of what it would be for him to go on existing indefinitely.[30]

After having a general sense of Nagel's objection, we can do a comparison between Nagel and Lucretius on the symmetry argument. Basically, both of them assume that the period of time before we were born and the period of time after our death are limitless in time or long enough to have limitless possibilities; both of them assume that people do not tend to regard the pre-natal period of time as a misfortune. However, unlike Nagel who thinks that death deprives us the good of life, Lucretius maintains that death is neither good nor bad and does not deprive us anything at all.

With Nagel's objection, there are three possible responses that may be made by

[30] Nagel (1972) 8.

Epicureans. The first one is based on the analogy between death and sleep. The second one comes from the claim that the good of life is limited. The last one is to use the existence argument itself to reply to Nagel's argument.

First of all, Epicureans always make the analogy between death and sleep. Since usually we assume that sleep in a natural way does not deprive us the good of life, we should not think that death would.[31] As Lucretius says:

> At the moment when people jerk themselves out of sleep and gather themselves together, the primary elements of the spirit scattered throughout their limbs cannot be straying far from the motions that produce sensation. It follows that death should be considered to be of much less concern to us than sleep—that is, if anything can be less than what we perceive to be nothing.[32]

Clearly, people usually do not choose to minimize their sleeping time to increase the good of life. The state of being asleep is not anything bad for us, and the state of being dead is not either. Hence, as the deepest sleep, death should not be viewed as the deprivation of any good of life. Appealing to this reply, Nagel might answer that there is still a difference between sleep and death. For instance, before we sleep, we know that we will wake up later and continue to enjoy the good of life. It is just like the discontinuous existence case. Sometimes even sleeping itself is an instance of the good of life. On the other hand, before we die, if we assume that death leads to nonexistence forever, and we know that we can never enjoy the good of life; it is still reasonable for us to fear it or feel distress about it. However, this reply would conflict with Nagel's own

[31] Some people think that sleep actually deprives us the good of conscious life. If we were not supposed to sleep several hours each day, we would enjoy more goods of life. However, since sleep in a natural way is required for us to enjoy the good of life, I prefer not to view this necessary condition for human beings to stay healthy as the deprivation of the good of life.
[32] *DRN* 3 922-928.

argument since this reply assumes that death is a bad thing because death leads to an everlasting non-existence, which is inconsistent with Nagel's previous assumption.

Or, Nagel might say that people do not fear sleeping only in the sense that this sleeping is in a natural and healthy way, i.e., this sleeping does not deprive them of the good of life. If someone has a medical condition that makes him sleep 20 hours a day, while he lives the same amount of life time, he could think that this is bad because of the 'life time' it deprives him of. Likewise, if there is a new drug that can provide all benefits of sleep in a healthy way with much shorter sleeping time, people could think that this is a good thing because it prolongs our life time. Nevertheless, just as we admit that sleeping should not be feared if it is in a natural way, we have to admit that death should not be feared if it is in a natural way. If we accept the precondition that all human beings are mortal, then facing death which is necessary and natural should not be too difficult. And even if extending life can produce more pleasure, how long should this extension be? As James Warren says:

> Even those who would wish to accept that death can be a harm since it robs us of goods which we would otherwise have enjoyed (the counterfactual account of the harm of death) might shrink from the claim that death robs us goods located a thousand years in the future…A more moderate position will concede that death is only a harm in so far as it robs us of time and goods we could reasonably have been expected to experience.[33]

Even if the good of life can be multiplied and more is better than less, there must be a reasonable limitation. And this limitation is the natural condition of human beings.

[33] Warren (2004) 71.

Suppose that based on the existing medical condition and natural environment, the average life expectancy of human beings is 70; then death at 70 or later should not be viewed as a bad thing since it does not deprive the subject any natural life span he is supposed to possess. In this sense, only the premature death can be viewed as a misery. Nevertheless, Lucretius' symmetry argument does not argue for the conclusion that premature death should not be thought harmful. Again, the symmetry argument only focuses on the harm of the period after death.

