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HOW TO BE DEAD AND NOT CARE: A DEFENSE OF EPICURUS

Stephen E. Rosenbaum

Non fui; fui; non sum; non curo.

Roman epitaph

THE prospect of death is at best a disquieting annoyance; it is at worst a terrifying mystery. However we react to the prospects of our deaths, we try to suppress our thoughts about death, and live as if our time were endless. Long ago, Epicurus offered a remedy for our attitudes toward our deaths. He apparently argued that since death is neither good nor bad for the person dead and since the fear of that which is not bad for one is groundless, it is unreasonable to fear death; consequently, no one should fear death. If Epicurus were correct in this, we should perhaps try to revise our attitudes toward our deaths. Without regard to what we can do or what we should do about our attitudes, I wish to discuss Epicurus's view that one's death is not bad for one. Since Thomas Nagel's article, "Death," published in 1970,¹ Epicurus's view has come under strong attack from various sources, but has not yet received a sound defense.² I undertake to supply that defense.

Before reconstructing Epicurus's argument, it would be well to make explicit certain basic assumptions and certain basic concepts involved in the issue to be discussed. First, I suppose that being alive is generally good. Some argue against Epicurus partly on the ground that life is good, and I wish to make clear at the outset that I shall not challenge that supposition. Second, I accept the proposition that when one dies, one ceases to exist, in some important sense. Although this proposition is not completely unproblematic, it is one of the bases for the discussion of Epicurus's doctrine. Those who find death frightful and evil find it so precisely because they consider it, or think it might be, the end of their existence as persons. Epicurus finds death harmless partly because it brings about

(or is) nonexistence. The issue between Epicurus and his antagonists is how to view one's death, if it leads to nonexistence. Of course, if one could justifiably believe in life after death, the issue would be different, though if one knew merely that one would continue to exist after one's death, one would not thereby know whether one's death is good, bad, or neither.

It is useful additionally to distinguish three concepts from one another, those of dying, death, and being dead. Attempting a careful explication of the issue raised by Epicurus using only the word "death" would be futile, for the term is ambiguous, being used to mean sometimes dying, sometimes death, and sometimes being dead, as I shall explain those terms. Dying, we may say, is the process whereby one comes to be dead or the process wherein certain causes operate to bring about one's being dead. As such, dying takes place during, and at or near the end of, one's lifetime, however extensive it may be. The time dying takes may be short or long. The process of dying may be comfortable or uncomfortable. When we say about a person that it took a long time for the person to die, we are commenting about the person's dying. An important truth about dying is that it takes place during a person's lifetime and may thus be experienced. We should distinguish dying from death. Doing so is not perfectly in accord with common usage, but this is insignificant, since common usage is not perfectly unambiguous. When we say, for example, "Her death took a long time," we could substitute the word "dying" for that of "death" with no loss of meaning. Nevertheless, I want to focus on that sense of 'death' in which the word might be used to say, "Though he had had a long, fatal illness, his death came unexpectedly." In this context, death is roughly the time at which a person becomes dead, and is different from dying, the

process leading to death. Metaphorically, death is the portal between the land of the living and the land of the dead; the bridge over the Styx. Several facts should be noted about death, in this sense. It is not clearly a part of a person's lifetime, although it may be a (very) small part. Also, it is not clear that it takes time or, if so, how much time it takes. It may be a mere moment in time separating being alive from being dead. Distinct from dying or death is being dead. Being dead is the state in which one finds oneself (so to speak) after one dies. Being dead is clearly not part of a person's life, in the normal sense, though we might say that it is part of a person's history. The differences among these concepts may be summarized easily: death comes at the end of a person's dying and at the beginning of a person's being dead. There are two points in making these distinctions. One is that doing so will enable us to understand Epicurus's view about death in the clearest way. The other is that it will enable us to notice ambiguous uses of the term "death" which embody rhetorically, but not logically, persuasive ways of insinuating the falsity of Epicurus's view.

Now we are in a position to formulate Epicurus's argument after reminding ourselves of what he said in his "Letter to Menoeceus."

