

Gauguin

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In 1891, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) left his wife and five children and sailed for Tahiti, where he hoped

to immerse myself in virgin nature, to see no one but savages, live their life, with no other thought in mind but to render, the way a child would, the concepts formed in my brain and to do this with the aid of nothing but the primitive means of art, the only means that are good and true (letter quoted in Eisenman, 1997, p 77).

His decision to desert his family and follow his art has been considered by philosophers as a case study in ethics. Was his hope of artistic success adequate justification for his behavior? As luck would have it, Gauguin did become a famous artist, albeit posthumously. Can this retrospectively vindicate his flight to Tahiti? These issues are complex – both in the abstract and in terms of Gauguin's actual life.

Life Before Art

Gauguin was born in France but spent much of his childhood in Peru, where his mother's family had aristocratic connections. His grandmother Flora Tristan (1803-1844), a feminist and socialist, was the niece of Juan Pío Camilo de Tristán y Moscoso, who briefly served as president of South Peru.

Gauguin returned to France to finish his schooling and then spent three years as a merchant sailor and two years in the French Navy, during which time he travelled throughout the world. When he returned to France in 1871, Gauguin was taken in by a rich relative, Gustave Arosa, an avid collector of realist and impressionist paintings. Arosa got Gauguin a job on the stock exchange, and introduced him to Camille Pissarro.

Gauguin became a very successful broker, and took up painting as a hobby. He married a young Danish woman Mette-Sophie Gad (1850–1920), and had five children. Having made a fortune on the stock market, Gauguin became an art collector himself, buying paintings by Pissarro, Cézanne, Manet, Degas, and Sisley (Bretell & Fonsmark, 2005, p 56)

Impressionism

Gauguin had talent and he quickly learned the new Impressionist style. His paintings were included in the Impressionist Exhibitions beginning with the fifth in 1880. Below is one of his paintings from this time – *Vaugirard Market Gardens*, 1879 – together with a self-portrait from 1885.



The Stock Market Crash

In 1882 the Union Générale bank collapsed and the Paris Bourse crashed. By 1883 Gauguin was out of work. The family moved to Rouen where life was less expensive than in Paris. Gauguin decided to paint full time. However, he was not able to sell his paintings. Mette moved back to Denmark with most of the family in 1884, and Gauguin reluctantly followed in 1885. For a brief time, he was a salesman for French tarpaulins in Copenhagen, but he did not speak Danish and the endeavor came

to nought. Mette supported the family by giving French lessons. Gauguin's paintings found no market among the Danes. He became depressed, and sometimes was sometimes physically violent with his wife (Mathews, 2001, p 62). Mette's family insisted that he leave.

In 1885 Gauguin returned alone to Paris. He submitted nineteen paintings to the Eighth and Final Exhibition of the Impressionist in 1886, but these were not well received by either critics or buyers. Gauguin fled Paris for Pont-Aven in Brittany, an artists' colony where living was cheap. There he worked with Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin.

Vision after the Sermon (1888)

Gauguin was fascinated by the deep religiosity of the Breton peasants. He developed a new style of painting to portray their lives. He began using clearly outlined blocks of flat color in the manner of the Japanese prints that had become popular in Paris. He further decided that colors should be based as much upon the imagination as upon reality. This emphasis on the creative imagination derived from the Symbolist movement in literature. Gauguin named his new style of painting "Synthetism." This approach was also called "Cloisonnism" after the technique for decorating metalwork, whereby colored enamels are placed within spaces bordered by metal strips. A masterpiece of this approach was Gauguin's *The Vision after the Sermon*, which portrays Breton peasants experiencing a vision of Jacob wrestling with the angel after a sermon on this episode from Genesis 22: 22-32 (Herban, 1977):



The figure at the lower right is Gauguin. The young peasant at the lower left is likely a portrait of Bernard's sister Madeleine, with whom Gauguin was infatuated. The following is a description of the painting from Vargas Llosa's novel *The Way to Paradise*. Vargas Llosa used the second person narrative as though someone is talking to Gauguin (or Gauguin is talking to himself). "Koké" was the name that the Tahitians called him – their best approximation of his name:

The true miracle of the painting wasn't the apparition of biblical characters in real life, Paul, or in the minds of those humble peasants. It was the insolent colors, daringly antinaturalist: the vermillon of the earth, the bottle green of Jacob's clothing, the ultramarine blue of the angel, the Prussian black of the women's garments and the pink-, green- and blue-tinted white of the great row of caps

and collars interposed between the spectator, the apple tree, and the grappling pair. What was miraculous was the weightlessness reigning at the center of the painting, the space in which the tree, the cow, and the fervent women seemed to levitate under the spell of their faith. The miracle was that you had managed to vanquish prosaic realism by creating a new reality on the canvas, where the objective and the subjective, the real and the supernatural, were mingled, indivisible. Well done, Paul! Your first masterpiece, Koké! (Vargas Llosa, 2003, pp 217-218)

Gauguin also created a striking version of the crucifixion based on his time in Pont-Aven – *The Yellow Christ* (1889):



The Studio of the South

Back in Paris, Gauguin met the dealer Theo van Gogh and through him his brother Vincent. The two artists exchanged self-portraits. Van Gogh's saw himself as an austere Japanese monk; Gauguin's portrait is off-center against a floral wallpaper background includes a portrait of Emile Bernard:



Vincent invited Gauguin to stay with him in Arles in Provence. For nine weeks in late 1888 the two artists lived and worked together (Silverman, 2000; Druick et al, 2001). Although their relations were initially amicable, they disagreed on many things and the tension between them increased. If we are to believe what Gauguin later recalled in his journals (Gauguin, 2009, pp 12-14), one evening van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor and Gauguin decamped to stay the night in a hotel. Van Gogh then proceeded to cut off his right ear with the razor and presented the ear to one of the prostitutes in Arles. Gauguin fled to Paris and van Gogh was confined to an asylum.

Manao Tupapau

Van Gogh and Gauguin had discussed the book *Rarahu* by Pierre Loti (1880), which described the author's marriage to a Tahitian girl, and the two artists considered the possibility of painting in the islands of the Pacific. Van Gogh committed suicide in 1890. Gauguin sailed to Tahiti in 1891.

In Tahiti Gauguin took a Tahitian girl aged thirteen, Tehemana (Tehura), as his mistress. One night when returning home late to his hut, he found her lying frightened on the bed:

Quickly, I struck a match, and I saw. . . . Tehura, immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me, and seemed not to recognize me. As for myself I stood for some moments strangely uncertain. A contagion emanated from the terror of Tehura. I had the illusion that a phosphorescent light was streaming from her staring eyes. Never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremulously beautiful. And then in this half-light which was surely peopled for her with dangerous apparitions and terrifying suggestions, I was afraid to make any movement which might increase the child's paroxysm of fright. How could I know what at that moment I might seem to her? Might she not with my frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaus, with which the legends of her race people sleepless nights? Did I really know who in truth she was herself? The intensity of fright which had dominated her as the result of the physical and moral power of her superstitions had transformed her into a strange being, entirely different from anything I had known heretofore. (Gauguin, 1919/85, pp 33-34)

In Tahitian legends the Tupapaus were malignant demons. Over the next few days Gauguin painted the scene that he had witnessed, calling it *Manao Tupapau*, "Spirit of the Dead Watching" (1892):



Vargas Llosa imagines his thoughts about the painting:

Yes, this was truly the painting of a savage. He regarded it with satisfaction when it seemed to him that it was finished. In him, as in the savage mind, the everyday and the fantastic were united in a single reality, somber, forbidding, infused with religiosity and desire, life and death. The lower half of the painting was objective, realist; the upper half subjective and unreal but no less authentic. The naked girl would be obscene without the fear in her eyes and the incipient downturn of her mouth. But fear didn't diminish her beauty. It augmented it, tightening her buttocks in such an insinuating way, making them an altar of human flesh on which to celebrate a barbaric ceremony, in homage to a cruel and pagan god. And in the upper part of the canvas was the ghost, which was really