Secondly, whether the good of life can be multiplied is dubious. Nagel presupposes that we will enjoy more happiness with the extension of our life because we can possess more of the good of life. To the contrary, although Epicureans regard pleasure as the most important good of life, as the starting point and the ultimate goal in life, they do not think pleasure is limitless. In the Principal Doctrines, Epicurus says:

> Unlimited time and limited time contain equal amounts of pleasure, if one measures its limits by reasoning.
> The flesh took the limits of pleasure to be unlimited, and only an unlimited time would have provided it. But the intellect, reasoning out the goal and limit of the flesh and dissolving the fears of eternity, provided us with the perfect way of life and had no further need of unlimited time. [34]

So the unlimited time cannot bring any further pleasure. It is not necessary to say that death can deprive us the good of life since all things are the same and no more pleasure can be found even if we can prolong our life. The justification for the limit of pleasure comes from Epicurus' view on pleasure and pain. According to Epicurus, "the removal of

[34] KD 19, 20.

all feelings is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever a pleasurable feeling is present, for as long as it is present, there is neither a feeling of pain nor a feeling of distress."[35] Hence, as Stephen Rosenbaum says in "Epicurus on pleasure and the complete life":

> Taking the removal of all disease to be the limit of the magnitude of complete health, one can understand how a person's complete health cannot be increased by occurring for a longer time. It is as great as it can be at all times a person has it. Analogously, if the absence of pain is katastematic pleasure, then Epicurus apparently thought that pleasure is an occurrent state such that either one is in the state or one is not. One either has reached the limit of pleasure or one has not. One either has pain or one does not. Therefore a life full of such pleasure will be like a life full of complete health. A total pleasant life could not be more pleasant, however long its extent.[36]

So living a long life is not a necessary condition for living a pleasant life. Also, Epicureans might say that the desire for the extension of life is not natural at all. So to guarantee the validity of his argument, Nagel has to provide further reasons for his third premise which says that the good of life can be multiplied and more is better than less.

Thirdly, Nagel's objection fails to defeat Epicurus' existence argument. We can still ask "If death deprives us anything, when and to whom is it a misfortune?" When alive, death is not present, so how death can deprive us the good of life? Meanwhile, when dead, we do not exist; so to whom does death deprive the good of life? Nagel himself addresses this objection. To answer how the evil of death can be assigned to a subject, Nagel maintains that "most good and ill fortune has as its subject a person identified by

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[35] KD 3.
[36] Rosenbaum, Stephen. "Epicurus on pleasure and the complete life", *Monist*, Jan. 90, Vol. 73, Issue 1.

his history and his possibilities, rather than merely by his categorical state of the moment."[37] For instance, one would not feel bad if he does not know he is betrayed by his friends. However, betrayal is still evil; otherwise it is hard for us to explain why the discovery of betrayal is a misfortune. So the evil of something to a person is not always connected with his experiential state. However, this account does not provide sufficient reason to believe that death is evil even if there is no subject when being dead. On the one hand, in the betrayal case, although the person does not know the betrayal, there is always the possibility of him to be aware of the fact; however, in the death case, the possibility of awareness has been removed by the permanent non-existence. On the other hand, if death can deprive any subject the good of life, the same reason can be applied to the prenatal non-existence as well. To answer this, Nagel proposes his own concept of personhood.

Back to Nagel's objection, it seems to me that Nagel actually implies that the time of a person's birth is a necessary condition for him to be himself, that is, to constitute his personal identity. The issue of personal identity concerns various related problems. For instance, what is the necessary condition for some being to be a person; what guarantees one the unique person one is; what makes one's identity persist over time; etc. The possible conditions that must be satisfied to be the same person involve the physical body, consciousness, psychological experiences and so on. The question is if Nagel assumes that the time of one's birth is necessary for his personal identity, how could he deny that

[37] Nagel (1972) 5.

the time of one's death is also necessary for his personal identity? Let us suppose John actually lived from the period 1930—1990. For Nagel, if John were born in 1920 and died in 1990, even if he had same psychology and experience, it was actually not John but someone else. However, if John were still born in 1930 but died in 2000, then this time he is still the same John with a longer life and more pleasure. The reason provided by Nagel is that time is determined to go from past to future and hence, the same beginning can lead to different possibilities whereas different beginnings can never come to the same ending point. However, one can still continue to ask that why different beginnings cannot guarantee personal identity or why the same beginning with different ending points can guarantee personal identity. Nagel needs to provide further reason to support his claim that a person born earlier than in fact he was would be a different person.