Accustom thyself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience, and death is the privation of all sentience;...Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.³

I offer the following reconstruction of Epicurus's argument. In formulating the argument as I do, I attempt to do justice to Epicurus's philosophical insight, caring less for historical accuracy than for verisimilitude. The reconstruction runs as follows:

- (A) A state of affairs is bad for person *P* only if *P* can experience it at some time.
- Therefore, (B) *P*'s being dead is bad for *P* only if it is a state of affairs that *P* can experience at some time.
- (C) *P* can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins before *P*'s death.

(D) *P*'s being dead is not a state of affairs that begins before *P*'s death.

Therefore, (E) *P*'s being dead is not a state of affairs that *P* can experience at some time.

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

Before discussing objections to this argument, several comments are in order. First, the conclusion does not entail that *P*'s being dead is not bad for others or that *P*'s being dead is not bad in any way in which something might be bad but not *for* anyone, if there is such a way. So, the argument, if sound, should not inhibit our thinking that a person's being dead is bad in these other ways. Second, the conclusion is not about death or dying, but rather it is about being dead. So it does not rule out a person's dying being bad for the person, as painful experience makes obvious it should not. Neither does it rule out a person's death being bad for the person. There are several reasons why I express the conclusion in this way. It makes Epicurus's argument clearly sensible in a way in which it would not otherwise be. When Epicurus said that "death... is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not,"⁴ he is most plausibly interpreted as talking about being dead. Taking death to be a sort of tertiary period in one's history, one could construe Epicurus as being concerned about death (in my sense), but I believe that it would be an exceedingly uncharitable way of making him look silly. The term "death" as ordinarily used, is ambiguous, being used sometimes to mean dying, sometimes death, and sometimes being dead, as I have explicated the terms. There is no reason to expect Epicurus thoughtfully to have distinguished these and to have selected the Greek equivalent of "being dead" to express his view.⁵ Second, the issue would be much less interesting if it concerned death instead of being dead. What people seem to think bad is not the moment of death itself, but rather the abysmal nonexistence of being dead. That, at any rate, is what they fear, and that fear is what Epicurus wished to extinguish. In addition, I am not sure that a person's death (in my sense) could be bad for a person, since the death of a person may have no temporal duration, being a mere moment in time separating being alive from

being dead. Even if death endured a fraction of a second, most rational beings would not be very concerned about it no matter how much agony were believed to be involved. Finally, there are sympathetic proponents of Epicurus's view who take him to be concerned about being dead, not death. Lucretius, for example, understood Epicurus's view about death as a view about being dead.⁶ So we have good reason to express the conclusion in the way we do.⁷

It is important, furthermore, to spend some time explaining and commenting on the concept of experience, which plays a crucial role in the argument. Comments about experience should be made in full realization of the woes that can befall one who attempts to look too deeply into Pandora's box. The word "experience" is ambiguous, and it is not possible to review the analysis of the concept briefly, nor is it useful to do so.⁸ Nevertheless, some helpful remarks can be made in the context of an argument for (A), that a state of affairs is bad for a person only if the person can experience it at some time.

Suppose that a person *P* cannot hear and never will hear. Then the egregious performance of a Mozart symphony cannot causally affect *P* at any time, supposing that what makes the performance bad is merely awful sound, detectable only through normal hearing, and supposing further that the performance does not initiate uncommon causal sequences which can affect the person. It is clear that the person cannot experience the bad performance, auditorily or otherwise. Furthermore, it seems clear that the performance cannot be bad for the person in any way. It cannot affect the person in any way. The reason why it is not bad for him is that he is not able to experience it. The person's being deaf insulates him from auditory experiences which might otherwise be bad for him. Similarly, a person born without a sense of smell cannot be causally affected by, and thus cannot experience, the stench of a smoldering cheroot. The stench cannot be an olfactory negativity for her. We could imagine indefinitely many more such cases.

Since I see nothing eccentric about these cases, I believe that we are entitled to generalize and claim that our judgments about these cases are explained

by the principle that if a person cannot experience a state of affairs at some time, then the state of affairs is not bad for the person. Dead persons cannot experience any states of affairs; they are blind, deaf, and generally insentient. So no state of affairs is bad for a dead person. The principle which explains these cases is, moreover, logically equivalent to (A), a state of affairs is bad for a person only if the person can experience it at some time. We may take it that we thus have a positive reason for believing (A).

