

“Death is Nothing to Us”

Death is inevitable. What it entails is largely unknown. Some believe that it permanently ends an individual's existence; others that it simply provides a transition to another form of life. Most people fear it, but some consider it with equanimity. Among the latter are the followers of Epicurus, who claimed

Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us.

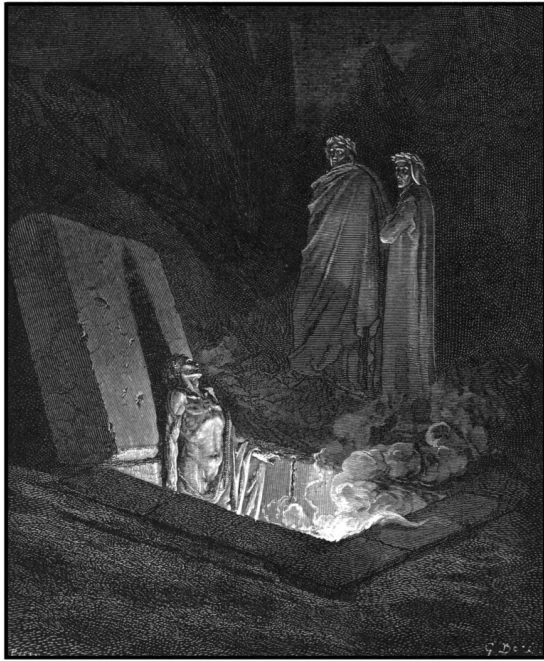
(Epicurus, reported by Diogenes Laertius, translated by Inwood and Gerson, 1997, p 32; another translation is by Yonge, 1983, p. 474).

Epicurus proposed that human beings are made of complex compounds of atoms. At death these compounds dissolve, releasing the atoms to form other things. The body decays and the soul evaporates. Once we are dead, we are no more. We cannot feel what it is like to be dead. And the dead certainly cannot experience pain. Death should therefore not be feared.

Epicureanism was popular during the Roman period. A common Latin epitaph summarized the life of the Epicurean as a brief interlude between the nothingness preceding birth and the nothingness following death:

Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo

(I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care).



Gustav Doré's illustration (1857) of Dante's Sixth Circle.

As Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Epicureanism faded into obscurity. Dante placed the Epicureans in the Sixth Circle of his *Inferno* (1320, Canto X). Those who did not believe in the afterlife were forced to spend eternity in graves that were completely closed just as in life their tenants' obstinacy kept them from the truth. The graves were filled with fire just as in life the Epicureans were consumed by their heresy.

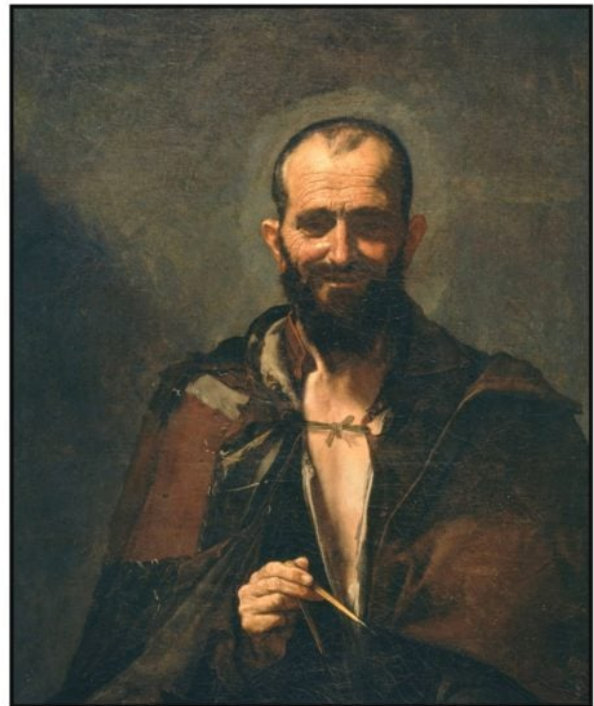
As the Western world moved away from the dogmatism of the Middle Ages, the idea that man was not immortal was once again considered. Those who now reject any belief in an afterlife sometimes adopt the bravado of the Epicurean epitaph. But more often than not they care deeply about death as the defining event in a life. It is not nothing.

Atoms and the Void

The philosophy of Epicurus derives from the atomism of Democritus (460-370 BCE).

Democritus was born and lived in Abdera, a city in Northern Greece, at about the same time as Socrates was active in Athens. Democritus maintained that everything was made of tiny indestructible atoms (Berryman, 2016). He claimed to have learned this from Leucippus, about whom little is known, and who may be more mythical than real.