more yours than Tahitian, Koké. It bore no resemblance to those demons with claws and dragon teeth that Moerenhout described. It was an old woman in a hooded cloak, like the crones of Brittany forever fixed in your memory, time-less women who, when you lived in Pont-Aven or Le Pouldu, you would meet on the streets of Finistère. They seemed half dead already, ghosts in life. If a statistical analysis were deemed necessary, the items belonging to the objective world were these: the mattress, jet-black like the girl's hair; the yellow flowers; the greenish sheets of pounded bark; the pale green cushion; and the pink cushion, whose tint seemed to have been transferred to the girl's upper lip. This order of reality was counterbalanced by the painting's upper half: there the floating flowers were sparks, gleams, featherlight phosphorescent meteors aloft in a bluish mauve sky in which the colored brushstrokes suggested a cascade of pointed leaves. The ghost, in profile and very quiet, leaned against a cylindrical post, a totem of delicately colored abstract forms, reddish and glassy blue in tone. This upper half was a mutable, shifting, elusive substance, seeming as if it might evaporate at any minute. From up close, the ghost had a straight nose, swollen lips, and the large fixed eye of a parrot. You had managed to give the whole a flawless harmony, Koké. Funereal music emanated from it, and light shone from the greenish-yellow of the sheet and the orange-tinted yellow of the flowers. (Vargas Llosa, 2003, pp 22-23)

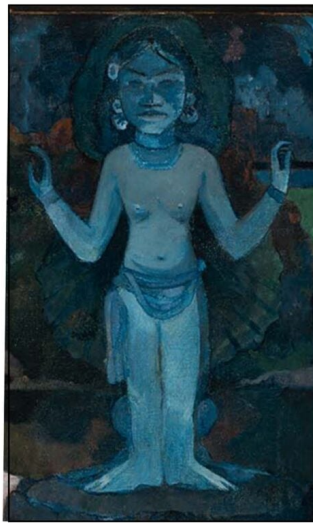
The painting is one of the most discussed of Gauguin's Tahitian pictures. The commentary is ambivalent:

All this is to put the painting in the best possible light. But there is surely more to it than just a charming anecdote based on local folklore. In blunt terms what we actually see is the interior of a hut at night, with a large couch, covered in a boldly flowered cloth, partially overlaid by a plain white sheet on which lies a naked girl, face down, another of the child-like, yet distinctly erotic figures who

have appeared before in Gauguin's work – pert buttocks offered invitingly to the spectator. There is even something disturbing about the way the face is half-turned towards the viewer, or rather towards the artist, Gauguin, as if he and not the figure in the background is the spirit of which she is afraid. (Sweetman, 1995, pp 326-327).

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

In 1893 Gauguin returned to Paris and arranged to sell some of his Tahitian paintings. He was not happy in Paris and in 1895 he returned to Tahiti. Over the next few years, Gauguin became severely depressed. He had suffered a broken ankle in a brawl in Concarneau near Pont Aven and the fracture had never really healed. He drank excessively – partly to relieve the pain and partly to improve his mood. He had sores on his legs, perhaps related to syphilis or perhaps related to the malnutrition that accompanies alcoholism. In 1897 he attempted to commit suicide with arsenic but failed. After this he worked on his last great painting, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1898):



Gauguin described his work in a letter to Daniel de Monfried:

The canvas is 4.50 meters long and 1.70 meters high. The two upper corners are chrome yellow, with the inscription on the

left and my signature on the right, as if it were a fresco, painted on a gold-colored wall whose corners had worn away. In the bottom right, a sleeping baby, then three seated women. Two figures dressed in purple confide their thoughts to one another; another figure, seated, and deliberately outsized despite the perspective, raises one arm in the air and looks with astonishment at these two people who dare to think of their destiny. A figure in the middle picks fruit. Two cats near a child. A white she-goat. The idol, both its arms mysteriously and rhythmically uplifted, seems to point to the next world. The seated figure leaning on her right hand seems to be listening to the idol; and finally an old woman close to death seems to accept, to be resigned [to her fate]; . . . at her feet, a strange white bird holding a lizard in its claw represents the futility of vain words. All this takes place by the edge of a stream in the woods. In the background, the sea, then the mountains of the neighboring island. Although there are different shades of color, the landscape constantly has a blue and Veronese green hue from one end to the other. All of the nude figures stand out from it in a bold orangey tone. If the Beaux-Arts pupils competing for the Prix de Rome were told: "The painting you have to do will be on the theme, 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?'" what would they do? I have finished a philosophical treatise comparing that theme with the Gospel. I think it is good. (Gauguin, 1990, p. 160; original letter is illustrated in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, p 168)

The philosophical treatise he mentioned was likely *The Catholic Church and Modern Times* (Gauguin, 1990, pp 161-173), in which Gauguin decries the hypocrisy of the modern church and urges his readers to return to a more natural theology. His painting is a testament to these ideas.