Now, clearly there are certain suppositions about experience used in this argument. Foremost is the assumption that one experiences a state of affairs only if it can affect one in some way. There is supposed to be a causal element in experience. In this sense of "experience," then, one does not experience a situation merely by believing that the situation has occurred or will occur, or by imagining a certain situation. A person can believe that a state of affairs has occurred or will occur even if the state of affairs has had no causal effects on the person. The event may not have occurred and may never occur. Thus, in the sense of "experience" presupposed here, one does not experience just by believing. Similarly, one does not experience a situation just by imagining it. One might imagine oneself basking lazily on a sunny beach, but that situation is not thereby a situation that one experiences. The apparently required causal connection between the situation and the person is missing.

Notice that I have assumed here only a necessary condition for experiencing a situation, not a sufficient condition. Hence, one might be causally affected by a situation and not experience it. Perhaps awareness of the causal effects is also required. I believe there may be one sense of the term "experience" in which awareness is required, another in which it is not. It is difficult to think that one could perceptually experience something, for example, without being aware of it. However, there is that way of experiencing in which we are said to undergo an experience, of which we need not be aware. If one undergoes (as we say) the experience of being irradiated by low level radioactivity, one might well not be aware of it. It seems to me that one clear requirement of experience, in

at least in one clear sense, is that one be causally affected in some way by situations one experiences.

Finally, if a requirement of experiencing a state of affairs is that the state of affairs be able to have causal effects on one, then we can express a positive reason for believing not only premise (A) but also premise (C), that *P* can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins before *P*'s death. Surely a state of affairs can causally affect a person only if the person exists after the state of affairs begins to occur, for effects occur only after their causes. To be sure, a person's dead body can be affected after the person ceases to be, but a person is not identical to its lifeless body. A person exists after a state of affairs begins to occur only if the state of affairs begins before the person's death. Therefore a state of affairs can causally affect a person only if the state of affairs begins before the person's death. So a person can experience a situation only if the situation begins to occur before the person's death. Obviously, this is (C). According to one reasonably clear concept of experience, then, we have reasons to believe basic premises in the argument.

Before considering objections to the Epicurean argument, I want to characterize what I take to be the purpose of Epicurus's argument. I do this because some discussions of the issue seem to have misunderstood entirely what Epicurus was trying to do. Simply, he was trying to show us the truth about being dead so that we might not be excessively troubled about it. His general philosophical aim seems to have been much the same as that of Lucretius, his disciple, to know the truth and thereby achieve *ataraxia*. There is no reason to believe he would have been willing to peddle *ataraxia* by means of rhetorical trickery, not that he may not have done so inadvertently. Indicative of his purpose is a comment in his "Letter to Herodotus," in which he discussed metaphysics. He said that "...mental tranquillity means being released from all...troubles and cherishing a continual remembrance of the highest and most important truths."⁹ Thus, I believe that Mary Mothersill seriously misunderstood Epicurus when announcing her view that his argument "...will hardly bear looking into, but may have been intended as little more than an eristic flourish," and

that "Epicurus was not much interested in logic..."¹⁰ Epicurus did have a serious purpose, to establish the truth and thereby gain mental tranquillity and show the way to mental tranquillity. In fairness to Mothersill, we should admit that there would be more to her comment if Epicurus's argument were to be understood only as he expressed it. There is not much there. Nevertheless, I think that it is uncharitable caviling to dismiss his argument without an attempt to state the argument clearly.

Others have not fully appreciated the revisionistic character of Epicurus's philosophy. Harry Silverstein, for example, sees the matter raised by Epicurus as a sort of contest between the Epicurean view and the common sense view "...that a person's death is one of the greatest evils that can befall him."¹¹ Seeming to believe that the philosopher's task is to bolster the deliverances of common sense against all antagonists, Silverstein is driven to extreme lengths in the effort to undermine Epicurus's view. Epicurus believed, however, that unreflective common sense frequently was a source of bemusement and misery, and he wished to make common sense conform to the results of philosophical reflection. He believed that one of the results was a realization that death is not bad for the person who dies. I do not want to argue for Epicurus's apparent view of philosophy, and I certainly do not wish to dismiss arguments against Epicurus on the ground that they presuppose a distinct view of philosophy. I merely note that the argument is offered in a revisionistic spirit and that those who conjure ways to defend common sense against Epicurus are arguing in a very different context from that of Epicurus. Whether one takes philosophy to be revisionistic or not, perhaps one should approach philosophical arguments from the point of view of possible discovery, not from that of the infrangibility of one's own prereflective inclinations. However this may be, the philosophical issue is whether the argument is sound. To objections against the argument I now turn.

