Lucretius on the Finality of Death: The Problem of Self-Reollection

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A good deal of the literature on Lucretius’ discussion of death has tended to dwell, ahistorically, upon the soundness of his symmetry argument, with most of the controversy centering around the question of whether pre-vital and post-mortem states of nonexistence are really symmetrical. I recommend taking a more historical approach by focusing on the consistency of Lucretius’ argument that death is permanent. In his defense of this claim, Lucretius entertains hypothetical scenarios wherein the soul is able to persist and continue perceiving in the absence of the body, and wherein the entire aggregate of the body and the soul might be restored and resume perceiving after death. In both cases, he denies that the perceiving being in question would be the same person who existed prior to the dissociation of the body and the soul. From Lucretius’ justification of this claim, we can derive two theses concerning the relation between personal-identity and the union of the body and the soul. The weaker thesis treats self-recollection as a criterion for personal-identity. The stronger thesis treats the continuity of self-recollection as a criterion for personal-identity. I will argue that, whereas the weaker criterion is explicable in terms of the Epicurean theory of memory, the stronger criterion is not. And since the weaker criterion is compatible with the notion of genuine post-mortem resurrection, it follows that Lucretius’ claim that death is permanent is inconsistent with the Epicurean theory of memory. Consistency would require Lucretius to acknowledge the possibility that ‘we’ might be restored and resume perceiving after death. But this conclusion undermines the entire point of the symmetry argument (that we ought not to fear death), since it entails the possibility that “we” will awake to further pain after death. Thus, regardless of whether or not we as modern readers find the symmetry argument to be persuasive, it may turn out that the author of this argument was never really entitled to make use of it.
1. The Symmetry Argument: Motivating an Historical Approach

In the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius argues that pre-vital and post-mortem states of non-existence are symmetrical, and that since nobody considers pre-vital nonexistence to be an evil, we ought to adopt a similar attitude with respect to post-mortem nonexistence. This argument has generated a good deal of recent discussion; some commentators (e.g., Nagel and Kaufman) have criticized Lucretius’ symmetry argument, while others (e.g., Rosenbaum and Pettigrove) have defended it.

Against Lucretius, Thomas Nagel (1970) argues that pre-vital and post-mortem states are asymmetrical, since death can be characterized as a deprivation of possible goods, whereas birth cannot. The idea here is that death closes off a person’s access to many goods, which they might have enjoyed, had they died at a later time. Birth, on the other hand, cannot be said to cut off access to possible goods that might have been experienced if the person had been born at an earlier time. This asymmetry occurs, according to Nagel, because personal-identity is more closely linked to the time of one’s birth than to the time of one’s death: “…anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else.” (Nagel, 79)

Stephen E. Rosenbaum (1989) takes issue with Nagel’s asymmetry claim, arguing that birth, coming when it does rather than earlier in time, can indeed be construed as a deprivation of possible goods. He defends this view by denying Nagel’s suggestion that it would be logically impossible for one and the same person to have had a different temporal beginning than they in fact had. Personal-identity, on Rosenbaum’s view, depends less on the time of one’s birth than on one’s genetic origin. And because it is logically possible for the sperm and egg out of which one is composed to have existed and fused earlier than they did, there is no logical reason why a person could not have come into existence earlier than they did:

Since it is logically possible that a person’s genetic beginning occur at some earlier time, even that it occur centuries earlier, it is logically possible that a person come into being at some earlier time, granting for the sake of argument that a person’s genetic origin is essential to the person’s identity. (Rosenbaum, 363)
Frederik Kaufman (1996) comes to Nagel’s defense, arguing that it is not a person’s genetic origin that is essential to their identity, but rather their psychological makeup. This, he says, could not have come into existence earlier than it did:

…it is not possible for a person in the psychological sense to exist earlier than in fact he or she did because a psychological continuum which, by hypothesis, starts earlier, would be a sufficiently different set of memories and experiences, and hence be a different psychological self. (Kaufman, 309)

Kaufman’s designation of psychological makeup as the relevant factor for discussing one’s concern about post-mortem states is challenged by Glen Pettigrove (2002), who argues that psychological features are insufficient to account for the complete range of concerns that people have about death:

…it is not self-evident that ‘concern about death is a concern that the psychological continuum that constitutes my personal conscious existence will be extinguished forever.’ Kaufman may find this position compelling, but his is only one among a host of competing voices. (Pettigrove, 410)

As examples of such alternative voices, Pettigrove cites cases in which people are known to take comfort in concepts of continued existence which do not entail the continuity of psychological awareness.