Democritus was called the “laughing philosopher” to distinguish him from Heraclitus (535-475 BCE), the “crying philosopher,” who believed that nothing was indestructible and that everything is forever changing. The cheerful and the tearful.



Jusepe de Ribera's imagined portraits of Heraclitus (1615) and of Democritus (1630), both now in the Prado Museum

Of the many writings of Democritus, we now have only fragments, the most famous of which

is

By convention sweet is sweet, bitter is bitter, hot is hot, cold is cold, color is color; but in truth there are only atoms and the void (translation by Will Durant, 1939, p 393).

The concepts of the atom and the void were derived from a combination of observation and logic.

Everyone perceives that the world contains objects and that these objects move:

matter and motion. Objects can be broken down into smaller pieces, and these

pieces can themselves be broken down into even tinier particles. But this

breaking down can only proceed so far, or all objects would by now have been

broken down to nothing. There must therefore be some indivisible particle

beyond which matter cannot be further broken. These atoms (from the Greek *atomos*,

uncuttable) are so tiny that they cannot be seen by the eye: invisible and indivisible.

The void is necessary to explain how things move. How could something change

its location unless there were empty space for it to move into?

Atoms are infinite

in number but of a finite number of types. Moving atoms collide with one

another and join to form compounds. These compounds interact with each other to

create all that exists in the world. Combining atoms is like forming words with

the letters of the alphabet. From a few letters come a myriad words.

Though atoms are eternal, the compounds that they form are transient. Rock erodes to sand, which under pressure becomes stone again. Water evaporates and then condenses. Living things develop, become mature and then die. At death, the components of the body break apart, releasing its atoms for making other compounds.

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away (*Hamlet*,
V:1)

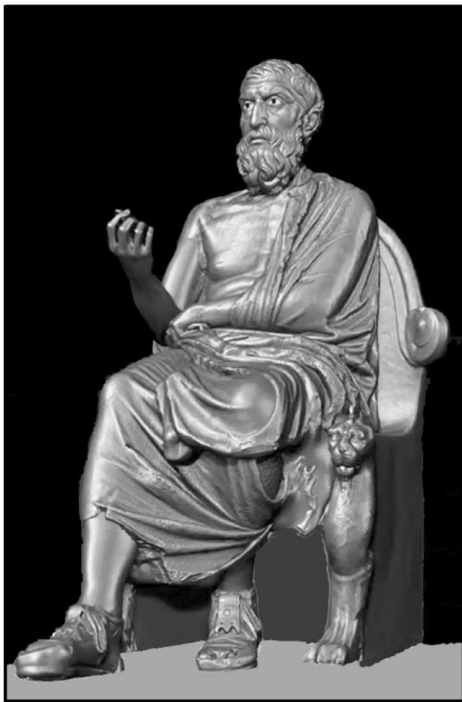
The soul is composed of atoms just like everything else. The atoms of the soul are extremely fine, perhaps similar to the atoms of fire. They permeate the body, giving it a conscious spirit. When the body dies, the atoms of the soul dissolve back into the void like all the other atoms of the body. The soul does not persist beyond death. There is no afterlife. We are transient like everything else, mortal like all other living things.

Democritus' absolute materialism differed from the philosophy of Plato, who proposed the primacy of ideas. Indeed, Plato was so upset with his rival's teachings that he reportedly urged that all the books of Democritus should be burned (Diogenes Laertius, p 393). So much for freedom of thought in a republic governed by philosophers.

The Garden of Epicurus

The ideas of Democritus were extended by Epicurus (341-270 BCE), who was

born on the Greek island of Samos off the west coast of Turkey. In 306 BCE Epicurus established a school of philosophy in Athens that met in a garden below the Acropolis (Jones, 1989; Konstan, 2018; O'Keefe, 2010; Wilson, 2015).



Epicurus (a digital reconstruction by Bernard Frischer that combines a head from Naples with a body from Florence)

He wrote extensively though none of his books survived the anti-heretical campaigns of the Christian Church. Most of what we know about Epicurus is preserved in the biography written by Diogenes Laertius (3rd Century CE), which includes some of the letters written by the philosopher to his colleagues, and a listing of his Principle Doctrines (*Kyriai Doxai*). The philosophy of Epicurus was popular in the Roman Empire, and several statues of Epicurus have survived in Roman copies (see right).