Given the Epicurean argument as I have stated it, there are only three premises one could question. Those are the basic ones, (A), (C), and (D). The others, (B) and (E), are merely logical consequences of (A), (C), and (D). Since (D) is true by definition, we shall consider only (A) and (C),

which have, in fact, been attacked by Epicurus's adversaries.

Thomas Nagel argues that what a person does not know may well be bad for the person.¹² Nagel seems thereby to object to premise (A). He gives plausible cases in which something can be bad for a person even if the person is unaware of it. Unknown betrayal by friends and destruction of one's reputation by vile, false rumors of which one is unaware are examples of evils which a person might not consciously experience. Strictly, however, such cases are logically compatible with (A) and hence do not refute (A), since all (A) requires for something to be bad for a person is that the person *can* experience it (perhaps not consciously) at some time, not that he actually experience it consciously.¹³ We can grant that what one *does not* consciously experience can hurt one without granting that what one *cannot* experience can hurt one. All (A) requires for an event or state of affairs to be bad for a person, implicitly, is that the person be able to experience at some time, not that the person be aware or conscious of the causal effects at some time.

Nagel tries to deny the conclusion directly by characterizing death as a loss to the person who suffers it, and, taking losses to be bad, concludes that a person's death is bad for the person. He seems relatively unconcerned about the proposition that once a person dies, that person no longer exists, and thus does not and *cannot* experience the loss, a proposition which he accepts.¹⁴ L. S. Sumner is more explicit about the issue and claims that though the person who dies no longer exists "...the only condition essential to any loss is *that there should have been a subject who suffered it*."¹⁵ It is all right, I suppose, to *call* a person's death a loss for the person, but it is clearly not like paradigmatic cases of losses which are bad for persons. Consider the case in which one loses one's business to creditors. One has the business, the creditors get it, and then one does not have it. We may suppose that the loss is bad for the person. Such cases are common. We should note that in such cases the loss is something the person is able to experience after it occurs. Typical losses which are bad for persons seem to instantiate the following principle:

A person *P* loses good *g* only if there is a time at which *P* has *g* and there is a later time at which *P* does not have *g*. If *P* ceases to exist when *P* dies, then being dead cannot be considered a loss of this typical sort in which losses are bad for persons, for in typical cases *P* exists after the loss and is able to experience it. If being dead is a loss, it is so insufficiently similar to paradigm cases of loss which are bad for persons that we need special reasons or arguments why treating death as a loss enables us to reject (A). Neither Nagel nor others offer such reasons. Therefore, the argument that death is a loss and is thus bad is not convincing.

Nagel believes further that by treating death as a loss for a person, he has a way of resolving *the symmetry problem*, noted by Lucretius.¹⁶ Considering this problem will help us understand more clearly the problems in holding that death is bad for one. Taking being dead to be nonexistence, Lucretius compared the nonexistence after death to that before conception, and apparently thought that since prenatal nonexistence is not bad for a person (and no one finds it distressing), then posthumous nonexistence is not bad either (though people *do* find it distressing). He seemed to have thought that we should rectify our unjustifiably asymmetrical attitudes toward the two symmetrical states. The argument would be that if being dead (when one is nonexistent) is bad for one, then not having had life before one's conception (when one is also nonexistent) should be bad for one. Since the latter is not bad for one, then the former is not.

Nagel's response to this argument is that "...the time after his [a person's] death is a time of which his death deprives him. It is a 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."¹⁷ By this, Nagel intends to suggest implicitly that we cannot say something similar about birth, hence, there is an asymmetry, contrary to Lucretius. However, we can say something quite analogous about birth: The time before a person's birth is a time of which his not having been born earlier deprives him. It is a time in which, had he not been born as late as he was, he would be alive. Therefore any delay in being born entails the loss of some life that its beneficiary would have led had

he been born earlier. To be clear about the analogy, if life is a good, then, given a living person, if losing life so soon is bad for the person, then not having acquired life earlier should be bad for the person. In either case, one misses out on life. Shall we say that the issue is whether it is worse to have lived and lost than never to have lived at all? No, because it is not true of a living person that that person *never* lived at all. A living person can live longer not only by dying later but also by being born earlier. The issue really is whether it is worse to have lived and lost than not *yet* to have lived. I do not see that it is worse. What makes the symmetry is, in part, the fact that a living person who *was* prenatally nonexistent *was going to live*, just as the living person who *will be* posthumously nonexistent *has lived*. The symmetry is plausible because the analogy between the two relevant states seems quite sound.