Now, this is undeniably a fascinating discussion, especially for anyone confronting their own anxiety at the prospect of death. However, it needs to be pointed out that it is also, for the most part, an ahistorical discussion. That is to say, its participants treat the symmetry argument in virtual isolation from the Epicurean worldview that provided its original context, taking little to no account of the peculiarities of Epicurean physics or psychology.¹ It seems to me that greater sensitivity to these historical details will reveal a serious problem facing Lucretius, which has so far gone unnoticed. In particular, there exists an inconsistency between Lucretius’ conviction that death is permanent—which is intended to reinforce the conclusion of the symmetry argument, that we ought not to fear death—and the Epicurean theory of memory. In order to remove this inconsistency, Lucretius would have concede that it is possible for a person to be restored following their death. But because this concession would entail the possibility that

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¹ Kaufman comes the closest to approaching the problem from an historical standpoint, since he at least acknowledges that continuity of psychological awareness is also emphasized by Lucretius, as a criterion for personal-survival.
one might awake to further pain after dying, it conflicts with the claim that we ought not to fear death. And so it would seem that the intention of the symmetry argument—to alleviate one’s fear of death—is seriously undermined by Lucretius’ prior philosophical commitments with respect to the mechanics of memory.

Before unpacking this inconsistency between Lucretius’ position on the permanence of death and the Epicurean theory of memory, I will review the basic rationale behind the Epicurean conviction that one ought not to fear death, as well as the reasoning behind Lucretius’ supplementary argument that death is permanent.

2. The Epicurean Position on Death

The Epicurean argument on the subject of death can be summarized in the following passage, from Epicurus’ Letter to Menoeceus: “…death is nothing to us. For all good and evil lie in sensation, whereas death is the absence of sensation” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 149).

Implicit in the first premise of this argument (that all good and evil lie in sensation) is the view that the proper object of fear is pain. The second premise (that death is the absence of pain) is derived from Epicurus’ remarks concerning sensation from his Letter to Herodotus. Following his definition of the soul as a body composed of exceedingly fine atoms, which are diffused throughout the rest of the aggregate, Epicurus goes on to remark that although the soul possesses the greater share of the responsibility for sensation, “…it would not be in possession of this if it were not contained in some way by the rest of the aggregate” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 65). Similarly, he says, “…when the soul has been separated from it, the rest of the aggregate does not have sensation” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 65). Thus, it appears that Epicurus regards sensation as an accidental by-product of the mutual interaction (or ‘co-affection’) of the soul and the rest of the aggregate (i.e. the body), which therefore could not occur if the union of body and soul were to be disrupted.

With this explanation in mind, we are now in a position to grasp the rationale behind Epicurus’ assertion that “death is the absence of sensation.” Since the occurrence of sensation

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2 i.e., Evil
3 What we would normally call body, contrasted with an incorporeal soul.

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depends upon the union of the soul and the rest of the aggregate, and since death entails the disruption of this union, it follows that death entails the cessation of sensation. From here, we need only consider the fact that pain is a facet of sensation in order to grasp the implication that death entails the cessation of pain. And since pain is the proper object of fear (as the first premise implies), it follows that there is nothing for us to fear in death—hence, Epicurus’ conclusion that that “death is nothing to us."

3. Lucretius on the finality of death

Lucretius’ commentary on the subject of death contains a number of arguments intended to reinforce Epicurus’ conclusion that there is nothing in death that warrants our anxiety. However, his approach is somewhat different from Epicurus’. Rather than insisting upon the cessation of sensation at the moment of death, Lucretius entertains hypothetical scenarios in which (i) sensation continues uninterrupted after the death of the body, and in which (ii) sensation is resumed following an eventual reconstitution of the body and the soul.

Lucretius imagines (i) as a scenario in which the soul is capable of persisting independently of the body and receiving sensory-impressions. This scenario must be hypothetical for Lucretius as it involves a suspension of both (E-1) the Epicurean principle that the soul is dependent upon the body to prevent it from dispersing and being destroyed, and (E-2) the Epicurean principle that sensation is the result of the co-affection of the soul and the body.

He imagines (ii) as a scenario in which, after our death, the same primary particles that we now consist of come to be rearranged in the exact same order as they are now. This is an extension of an inference which Lucretius draws from the Epicurean principles (E-3) that the past is infinite, and (E-4) that atoms are always in motion.