Among the lost books of Epicurus was the *Kanon* (Rule, Criterion) which discussed how true knowledge could be obtained. Epicurus proposed that sensation is the

most dependable
criterion of truth – the world is what we perceive. Ideas
derive from rather
than precede the analysis of sensory information. This seems
to have differed
from the ideas of Democritus, who believed that our
perceptions were as much
convention as reality.

In the lost *Peri*
Physis (On Nature) Epicurus presented and extended the atomism
of
Democritus. He acknowledged that there are only atoms and the
void. The body
and the soul are made of atoms that fall apart when the
corporeal body dies and
the conscious soul ceases. We do not live forever.

Epicurus appears to have deviated from the fixed determinism
of Democritus by proposing the idea of the *clinamen* (swerve).
Atoms falling through the void would never collide to form
compounds unless some atoms at some time swerved from their
predetermined path. Democritus also suggested that this
unpredictable random movement was the basis of our free will,
when we act according to what is desired of the future rather
than what has been ordained by the past. In recent years
similar ideas based on the uncertain behavior of atoms in the
brain have been used to explain free will. Unfortunately,
these ideas have little explanatory value. My actions are no
more free when determined by random events in the present than
when determined by the fixed events of the past.

Free will was
important to Epicurus because he wished us to choose the good
life. This depended
on maximizing our happiness. Although maligned by Christian
polemicists as a decadent
libertine, Epicurus actually practiced an ascetic hedonism. He

valued most the simple sensory pleasures of his garden and the friendship of his colleagues. He eschewed any participation in politics as causing too much anxiety. His goal was *ataraxia* (tranquility, peace of mind, from *a-* not and *tarasso*, disturb).

Although he was described as an atheist, Epicurus thought that the gods were real because our ideas of them were just too clear to be ignored. However, he argued that the gods were not in any way concerned with human affairs. Like true Epicurean, the gods enjoy themselves and refuse to be bothered by human politics.

Epicurus proposed that we should not be frightened of death. Since our consciousness ceases when we die, death is not painful. Since the gods are not concerned with human beings, they have not provided an afterlife of punishment for all that we have done wrong. If we attain a life of *ataraxia*, it matters not how long we live (Lesses, 2002; Mitsis, 2002). Death is the natural and inevitable end to life. The following is from the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us

makes the mortality
of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless
time to life but by
removing the longing for immortality. For there is nothing
fearful in life for
one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the
absence of life. Thus,
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.
For that which
while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when
merely
anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is
nothing to us;
since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death
is present, then
we do not exist. (Inwood & Gerson, 1997, p 29)

Epicurus practiced
what he preached. He died from an attack of kidney stones.
Despite severe and
prolonged pain, he maintained his *ataraxia*. His cheerfulness
of mind and
his memory of philosophy counterbalanced his afflictions.

De Rerum Natura

In about 50 BCE
Titus Lucretius Carus published a long Latin poem about the
Nature of Things.
The poem probably derives from the *Peri Physis* of Epicurus.
Little is
known about the poet. In his *Chronicon* (circa 380 CE), written
some 400
years later, Saint Jerome included an entry for the year 94
BCE:

Titus Lucretius,
poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he
had written, in
the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero
revised, he killed
himself by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age.
(translation by
Santayana, 1910, p 19)

Saint Jerome was a
devout Christian, completely opposed to the beliefs of
Epicurus, who claimed
that the gods had nothing to do with human life, and who
denied the immortality
of the soul. Most critics feel that Jerome was simply trying
to belittle the
poet and to cast his work as nonsense: be not seduced by
Epicureanism, since madness
and suicide follow from such heresies (e.g., Sedley, 2018, and
Smith, 1992 in
his introduction to the Loeb edition of *De Rerum Natura*).
However, the
biography may contain some threads of truth:

The love-philtre in this report sounds apocryphal; and the
story of the madness and suicide attributes too edifying an
end to an atheist and Epicurean not to be suspected. If
anything lends colour to the story it is a certain consonance
which we may feel between its tragic incidents and the genius
of the poet as revealed in his work, where we find a strange
scorn of love, a strange vehemence, and a high melancholy. It
is by no means incredible that the author of such a poem
should have been at some time the slave of a pathological
passion, that his vehemence and inspiration should have passed
into mania, and that he should have taken his own life.
(Santayana, 1910, pp 19-20).

De Rerum

Natura is like no other
poem: a scientific treatise expressed in verse. The poetry is
characterized by
brilliant language and intense imagery. Most impressive is the
ongoing energy
of the argument as Lucretius moves from atoms to death, from
the soul to the
cosmos, from the weather to the plague.