Nagel objects to the proposed symmetry by insisting that "...we cannot say that the time prior to a man's birth is a time in which he would have lived had he been born not then but earlier...He *could* not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he would have been someone else. Therefore, the time prior to his birth is not time in which his subsequent birth prevents him from living."¹⁸ The reply to this is obvious. If the time at which we are born is *essential* to who we are, to our identity, then the time at which we die should be also. If *we* could not have been born earlier (because if "*we*" had been, "*we*" would have been someone else), then *we* could not have died later (and still have been us). Nagel's answer relies on the view that there is an asymmetry between time of birth and time of death, implicitly because time of birth is not essential to us while time of death is. But *this* putative asymmetry is invisible. Thus it cannot be used to argue for the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. If Lucretius's symmetry thesis is correct, as it seems to be, then there is no reason to think that being dead is any worse than not having been born yet.

A recent objection to the Epicurean argument is that of Harry Silverstein, who, defending common sense, apparently believes that a person can in some way, experience posthumous states of affairs, thus

seeming to reject (C). He apparently argues against (C) by proposing an analogy between spatially distant events and temporally distant (future) events. He believes that the view that spatially distant events exist (but not *here*) and that temporally distant events do not exist "...presupposes a conceptual ontological framework which is significantly biased in favor of space, a framework according to which we inhabit an essentially three-dimensional, spatial, universe and which condemns time to a purely ancillary treatment befitting its status as space's poor relation."¹⁹ Wishing for a less biased ontology, Silverstein proposes to treat time on a par with space and to say that just as spatially distant events exist so too do future events. Thus, he has a possible way of negating (C): A person can experience states of affairs or events that begin after that person's death, because such things *exist* atemporally ("during") a person's life.

There is much to say about Silverstein's argument, which is, at points, quite complex. However, I shall be content to make a few points, one of which seems to me quite telling against his argument. Silverstein wishes to show, as he puts it, "...that A's death can be the *object* of his grief in the same way that the death of a spatially distant friend can be such an object..."²⁰ He wants to make this point because he thinks that "where A's 'appropriate feeling' results from his apprehension or consciousness of the event (*etc.*) in question, what seems important in any case is not the event's being the *cause*, but its being the *object*, of this feeling."²¹ To make the point, he feels he must hold a metaphysical view according to which it is possible that future events or states of affairs exist now, atemporally. There are several appropriate comments to be made about Silverstein's view. First, one of his basic assumptions goes without support, that assumption, namely, that an event's being an object of feeling, not a cause, is what is important in saying whether posthumous events are bad for a person. It seems to me that unless this hypothesis receives some support, we are free to reject it, especially since I have already argued that a causal relationship between the event and the person is necessary. Second, he assumes that a person's having, at some time, an actual feeling about an event is necessary for the event to be bad for the person.

This assumption, too, is without support. To be sure, it is his interpretation of Epicurus's view that bad is associated with sentience, but it is not the only or the most obvious interpretation. If we say, for example, that one must experience an event consciously for it to be bad for one, it does not follow from what we say that one must have certain feelings about the event, about one's awareness of the event, or about anything. It should be argued that feelings of some sort are involved.