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4 In his Letter to Herodotus, Epicurus says that, were it not for its being contained within the denser aggregate of the body, the soul would disperse and would be destroyed on account of the unsurpassed fineness and mobility of its atoms. Hence, “…when the whole aggregate disintegrates the soul is dispersed and no longer has the same powers, or its motions.” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 66)

5 Explained above, in section 2.

6 This can, I think, be derived from Epicurus’ claim, from his Letter to Herodotus, that “…the totality of things is infinite.” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 44)
For when you look back at the entire past span of measureless time, and then reflect how various are the motions of matter, you could easily believe that the same primary particles of which we now consist have often in the past been arranged in the same order as now. (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 151)

Lucretius argues that the conjunction of (E-3) and (E-4) makes it probable that our atoms will come to be arranged in the same order as now many times in the future, by the same token that it entails that they have been so arranged many times in the past. And if the entire aggregate of body and soul comes to be reconstituted in the same configuration as now, then the accidental attribute of sensation (resulting from the co-affection of the soul and the body) will also be restored.

Now, despite entertaining both of these hypothetical scenarios, Lucretius still does not think that their possibility should cause us any anxiety. This is, according to Lucretius, because although scenarios (i) and (ii) would entail either the continuation or the restoration of sensation (and thus, the possibility of pain) after death, neither would really amount to a continuation or a restoration of ‘us’. It would, in effect, be someone else who experiences these future pains.

In the case of scenario (i), Lucretius argues that the continuation of sentience in the absence of the body would not amount to a continuation of sensation for ‘us,’ because personal-identity (like sensation) also requires the co-affection of the soul and the body:

Even if the nature of our mind and the power of our spirit do have sensation after they are torn from our bodies, that is still nothing to us, who are constituted by the conjunction of body and spirit. (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 151)

In the case of scenario (ii), Lucretius argues that none of the many past instances of the configuration of our atoms, nor any of the possible future instances, really did or will constitute instances of ‘us,’ because each pair of consecutive instances is interposed by a discontinuity of self-recollection:

…supposing that after our death the passage of time will bring our matter back together and reconstitute it in its present arrangement, and the light of life will be restored to us, even that eventuality would be of no concern to us, once our self-recollection was interrupted. (Long & Sedley, 151)

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7 In his Letter to Herodotus, Epicurus claims that “The atoms move continuously for ever, some separating a great distance from each other, others keeping up their vibration on the spot whenever they happen to get trapped by their interlinking or imprisoned by atoms which link up.” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 46)

8 That is to say that during the intervening period, during which the set of atoms in question does not form a person, there is no self-recollection, because there is nobody to engage in self-recollection.
4. Two Theses on Selfhood and the Soul-Body Union

It seems to me that Lucretius’ emphasis on the link between personal-identity and self-recollection in his response to scenario (ii) can serve to illuminate the claim, from his response to scenario (i), that ‘we’ are the conjunction of our bodies and souls. The idea would be that, even if it were possible for the soul to persist and engage in perception following its dissociation from the body, this would still not amount to a continuation of ‘us’ because the dissociation of our souls from our bodies constitutes a cessation of self-recollection.

Hence, Lucretius’ responses to (i) and (ii) yield weak and strong versions (respectively) of a position on the relation between personal-identity and the soul’s union with the body:

(a) **Weak Thesis**: Personal-identity depends upon self-recollection, which depends upon the soul’s interaction with the rest of the aggregate.

(b) **Strong Thesis**: Personal-identity depends upon the continuity of self-recollection, which depends upon the continuity of the soul’s interaction with the rest of the aggregate.

The weak version asserts that self-recollection (and thus, personal-identity) cannot occur while the soul is isolated from the body. But it allows, implicitly, that self-recollection (and thus, personal-identity) might be restored along with the union of body and soul. The strong version asserts that personal-identity is irrevocably lost at the moment of soul-body dissociation; that even the hypothetical restoration of the union between the soul and the body (and of self-recollection along with it) would not amount to a revival of the original agent.

These two theses will form the basis of our inquiry concerning the consistency of Lucretius’ position on the finality of death with the Epicurean theory of memory. Before commencing this inquiry, however, it will be necessary to come to a better understanding of what is meant by “self-recollection.”

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9 i.e., By omission.
5. Defining Self-Recollection

For Lucretius, the notion of self-recollection must be a function of the general Epicurean theory of memory. In order to establish a plausible Lucretian definition of self-recollection, then, we must first take a look at the Epicurean theory of memory.