The poem begins
with a beautiful invocation of Venus as the mother of Aeneas,
founder of Rome,
as the patron of all the creative forces in the world, and as
the
personification of Epicurean pleasure:

Life-stirring Venus, Mother of Aeneas and of Rome,
Pleasure of men and gods, you make all things beneath the
dome
Of sliding constellations teem, you throng the fruited
earth
And the ship-freighted sea – for every species comes to
birth
Conceived through you, and rises forth and gazes on the
light.
The winds flee from you, Goddess, your arrival puts to
flight
The clouds of heaven. For you, the crafty earth contrives
sweet flowers,
For you, the oceans laugh, the skies grow peaceful after
showers,
Awash with light. (I: 1-10 Stalling translation)



On the right is the first page of a 1483 manuscript copy of the poem made for Pope Sixtus IV by Girolamo di Matteo de Tauris. The Latin text begins

Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas,
Alma Venus, caeli subter labentia signa
Quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis

The beginning of the poem immediately questions the Epicurean view that the gods are not involved with the human world. Why should Lucretius invoke Venus as a partner in his poetry? The gods are a problem for Epicureanism: if they are real, they must be made of atoms and, if so, they cannot be immortal; yet, if they are mortal, they are not gods. Lucretius probably considered the gods more as metaphors than as real beings. Later in the poem (II: 646-660)

he remarks that it
is customary to call the sea Neptune, the corn Ceres and the
wine Bacchus
without actually meaning that these things are divine.



Lucretius quickly indicates that superstitious belief in the gods can lead to terrible wrongs by recounting the story of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon, who was sacrificed at Aulis to propitiate the anger of the goddess Artemis, and obtain fair winds to send the Greek ships to Troy. The illustration at the left shows a fresco in the House of Tragic Poet in Pompeii from about the same time as Lucretius. Iphigenia is carried by Achilles and Ulysses to be sacrificed by Calchas the priest, while her father on the left refuses to observe her death. Above, the goddess Artemis arranges for a stag to be substituted for Iphigenia, who will be spirited away. However, this will be done without any of the Greeks realizing that Iphigenia was not actually sacrificed. Human sacrifice is also part of the Hebrew Bible, which recounts the attempted sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis 22* and the actual sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in *Judges 11*. As Lucretius clearly states, Iphigenia was

An innocent girl betrayed to a sort of incest
To be struck down by the piety of her father

Who hoped in that way to get a good start for his fleet.

That is the sort of horror religion produces.
(I: 98-101, Sisson translation).

De Rerum

Natura recounts the principles of atomism espoused by Epicurus. Lucretius describes the *clinamen* or swerve, and notes its importance for free will. We are not completely determined by our past:

Again, if all motion is always one long chain, and new motion arises out of the old in order in-variable, and if the first-beginnings do not make by swerving a beginning of motion such as to break the decrees of fate, that cause may not follow cause from infinity, whence comes this free will in living creatures all over the earth, whence I say is this will wrested from the fates by which we proceed whither pleasure leads each, swerving also our motions not at fixed times and fixed places, but just where our mind has taken us? (II: 252-260, Rouse translation).

Lucretius considers death in many ways. The following passage provides the principal Epicurean argument:

So death is nothing, and matters nothing to us
Once it is clear that the mind is mortal stuff.

...

So when we are dead and when our body and soul
Which together make us one, have come apart,
Nothing can happen to us, we shall not be there,
Nothing whatever will have the power to move us,
Not even if earth and sea got mixed into one.
(III: 830-1, 838-842, Sisson translation)

Lucretius also

adds the analogy of the mirror to the Epicurean comparison of the time before birth to the time after death. If we are not concerned with what occurred before we are born, why should we be afraid of its mirror-image: the time after we have died and once again do not exist:

Now look back: all the time that ever existed
Before we were born, was nothing at all to us.
It is a mirror which nature holds up for us
To show us what it will be like after our death.
Is it very horrible? Is there anything sad in it?
Is it any different from sleep? It is more
untroubled.
(III: 972-977, Sisson translation)

The poem goes on to consider many natural phenomena. Some of the explanations that Lucretius offers are good, and some are similar to those proposed in modern science. However, most of the explanations are wrong. Science and poetry are not well suited: poetry attempts to say things that will last forever, whereas science is always changing.

At the end of the VI Book of *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius vividly describes the great Plague of Athens that began in 430 BCE during the Peloponnesian War. There is great debate about the nature of the plague, which was perhaps caused by an Ebola-like hemorrhagic fever.

The symptom first to strike was fiery fever in the head,

And both eyes, burning hectic bright, were all shot through with red.