In the article "death and deprivation; or, why Lucretius' symmetry argument fails", Frederik Kaufman provides another definition for personal identity to argue against the symmetry argument based on the deprivation account. Kaufman disagrees with Nagel that time of birth is a necessary condition for personal identity. According to Kaufman, there are two ways to define personhood—bodily considerations and psychological considerations. It is the latter that determines personal identity, whereas the time of birth is connected with bodily consideration. So he thinks that birth is irrelevant to the issue at hand. As he proposes:

The features of personhood which most concern us are not captured by

> genetic or bodily considerations or time or birth; hence, showing that a birth or a fertilization or a bodily constitution could have occurred earlier does not show that, in the relevant sense, the same person could have existed earlier.
> It is in virtue of psychological connectedness to the events of our lives that we construct a sense of ourselves as ourselves, and psychological continuity is what most concerns us when we deliberate about whether or not we could have lived at different times or different places; and the prospect of psychological extinction is surely what disturbs us when we think about death.[38]

This view is compatible with Lucretius' reasoning that the recollection of our atoms cannot compose the same person with the interruption of the consciousness. Lucretius says:

> Even supposing that the mind and the spirit retain their power of sensation after they have been wrenched from our body, it is nothing to us, whose being is dependent upon the conjunction and marriage of body and soul. Furthermore, if in course of time all our component atoms should be reassembled after our death and restored again to their present positions, so that the light of life was given to us a second time, even that eventuality would not affect us in the least, once there had been a break in the chain of consciousness.[39]

Obviously, for Lucretius, his definition for personal identity involves at least two conditions—the combination of body and soul and the continuity of consciousness.

However, Kaufman maintains that it is impossible for a person in the psychological sense to exist earlier but possible to exist longer. His reason is that to guarantee personal identity, psychological continuity must be satisfied. If in the psychological sense a person can exist earlier than he actually did, "a psychological continuum which, by hypothesis, starts earlier, would be a sufficiently different set of memories and experiences, and

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[38] Kaufman, Frederik. "Death and Deprivation; Or, Why Lucretius' Symmetry Argument Fails." *Australian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 74, No. 2; June 1996. pp. 305-312.
[39] *DRN* 3, 845-852.

hence be a different psychological self."[40] However, when it comes to the issue of longer existence, Kaufman thinks the psychological continuity will not be disconnected. "In imaginatively extending a psychological continuum beyond the point at which it was in fact extinguished, we do not have to disrupt the previous contents of the continuum; we simply make additions to it."[41] According to Kaufman, it is psychological continuum that determines the continuity of personhood. And he insists that existing earlier would disrupt this continuum whereas existing later will not. However, Kaufman does not explicitly point out what determines 'psychological continuum'. Is it the beginning of the psychology or some sort of continuity? If existing earlier can disrupt the psychological continuity, why cannot existing longer? Of course we can imagine different possibilities in one's extending life than in fact it was, but what if there is an essential change in his psychology? For instance, John is supposed to die at 60, and he is well known for his kindness and generosity. Now imagine metaphysically his life can be extended to 70. In this additional 10 years, John suffers some disasters and becomes malicious and brutal. Can we maintain that this John in his extending life is the same person? At least, it is obvious that Kaufman's claim that extending life in the psychological sense is simply making additions to it requires further justification.