It is important to understand that the Epicurean conception of memory does not entail the buildup or storage of images in the mind; rather, it is the mind’s repeated penetration by images (i.e., thin layers of atoms, resembling the objects from which they have been shed) that persist independently of both the mind and the body. As Lucretius notes, “…everywhere at every time every image is ready on the spot: so great is the speed and availability of things.” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 75) Moreover, memory seems to be primarily an active function, requiring the willed effort of the individual. Lucretius argues that, “…because they [images] are so delicate the mind can only see sharply those of them which it strains to see. Hence the remainder all perish, beyond those for which the mind has prepared itself.” (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 76) However, there must also be a less prominent passive facet to memory, as indicated by our recollections in dream states (which, as Lucretius acknowledges, are more prone to error than memories that occur in a waking state).

As to how and why the faculty of memory is dependent upon the soul’s integration with the body, it seems to me that we may plausibly ascribe to Lucretius something like the following view (courtesy of Diogenes of Oenoanda):

What is viewed by the eyesight is inherited by the soul, and after the impingement of the original images passages are opened up in us in such a way that, even when the objects which we originally saw are no longer present, our mind admits likenesses of the original objects. (qtd. in Long & Sedley, 76)

Here, the body plays an indispensable role in the repeated reception of memory-images, as it is by way of bodily passages that memory-images are enabled to enter into and affect the mind.

Although this passage is not taken directly from Lucretius, it seems to me that the only other way of explaining his insistence that self-recollection is terminated at death would be by appeal to the principle that the body contributes indirectly to the mind’s reception of images, by preventing it from dispersing. However, this is clearly not what is primarily at issue for Lucretius since, as we have seen, he has voluntarily suspended this principle, and maintains that self-recollection would nonetheless cease with the mind’s dissociation from the body, even if the mind were capable of subsisting independently.
Presumably, then, if the body were no longer present, then external memory-images would lack the passageways necessary for gaining access to the mind.

With the Epicurean theory of memory in mind, we are now in a position to make an educated guess as to what, precisely, Lucretius intends by “self-recollection.” The most plausible Lucretian definition of self-recollection would be: ready access to a certain sufficient number or combination of previously imprinted images. And with this definition in place, we may now proceed to test Lucretius’ position on the finality of death for consistency with the Epicurean theory of memory.

6. Assessing Lucretius’ Stance of the Finality of Death

We will proceed by testing both the weak and strong theses concerning the relation between personal-identity and the soul’s union with the body, for consistency with the Epicurean theory of memory.

Since the weak thesis is compatible with the possibility of a (genuine) post-mortem resurrection, both the weak thesis and the strong thesis (which rules out the possibility of post-mortem resurrection) must pass our consistency-test, in order for Lucretius’ overall position on the finality of death to retain its persuasiveness. If only the weak thesis passes the test, then Lucretius will be forced to concede the possibility of genuine post-mortem resurrection. But this would entail the possibility that ‘we’ might awake to further pain after dying. We would, therefore, be justified in fearing death.

In assessing each of the two theses, I shall employ the following criterion for consistency with the Epicurean theory of memory: the thesis will be consistent with the Epicurean theory of memory if it can be explained adequately in terms of that theory. That is, if the Epicurean theory

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11 This definition has the advantage of encompassing both the active and passive facets of memory. If we were to define self-recollection only in terms of the active effort of remembering things, then we would run into at least two problems: Firstly, it would follow that we die whenever we go to sleep. Lucretius says that during sleep, “…the [active] memory lies in slumber.” (Long & Sedley, 75) So that if self-recollection were defined only as a function of active memory, it would follow that self-recollection is extinguished whenever we go to sleep. And given Lucretius’ strong thesis (above) that personal identity depends upon the continuity of self-recollection, it would follow that personal identity is permanently extinguished when we fall asleep. Besides which, we know by experience that we retain a sense of personal continuity during dream-states.
of memory can provide some genuine insight as to why the thesis should hold true. In the case of the weak thesis, this means that the Epicurean theory of memory should be able to explain why self-recollection is disrupted when the soul and the body dissociate at death. But in the case of the strong thesis, it means that the Epicurean theory of memory should be able to explain why the resumption of self-recollection (along with the restoration of the original aggregate of body and soul) would not amount to a restoration of the original person. That is to say, it should be able to provide an informative account of what it is that is irrevocably lost when the mind and the body dissociate at the moment of death.

6.1 Weak Thesis

Given our working definition of self-recollection—i.e., ready access to a certain sufficient number or combination of previously imprinted images—I think that it is rather easy to explain, in terms of the Epicurean theory of memory, why self-recollection is extinguished at the moment of bodily death. This is because the destruction of the body eliminates the bodily passageways through which memory-images are able to enter into the mind. The correct number (or combination) of memory images, therefore, has no way of entering into the mind. Thus, in the absence of the body, the mind no longer has access to a sufficient number (or combination) of familiar images to furnish it with a sense of self-recollection.