The throat as well would sweat with blood, all black within. And stung

With sores, the pathway of the voice would clog and choke. The tongue,

Interpreter of the mind, oozed pus, and, made limp with the smart,

Was too heavy to move, and rough. Thence the disease would start,

Passing the gullet, to fill the chest, and flood the heavy heart

Of the afflicted, and then, indeed, all of the gates of Life

Began to give. From the open mouth, there would exhale a rife

Stink, like the stench of rank unburied corpses left to rot.

And then all of the powers of the mind and body, brought

To the very brink of doom, began to flicker. Mental strain

Ever danced attendance on intolerable pain;

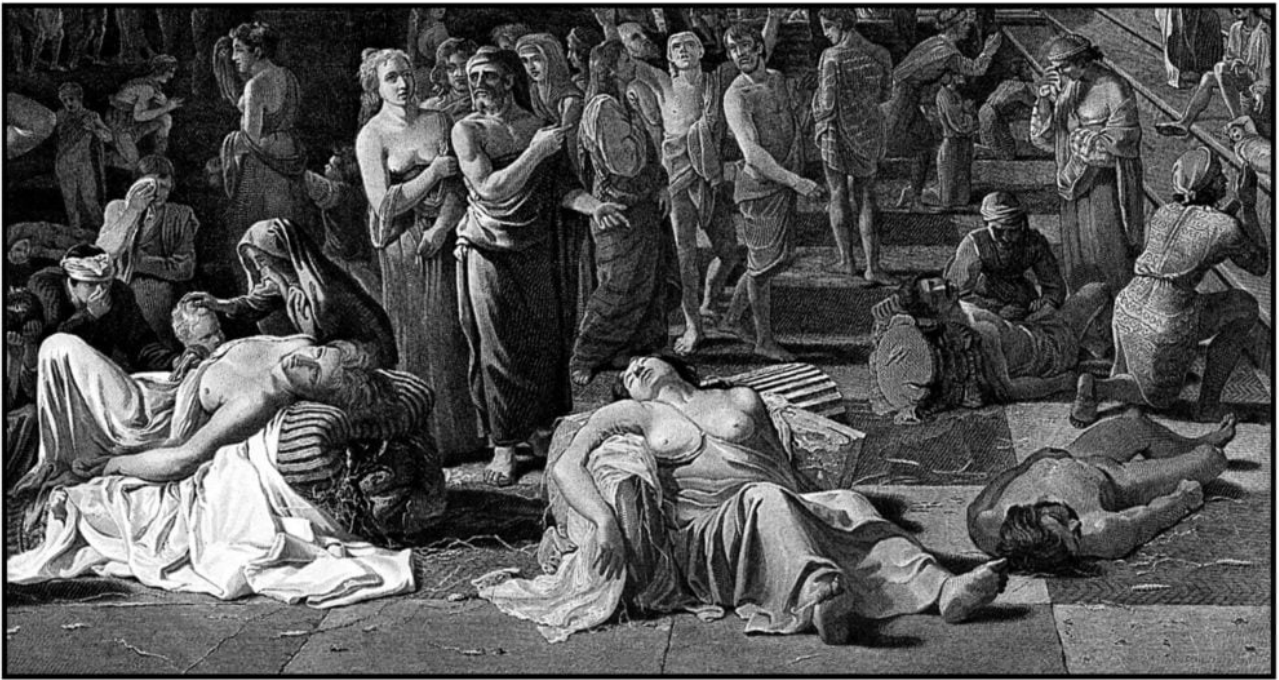
Pleas mingled with moans. Ceaseless retching, lasting day

And night, was ever causing seizure and cramp, and wasting away

The strength of men already racked with suffering and worn out.

(VI: 1145-1161, Stallings translation)

Death was everywhere. Below is a detail of an engraving (from the Wellcome Library) from a 1654 painting by Michael Sweerts, once thought to represent the plague of Athens:



The Plague of Athens

The prevalence of
death tore at the moral fabric of the city:

The present grief was overwhelming. No one any more
Observed the rites of burial they had observed before,
For the whole populace was thrown in disarray and cowed.
Each mourner buried his dead just as the time and means
allowed.

Squalid Poverty and Sudden Disaster would conspire
To drive men on to desperate deeds – so they'd place on a
pyre

Constructed by another their own loved-ones, and set fire
To it with wails and lamentation. And often they would
shed

Much blood in the struggle rather than desert their dead.
(VI: 1278-1286, Stallings translation)

De Rerum

Natura ends here. Most
critics feel that Lucretius died before he could finish his
poem, and that he
probably intended to explain how philosophy could help one

face the horrors of such a plague with equanimity. But he did not. And one wonders if he could not.