Finally, it is clear that events which have never occurred and will never occur *can*, in some sense, be *objects* of our psychological attitudes. For example, Britons in the early 1940's feared an invasion of Britain by the Nazis. Yet that event never occurred. They dreaded being governed by Hitler, yet that state of affairs did not obtain and never will. Silverstein insists that "the problem of existence constitutes the sole obstacle to the claim that posthumous events, like spatially distant events, can be objects of appropriate feelings and experiences..."²² But should we say that the event and state of affairs in the previous examples had to exist (and existed) for them to have been objects of fear and dread? We can say so, if we like, but whether we say thus that the Nazi invasion of Britain existed (or exists), atemporally, it is nevertheless an event that Britons never experienced (it is natural to say), because it never occurred. This suggests that something is seriously wrong with Silverstein's objection to premise (C). Very simply, he fails to distinguish the existence of an event or state of affairs from the occurrence of an event or state of affairs. Certainly, there might be no need to make such a distinction for one who takes it that the class of occurring events is identical to the class of existing events. Without such a distinction, one would hold that an event exists if, and only if, it occurs. If Silverstein identifies the classes of events, then he would seem forced to the view that if events exist atemporally (as he believes) then events occur atemporally. But if events occurred and existed atemporally, what would be the difference between past and future events? There would be none, which is absurd. Therefore, Silverstein should distinguish existing from occurring events or find some other way of distinguishing past from future events. It would be most plausible to say

that for events or states of affairs, to exist is one thing, to occur is another. One might hold that all events *exist* atemporally but that among the existing events, some have already occurred (past events) and some have not yet occurred (future events). With this distinction, moreover, it is easy to defend (C) against Silverstein's attack. (C) could be interpreted in terms of an event occurring instead of an event existing. As stated, (C) should be understood to be slightly elliptical for this: *P* can experience a state of affairs at some time only if it begins *to occur* before *P*'s death. In fact, this is how I have taken it. So understood, it is no good to object to (C) that posthumous events or states of affairs exist timelessly (during a person's life). This would be logically compatible with (C). One would have to show that a person can experience a state of affairs or an event that does not begin *to occur* before the person's death. I do not see how *this* can be done. Therefore, I conclude that Silverstein's metaphysical proposal is ineffective against premise (C), whatever its merits independently.

In spite of the apparent soundness of Epicurus's argument, one might object against Epicurus's argument on the ground that it misses the point. One might claim that the badness of our deaths lies in our anticipation of losing the capacity to experience, to have various opportunities and to obtain various satisfactions. It does seem quite obvious that such anticipation is bad, for it is a source of displeasure, as much as is the experience of anticipating the tortures of the dental chair. However, the anticipation of either bad experiences or of the inability to experience *simpliciter* is something that can occur only while we are alive. It cannot occur when we are dead if being dead entails nonexistence. Therefore, we do not experience the anticipation of being dead when we are dead. So, the badness of the anticipation of death does not show the badness of death itself. This point may be understood more clearly when one compares the anticipation of dental pain to the anticipation of being dead. For the former, there are two bad experiences, the anticipation and the pain of the root canal; for the latter, there is only one bad experience, the anticipation of being dead. Indeed, Epicurus may be thought to have believed that the anticipation of death is a pointless bad, since it is

a bad with no genuine basis, the object of it not being bad. Epicurus hoped that understanding this could free us from one bad, one baseless source of anxiety. One could say, I suppose, that one's death is bad, meaning that anticipation of one's death is bad. However, not only would it be unduly misleading to say this, but also, it would not be a way of undermining Epicurus's view that one's death itself is not bad for one.

Now that objections to the Epicurean argument have been shown to fail, we might think of trying to account for what seems a widespread and well-entrenched fear of death or being dead. It is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that people may fear what is not really bad for them; they might fear what they only believe to be bad for them. We might thus speculate that people fear death out of ignorance. This seems somewhat too facile and insensitive, however true. Perhaps a few conjectures may help explain the fear of being dead in a way both sympathetic to human anguish and consistent with the Epicurean view.

Lucretius offered a very interesting psychological explanation of the terror of death. He hypothesized that we have a very difficult time thinking of ourselves distinct from our bodies.

Accordingly, when you see a man resenting his fate, that after death he must either rot with his body laid in the tomb, or perish by fire or the jaws of wild beasts, you may know that he rings false,..., although he himself deny the belief in any sensation after death. He does not, I think, admit what he professes to admit,...: he does not wholly uproot and eject himself from life, but unknown to himself he makes something of himself to survive. For when he in life anticipates that birds and beasts will mangle his body after death, he pities himself; for he does not distinguish himself from that thing, he does not separate himself sufficiently from the body there cast out, he imagines himself to be that and, standing beside it, infects it with his own feeling. Hence he...does not see that in real death there will be no other self that could live to bewail his perished self, or stand by to feel pain that he lay there lacerated or burning.²³

Lucretius may have believed that we so habitually identify ourselves with our bodies that we have a psychologically difficult time separating ourselves from them. So we think that since bad things can

happen to our bodies in death, bad things can happen to us. This way of thinking is perhaps exemplified in the custom, in some societies, of placing a dead person's body inside a sturdy, well-sealed box, fitted with comfortable bedding. Why would there be this practice if there were not at least some psychological basis for associating a living person with that person's lifeless body? If Lucretius were correct in his hypothesis, then it would help to alleviate our fear of our deaths if we could sufficiently separate ourselves from our dead bodies.