Let us see another way to argue against the symmetry argument. This kind of objection is represented by Derek Parfit, and it is based on the justification of our psychological

[40] Kaufman (1996) 309.
[41] Kaufman (1996) 310.

attitudes toward the past and the future.

Chapter 5 Parfit's Objection to the Symmetry Argument and Lucretius' Possible Response

As already mentioned previously, harm of death and fear of death are two different affairs. The former refers to a factual state whereas the latter refers to our psychology. Hence, it might be rational to fear death even if we accept the thesis that death is not harmful to us both when alive and after death. However, if Epicurus and Lucretius are right, if the prenatal non-existence and the posthumous non-existence are symmetrical, Lucretius' suggestion that we should adjust our attitudes toward death should be viewed as rational.[42] Although it is still possible that psychologically we cannot remove our fear of death, but given the correctness of the symmetry argument, this fear loses its foundation, or using Kaufman's words "if Epicurus and Lucretius are correct, we should treat the fear of death as a silly phobia—hard to deal with but lacking justification."[43]

In his book "Reasons and Persons", Derek Parfit tries to justify our different attitudes toward the past and the future, and this justification is often used to prove the asymmetry between our pre-natal non-existence and our post-mortem non-existence. Parfit provides a case which he calls "my past and future operations". In this case, there is a kind of operation which is set up to be painful and performed without the use of anesthetic. Further, because the suffering is too severe, the patients' memories about this are

[42] Among three periods of death—before death, the process of being dead and after death, both Epicurus and Lucretius admit that it is rational to fear the pain at the instant of death. In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus says that "he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when present but because it is painful when it is still to come." So it is still reasonable to fear death on the ground that there will be pain during the process of dying.
[43] Kaufman (1996) 306.

removed after the operation by some drug. Suppose there are two patients A and B. A wakes up in the hospital and finds out he has no memory about the last few hours. So he asks the nurse whether he has already had the operation. The nurse only knows that A is one of two patients but cannot tell which one has already finished the operation. Assume that A already suffered the operation for 10 hours, and B is going to undergo a shorter operation later. Parfit insists that person A would rather choose to be the guy who already suffered the operation even if he knows that this one was a much more horrible one.[44] According to this preference, Parfit concludes that between great pain in the past and light pain in the future, we prefer to choose that our pain is in the past even if it is greater.

So Parfit's case mainly deals with the asymmetry between our attitudes toward the past and the future. The structure of this kind of objection is like this: since, psychologically, human beings have different attitudes toward the past and the future, it is rational to hold that there is asymmetrical relationship between the past and the future; hence, Lucretius' symmetry argument is unsound because one of its premise holds that the pre-natal non-existence time period is relevantly similar to the post-mortem non-existence time period.

However, this argument is also not strong enough to defeat the symmetry argument. Firstly, Parfit implies that most people prefer to choose misfortunes in their past rather than in their future. But this is not always the case. For instance, Rosenbaum thinks that the loss of one's reputation can be viewed as a counterexample. Most people would

[44] Parfit (1984) 165-166.

choose the loss of reputation in their future rather than in their past.[45] The difference between Parfit's case and Rosenbaum's case is that surgery pain is temporary whereas the loss of reputation has a further effect that reaches into the future. So the relationship between our preference and our emotion are not as easy as Parfit proposes.

Secondly, there is a difference between the past or future experience and past or future non-existence. The claim that we have different attitudes toward past and future suffering cannot be equated to the claim that we have different attitudes toward the pre-natal non-existence and the post-mortem non-existence. In Parfit's case, the patient's different attitudes toward the past and the future refer to his experience. He must suffer the pain either in the past or in the future. In other words, the past and the future experiences are relevant to the benefit of the person at issue. On the other hand, Epicureans can reply that our pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence have no relevance to us. Assuming there was turbulence like the Punic wars or there will be disasters like the end of the world, since we were or will not exist at those times, they are nothing to us. Therefore, in Parfit's case, the past and the future involve the existence of the patient; whereas in Lucretius' symmetry argument, the past and the future do not involve the existence of the person. Specifically, this case should be devised to address the past and the future non-existence. In Rosenbaum's words:

> One's death (being dead), if a bad at all, is not the sort of bad of which a person could be aware, and our anxiety bias toward the future is only for experienced bads, like pain, injury, and other things of which we can

[45] Rosenbaum, Stephen. 1989. "The Symmetry Argument: Lucretius Against the Fear of Death", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 50, No. 2. pp. 353-373.