Stoicism

At the time of Epicurus, Athens was home to several other schools of philosophy. The most important of these were the Skeptics who refused to believe in anything, and the Stoics who differed from the Epicureans mainly in their promotions of virtue rather than pleasure as the goal of human life (Baltzly, 2019; Long, 1986). The Stoics proposed that the universe proceeded according to its own *Logos*, and that human benefit was not necessarily part of this determined path. One had to accept one's fate and do the best that one could. The Stoical idea of the *Logos* goes back to Heraclitus. Indeed, Stoics and Epicureans can trace their emotional origins to tearful Heraclitus and cheerful Democritus.



Marcus Aurelius

The Stoics also differed from the Epicureans in their approach to death. While the Epicureans tried to ignore death, the Stoics paid it constant attention. Death brings one's life to an end, and therefore settles the sum of one's virtues and achievements. Life should therefore be lived as if death were imminent. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the 175 CE statue of whom is illustrated on the left, voiced these Stoical precepts in his *Meditations*:

Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice; and to give thy self relief from all other thoughts. And thou wilt give thyself relief, if thou doest every act of thy life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy, and self-love, and discontent with the portion which has been given to thee.

Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.

(Marcus Aurelius, 180 CE, II: 5 and III: 17, translation by Long)

Stoicism became more popular with the Romans than Epicureanism. And Stoicism fitted more easily to the doctrines of Christianity, which accepted and transformed the Stoic idea of *Logos*, making Christ its personification.

Epicurus and Modernity

The works of Democritus and Epicurus did not survive beyond Roman times. However, a manuscript of *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius was diligently copied and re-copied by Christian monks, and finally discovered in a German monastery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini (Greenblatt, 2011). The first printed publication of *De Rerum Natura* was in 1473.

The rediscovered book brought the atomism of Democritus and Epicurus to the attention of the philosophers and scientists of Europe. Pierre Gassendi (1592-1665) in France and Robert Boyle (1627-1691) in England were attracted to the explanatory power of atoms and developed a “corpuscular philosophy” (Wilson, 2008). They tried but failed to reconcile this atomism with Christian beliefs in the immortal soul and a beneficent God.



Motion of Gas Molecules

As science progressed, corpuscular philosophy developed into modern chemistry. Atoms of different types combine to form

molecules of various chemical compounds. The pressure of a gas depends on the force exerted by the continual movement of its molecules. This is illustrated on the right, in which five of the molecules are colored red to make their motion easier to follow. The molecules move like the motes of dust in the sunlight that were described in *De Rerum Natura* (Book II:62-79). Science now knows that atoms are not indivisible, but modern science owes much to Lucretius.

As the Enlightenment progressed, some thinkers decided to reject God and immortality and to accept Epicurus' views of death. Of these perhaps the most famous is David Hume (1711-1776) who, when dying of cancer, was interviewed by James Boswell (1740-1795). Boswell was disconcerted by Hume's refusal to believe in the afterlife, and by his cheerfulness in the face of death (Miller, 1995):

I asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius observes. (Boswell, 1776).

Fear of Death

Despite the cheerfulness with which Epicurus and Hume faced death, Epicurean logic fails to convince most human beings not to fear death. Since death before maturity prevents us from reproducing, evolution must clearly have given preference to those whose fear of death made them avoid potentially fatal situations.

Epicurus promoted pleasure as the goal of life, but had difficulty handling its relation to time.

Common sense definitely presumes that pleasure is greater when it lasts longer.

A death that shortens a potentially pleasurable life should therefore be

feared. Epicurus proposed that *ataraxia* is the same regardless of the

duration, but his argument is unconvincing:

Epicurus holds that pleasure is the supreme good, and yet claims that there is no greater pleasure to be had in an infinite period than in a brief and limited one. Now one who regards good as entirely a matter of virtue is entitled to say that one has a completely happy life when completely virtuous. Here it is denied that time adds anything to the supreme good. But if one believes that the happy life is constituted by pleasure, then one cannot consistently maintain that pleasure does not increase with duration, or else the same will apply to pain. Or are we to say that the longer one is in pain the more miserable one is, but deny that duration has any bearing on the desirability of pleasure. (Cicero, 45 BCE, II: 88)

Nagel (1990) makes a similar point:

Observed from without, human beings obviously have a natural lifespan and cannot live much longer than a hundred years. A man's sense of his own experience, on the other hand, does not embody this idea of a natural limit. His existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future, containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so tolerable in the past. Having been gratuitously introduced to the world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he finds himself the subject of a life, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future. Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt

cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods. Normality seems to have nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer.