Another possible explanation for the fear of death in at least our society, broadly speaking, is that people have been exposed for so long to the thesis that there is a life after death that even if they do not explicitly accept the view, they are somehow strongly affected by it. Since they have no information about what really happens to a person after the person dies, they feel that what happens then could well be awful. Wanting desperately not to experience the awful, and not knowing that they will not, they fear. If this is so, then, ironically, fear of death has its psychological roots in the belief in a life after death.

One might try to account for our fear of death based on the fact that the conclusion of the Epicurean argument leaves plenty of room for maneuver. It would allow, for example, dying or death (possibly), but not being dead, to be bad for a person. One might hypothesize that those who view being dead as a bad for them and thus fear it do so out of confusion. They take dying or death to be bad, mistakenly identify dying or death with being dead, and then think that being dead is bad. On that basis they may fear it. Their fear could be based on a truth, that dying or death is (or could be) bad for them, and at the same time a confusion, that there is no difference between dying or death and being dead. Such a confusion might well receive aid from the fact that "death," as commonly used, is ambiguous, as I noted at the outset. Nagel's argument benefits from such a confusion. Whatever the explanation or explanations, it is obviously possible to account for our fear of death while at the same time accepting the conclusion of the Epicurean argument.

I have resurrected and reconstructed an Epicu-

rean argument that death is not bad for one. I have given reasons for believing basic premises in the argument, and I have laid to rest all the objections of which I am aware. (*Requiescant in pace*). Finally, I have offered conjectures which may enable us to account for our fear of being dead compatibly with the conclusion of the argument. This effort should bury the myth that death is bad for us. If we do not believe, as did many of the

ancients, that a Stygian passage will take us to a nether realm of being, then, though we may not relish the idea of not being able to experience, we should find in the contemplation of our journey no cause for thanatophobia, as we might if we could reasonably believe that a disorientingly different and possibly quite displeasing set of experiences awaited us.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Nagel, "Death," *Nous*, vol. 4 (1970), pp. 73-80.
2. Since completing this paper, I have learned of a recent paper which undertakes a defense of Epicurus. O. H. Green, "Fear of Death," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 43 (1982), pp. 99-105.
3. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), p. 651.
4. *Ibid.*
5. In fact, there is reason to expect him not to have carefully distinguished these. He wrote more for popular accessibility than for careful philosophical discussion.
6. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 254. There are many comments that prove this, but see "*scire licet nobis nil esse in morte timendum*," at 866. This use of the phrase "*in morte*" is not eccentric, for its literary use antedates Lucretius by some 150-200 years. It occurs, for example, in the Plautus play *Captivi*, at 741: "*post mortem in morte nihil est quod metuam mali*."
7. Hereafter, I shall use "death" to mean being dead, unless the context makes it clear that it is used otherwise.
8. But one might wish to review J. M. Hinton's work, *Experiences*, in which there is a useful discussion of the various senses in which the term is used. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), Part I.
9. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, *op. cit.*, p. 611.
10. Mary Mothersill, "Death," in *Moral Problems*, ed. by James Rachels, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 378.
11. Harry Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77 (1980), p. 401.
12. Thomas Nagel, "Death," *Nous*, vol. 4 (1970), p. 76.
13. The same point is made by Harry Silverstein in "The Evil of Death," *op. cit.*, pp. 414 ff.
14. Nagel, "Death," *op. cit.*, p. 78.
15. L. S. Sumner, "A Matter of Life and Death," *Nous*, vol. 10 (1976), p. 160.
16. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, *op. cit.*, p. 253 and p. 265.
17. Nagel, "Death," *op. cit.*, p. 79.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," *op. cit.*, p. 413.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 419.
23. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.