6.2 Strong Thesis

The strong thesis presents a greater difficulty. As I have shown above, the Epicurean theory of memory is capable of providing a satisfactory explanation as to why self-recollection (and thus, personal-identity) is interrupted when the soul dissociates from the body at death. Moreover, on this theory of memory, there seems to be no special difficulty in explaining the weak thesis’ implicit concession that self-recollection might be restored, given the reconstitution of the aggregate of body and soul. If the atoms out of which the aggregate is currently composed were to be reconstituted in the exact same configuration as they are now, this would entail the
restoration of all the same passageways forged by previous sense-impressions, through which memory-images might enter into the mind. Thus, upon the reconstitution of the aggregate, the mind would have access to all the same memory-images that it had access to before. And this would be sufficient to furnish it with a sense of self-recollection.

Crucially, however, when we come to the question of why this restoration of self-recollection would not constitute a revival of the original person, the Epicurean theory of memory fails to provide any significant insight. The strong thesis concerning the relation between personal-identity and the soul-body union emphasizes the continuity of self-recollection as a requirement for personal-identity. But if we press for a more detailed explanation as to why the restoration of the original atoms of the aggregate in their original configuration (along with all of the memory-passages that it possessed before, which allow the exact same memory-images as before to enter into the mind) would not amount to a genuine restoration of the person, the respondent’s only recourse seems to be to repeat the original assertion: “because the continuity has been disrupted.” For this reason, it seems to me that the appeal to continuity is rather vacuous. And its designation as the single most crucial requirement for the aggregate’s sense of personal-identity strikes me as arbitrary.12

Thus, it seems to me that the weak thesis—but not the strong thesis—concerning the relation between personal-identity and the union of the body and the soul has been substantiated by the Epicurean theory of memory. The stronger thesis has been framed in terms of the Epicurean theory of memory (i.e., as being a function of self-recollection), and yet it appears to be inexplicable in the terms of this theory.

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12 One might suggest that Lucretius’ emphasis on the continuity of self-recollection is intended to offset a difficulty arising from the possibility that multiple body-soul aggregates might arise, by chance, with similar enough memory-passageways to allow them all to possess more or less the same sense of self-recollection (in which case we would be faced with the problem of identifying the original person, from a stock of individuals with the same sense of self-recollection). However, aside from the fact that Lucretius gives us no indication that this is what he has in mind, it seems to me that this suggestion overlooks the fact that Lucretius’ hypothetical reconstitution scenario—(2)—presupposes the reconstitution of body and soul, along with the relevant memory-passageways, from the same matter (i.e. the same set of atoms) as before. Sameness of matter is a part of the context for the entire discussion. Thus, any similarly configured “duplicates” which might co-exist alongside of this reconstituted aggregate would have to be composed from different atoms. And so it seems to me that the correct set of memory passageways contained within an aggregate of the original configuration and composed out of the exact same atoms as before could be regarded as sufficient criteria for distinguishing the original person from similarly configured imposters, without the need for any appeal to continuity. We need only specify that it is not self-recollection on its own which is the necessary and sufficient condition for sameness of personhood, but self-recollection plus the correct material constitution.
7. Conclusion: Returning to the Symmetry Argument

Since Lucretius’ overall position on the finality of death requires not only the weak thesis but also the strong thesis to be explicable in terms of the Epicurean theory of memory, and since the strong thesis has failed this test, it seems to me that Lucretius’ overall position on the finality of death is inconsistent with the Epicurean theory of memory. It would appear, therefore, that the demands of consistency commit him to the view that it is (at least) possible for ‘us’ to be revitalized, following death.

Thus, although we may be able to affirm a symmetry between pre-vital and post-mortem states, we must acknowledge that part of what this symmetry consists in is the fact that neither state is necessarily permanent. And this undermines the intent of the symmetry argument. If death is not necessarily permanent, then it is possible that one will awake to further pain after dying. And since the possibility of pain warrants fear, it follows that it may be rational to fear death.

This is not to say, however, that the symmetry argument does not retain a certain intuitive pull, from a modern perspective. If there have been past instances in which the atoms out of which I am currently composed were arranged in the same configuration, I must certainly admit that I have no recollection of any of these past lives. And so it does not seem obviously problematic to infer that the same will hold of any future instances. But my aim in this paper has not been to establish that this intuition is false. Rather, my aim has been to illustrate the difficulty of accounting for why any of this should be the case, given the Epicurean mechanistic framework (i.e., of memory). In light of this difficulty, we should consider the possibility that Lucretius was never entitled to make use of the symmetry argument.

Works Cited