Most people feel that death comes before their lives have been properly completed. Some things have not yet been experienced, others have not yet been atoned for; their achievement is not enough, their legacy not sufficient. As Cicero (44 BCE) remarked "No one is so old that he does not expect to live a year longer."

The Makropulos Case

How much longer should one then wish to live? Forever may be as frightening as tomorrow. This idea was considered in an important paper by Bernard Williams (1973) that took as its point of origin a play by Karel Capek that premiered in Prague in 1922 – *The Makropulos Case*. Leos Janacek's operatic version of the play was produced in Brno in 1925.

In the play Emilia Marty, a beautiful and successful opera singer, turns out to be Elina Makropulos, a young Greek woman who was given an elixir of longevity by her physician-father in 1601. Having lived over 300 years without aging she has returned to Prague to find the elixir's formula so that she can further prolong her youth. The following photograph from the San Francisco

Opera (2016) shows
Nadja Michael in the role of Emilia in the first act of the
opera (which takes
place in a law office):



In the end Emilia
decides that she does not want to live longer. She explains to
the others:

Oh, life should not last so long!
If you only realized how easy life is for you!
You are so close to everything!
For you, everything makes sense!
For you, everything has value!
– for the trivial chance reason
that you are going to die soon.
... It's all in vain
whether you sing or keep silent –
no pleasure in being good
no pleasure in being bad.
No pleasure on earth,

No pleasure in heaven.
And one comes to learn
that the soul has died inside one.
(Janacek version)

Williams (1973) agrees
with Emilia. After a while immortality will become tedious.
Human desires are
designed for shorter periods. Evolution has made us long to
live longer. Yet
the usual span of human life gives us about the right amount
of time to
experience what we can, and to accomplish what we should.

Aubade

Another aspect of
death not considered in Epicurean philosophy is that it is the
end of the
“person.” Each individual spends a lifetime developing a
collection of
experiences and achievements, out of which are derived a set
of values and an
accumulated knowledge. Warren (2004, chapter 4) considers
these as the personal
“narrative.” At death the story ends. The person vanishes.
Some traces will be
preserved in the memories of others but these are but faint
copies of the
original.

This is the reason
why Lucretius’ analogy of the mirror does not work. We are not
concerned with
the time before we were born because we did not exist then.
However, this is
not the mirror image of the time after our death when we again
do not exist.

Because in the meantime we have existed. Time only goes one way.

Personal annihilation is perhaps the most frightening part of death. On December 23, 1977, Philip Larkin published a poem about death in the *Times Literary Supplement*. (The full text is available at [this link](#)). In a letter to a friend he called it “a real infusion of Christmas cheer” (Larkin, Burnett, 2012, p 495). Fletcher (2007) provides some discussion of the poem and its relation to one of John Betjeman’s. An aubade is typically the dawn song of a lover as he leaves his mistress. Larkin’s poem is a death song about leaving his life. He is intensely afraid:

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
—The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

He laments the inability of religious faith or philosophical reason to provide any comfort:

Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says *No rational being*
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

Larkin provides us with no resolution of this fear. In the final lines of the poem he watches as the dawn breaks and people get ready for work. Phones will ring and letters will be delivered. Communication is perhaps our only comfort. The following is Larkin's recitation of the poem.

Endings

So we come to the
end of this essay on endings. Though death is not desired, it is inevitable.

Epicurus was right about there being nothing after death, but death itself is

not nothing. It marks the transition of a life from the individual

consciousness to the memory of others. Henry James noted in 1916 when his final

stroke began, "So here it is, the distinguished thing" (Edel, 1968, Callahan, 2005).

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Remembrance

The onset of World War I brought into question the very idea of European civilization. Mankind's ongoing progress to a better world appeared no longer pre-ordained. Promises of future peace and plenty were forever broken. Henry James wrote in a letter to Howard Sturgis on August 5, the day after

Britain declared war of Germany.

The plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton fiat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we had supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for my words. (James, 1920, p 398)

(The “autocrats” were Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Franz Josef I of Austria.) The complex sentence is typical of James, the master of convoluted qualification. Rudyard Kipling later said the same in fewer words in his *Common Form* for the *Epitaphs of the War*:

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

However, at the beginning of the war, the general population had no such reservations. People rallied to support their King and Empire. Young men thronged enthusiastically to the recruiting centres.