> become aware, such as future pain. Therefore, our bias toward the future is not general enough to include such alleged bads as being dead. [46]

Even if we accept that there is a logical connection between our attitudes toward the near past and the near future and our attitudes toward the pre-natal non-existence and the post-mortem non-existence, Parfit's objection is still dubious. There is also a difference between our attitudes and the justification of those attitudes. As James Warren argues:

> Although they may be successful in offering an account of the origin of the apparently intuitive asymmetrical attitude, they are much less successful in showing whether and in what way that attitude can be justified, especially in the case of past and future non-existence.[47]

Parfit puts this problem like this:

> Whether a pain is in the past or future is a mere difference in its relation to the present moment. And if it is not irrational to care more about pains that are in the future, why is it irrational to care more about pains that are in the nearer future?[48]

One might say that the claim that we do not care more about pains that are in the past can be justified by the fact that we cannot affect the past. Whatever we do now, we cannot change what has already occurred in the past; whereas our present actions can affect what will occur in the future. However, this objection might be used to justify my previous point that past and future experiences are different from past and future non-existence. This objection relies on the claim that we cannot affect our past experience whereas what we do now can affect our future experience. Nevertheless, this difference, if true, can only be used to justify our different attitudes toward past experience and future experience. On the other hand, our present actions can neither affect our past non-

[46] Rosenbaum (1989) 365.
[47] Warren (2004) 88.
[48] Parfit (1984) 167.

existence nor affect our future non-existence. Whatever we do now, we will become nothing after death. So if anyone thinks that we have different attitudes toward past non-existence and future non-existence, he has to find another way to justify this difference.

One might say, even if some future suffering is inevitable, even if it cannot be affected by our present actions, we can still fear it in a different way than the fear of the past. Parfit provides a prisoner case to illustrate this opinion:

> Suppose we are in prison, and will be tortured later today. In such cases, when we believe that our future suffering is inevitable, our attitude towards it does not fall into line with our attitude towards past suffering…we are concerned about these future pains simply because they are not yet in the past.[49]

However, this case can only provide reason for the fear of future pain or suffering. When it comes to the death issue, it can only justify that it is rational to fear the pain during the process of dying. But again, if we accept that death leads to annihilation, the fear of future non-existence still requires further justification.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

It is clear now that Lucretius intends to remove the fear of death by proposing the symmetry argument, and his effort is quite successful. The symmetry argument has withstood the test of its criticisms. Closer examination of those criticisms only strengthens the creativity and coherence of the symmetry argument. According to the analysis above, both the deprivation approach and the psychology approach fail to defeat Lucretius' argument. It seems that both the objection that tries to break the symmetry

[49] Parfit (1984) 168,

between past non-existence and future non-existence and the objection that tries to break the symmetry between our attitude toward the past non-existence and our attitude toward the future non-existence do not work.

However, this doesn't mean the symmetry argument is exempt from any suspicion. There is still a little-discussed problem with the symmetry argument. That is, Lucretius simply presupposes our psychological preference of our present attitudes toward the past non-existence that we do not fear our past non-existence.[50] To guarantee the soundness of the symmetry argument, Epicureans have to provide further justification for this premise.

Anyway, Lucretius' symmetry argument provides a supplemental argument for Epicurus' existence argument by aiming to mitigate the fear of the status of being dead; and the symmetry between pre-natal non-existence and post-mortem non-existence is quite coherent.

[50] This sort of little discussed difficulty is called 'the backfire problem' by Rosenbaum. For further details about this issue, see "The Symmetry Argument: Lucretius against the fear of death," pp. 368-369.

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