On looking at photographs of these happy volunteers, Philip Larkin wrote in 1960 a poem called *MCMXIV*

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The Oval or Villa Park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;

And the shut shops, the bleached
Established names on the sunblinds,
The farthings and sovereigns,
And dark-clothed children at play
Called after kings and queens,
The tin advertisements
For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
Wide open all day;

And the countryside not caring:
The place-names all hazed over
With flowering grasses, and fields
Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat's restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.

The title gives “1914” in Roman numerals, the way dates are written on the war memorials. The crowds lined up as if for a sporting event – cricket at the Oval or soccer at Villa Park. The innocence of England went back to medieval times when the country was surveyed for the Domesday Book of 1086. It was a land of simple pleasures, of hot cocoa steaming in a mug and pipe-tobacco sold in a “twist.” It was a society, where everyone from lord to maid knew their place.

Over the next four years, everything changed. The pubs that had once been open all day became restricted in their hours so that workers did not become too inebriated to produce munitions. Servants fought alongside their betters and began to wonder about why they were different. In the years that followed the war, the British Empire began slowly to unravel. The war etched itself into modern memory through poetry, photographs, painting and music (Silkin, 1972; Fusell, 1975; Malvern, 2004).

The bravado of the war’s first months soon ceded to harsh reality. Young men in their thousands marched to their deaths; trenches were dug like graves in the once-fertile land; the instruments and engines of war grew more efficient and terrible; form and sound became incomprehensible in the exploding shells; death came even in the air that soldiers breathed.



Siegfried Sassoon described trench warfare in his 1917 poem *Attack*:

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Sassoon-Attack.mp3>



Broodseinde, 1917

Sassoon was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. He often went out on his own to engage the German lines, and was called "Mad Jack" for these near-suicidal exploits. Deeply disillusioned by the conduct of the war and the waste of life, in 1917 he wrote to his commanding officer a letter entitled *Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration*, and forwarded a copy of this to the press. Rather than prosecuting him for

treason, the military authorities sent him to Craiglockhart Hospital to be treated for neurasthenia or “shell shock.” At the hospital, Sassoon met and encouraged another soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen.

The Great War altered forever the way that we see the world. More than in any previous war, the public was able to see what actually happened from photographs of soldiers in action. These were strictly censored. Nevertheless, the published photographs showed clearly both the isolation of the soldiers and the desolation of the land.



Ypres, 1917

Paintings no longer portrayed romance and courage but horror and fear. Paul Nash was a war-artist who served with the British Army at Ypres in 1917. He wrote to his wife

Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen

clouds all though the bitter black night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps, breaking the plank roads, striking down horses and mules, annihilating, maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast up on it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls. (quoted by Haycock, 2009, p. 278)

His impressions formed the basis for his painting *The Menin Road*:



After the Allies broke through their defences in 2018, Germany sued for peace. Negotiations began in October and the war was finally ended by an armistice between the Allies and Germany signed on November 11 at 5 am in a railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne. Hostilities were to cease at 11 am that day “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh

month." At that time each year since then, we have paused to remember those who died in battle.

Wilfred Owen was killed in action at the crossing of the Sambre-Oise canal on November 4, a brief week before the war ended. One of his last poems imagined what might happen when he died. The slant rhymes underline the uneasiness of his *Strange Meeting*.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, –
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.

None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . .'

The dead soldier's description of the life that might have been, the laughter and the tears cut short, portrays "the pity war distilled." *Strange Meeting* was one of several poems by Owen that were set to music by Benjamin Britten in the *War Requiem*, composed for the 1962 consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. The old cathedral had been destroyed by bombing in World War II, which began only twenty-one years after the end of the "war to end all wars."

Britten used as an epigraph to the score a quotation from the draft preface that Owen had written to a planned book of his poems on the war:

My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity ...
All a poet can do today is warn.

Owen's words and Britten's music provide context for today's Remembrance. The following clip provides the ending to the *War Requiem*. The final lines of Owen's poem, beginning with "I am the enemy you killed," lead into the final section of the

mass, initially sung by the two male soloists and a boys' choir, before ending with the full chorus.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Britten-War-Requiem-VI-ending.mp3>

*In paradisum deducant te angeli
In tu adventu suscipiant te martyres
et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem.
Chorus angelorum te suscipiat et cum Lazaro
quondam pauper aeternam habeas requiem.
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:
et lux perpetua luceat eis.
Requiescant in pace.*

(May the angels lead you into paradise and at your arrival may the martyrs receive you and bring you into the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive you and may you have eternal rest together with Lazarus who once was poor. Lord, grant them eternal rest and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace.)

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