In a letter to Charles Morrice (Goddard, 2029, p 48) Gauguin describes his painting as proceeding from right to left, with

the answer to "Where do we come from?" on the right, the answer to "What are we?" in the center and the answer to "Where are we going?" on the left. Nevertheless, the painting has no simple interpretation (Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, pp 167-201). The man plucking fruit from a tree in the center perhaps refers to Adam in a modern version of Eden. The two women in purple may refer to the church and its interpretation of our origins. The idol on the left is the Tahitian Goddess Hina (Gauguin, 1953, pp 11-13). Hina represented the sky, moon, air, and spirit. From the union between Hina and Tefatou, God of matter and earth, came forth man. Hina wished that man might be reborn after death much like the moon returns each month. Tefatou insisted that, although that matter lasts forever, man must die.

The painting stands at the cusp between earlier paintings like that of the neo-classical *Between Art and Nature* (1895) of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, which Gauguin has seen on his visit back to Paris, and the Fauvist *La Bonheur de Vivre* (1905) of Henri Matisse. Both paintings are smaller than Gauguin's masterpiece.



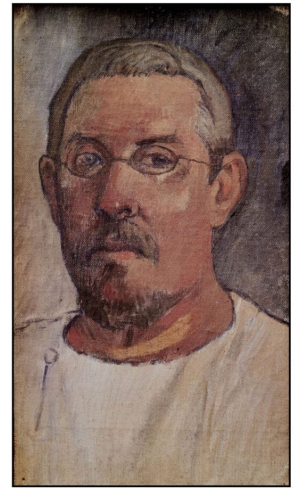
La Maison de Jouv

Gauguin decided that Tahiti was too tainted with Western civilization and decided in 1901 to move to the Marquesa Islands, about 1500 km northeast of Tahiti. There he again took a young Polynesian girl for his mistress and built himself a home that he called *La Maison de Jouv*. This is

usually translated as the “House of Pleasure” but more precisely means the “House of Orgasm.” He continued to paint and to write, and he created many striking woodcuts and drawings. One of his paintings from 1902 was the *Riders on the Beach*. The pink color of the beach is in the imagination of the artist and nowhere near reality.



In these last years, Gauguin was wracked by pain and became more and more depressed. His last *Self Portrait* (1903) from just before his death shows the ravages of alcohol and morphine. It is presented below together with two earlier portraits, one from 1889 alluding to his time in Pont-Aven, and one from 1893 referring to his first visit to Tahiti:



Acclaim

Gauguin was never recognized in his lifetime as a painter of significance. His death in 1903 warranted only a few lines in the Paris newspapers. It was not until 1906 that his friends arranged a retrospective exhibition at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. His fame has grown since then. Art historians now consider Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin as the “guiding lights” (Hook, 2021, p. 21) of the modernist revolution in art that occurred in the first decades of the 20th Century. This assessment is borne out by the high prices that Gauguin’s paintings now command at auction.

Isabelle Cahn (in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, pp 300-1) writes

He was the one who had dared take all the liberties, sparking the most advanced research, particularly in the domain of color . . . Gauguin had perceived the decline of the West and revolted against the dictatorship of Greco-Roman culture. In his wake, other artists had tried to surpass the traditional boundaries of thought and, seeking regeneration, had taken an interest in primitive arts, children’s drawings, folk art and outsider art. An interest in the unconscious had also opened new vistas. By giving shape to his internal world, Gauguin exposed the anxiety of

the modern soul and its questions about its fate, leading us to edge of our own enigma, but not weighing it down with explanations.

Bretell (1988, p 396) remarks about the effects of Gauguin's work on later painters:

Picasso was clearly devastated by the power and raw, crude strength of the printed drawings. Matisse was overcome by the color and the apparently casual draftsmanship of the late paintings. Indeed, if one can measure the strength of an artist by that of his most brilliant followers, Gauguin would be among the very greatest from the late nineteenth century.

Moral Luck

In 1976 Bernard Williams presented a paper on "Moral Luck," in which he dealt extensively with the

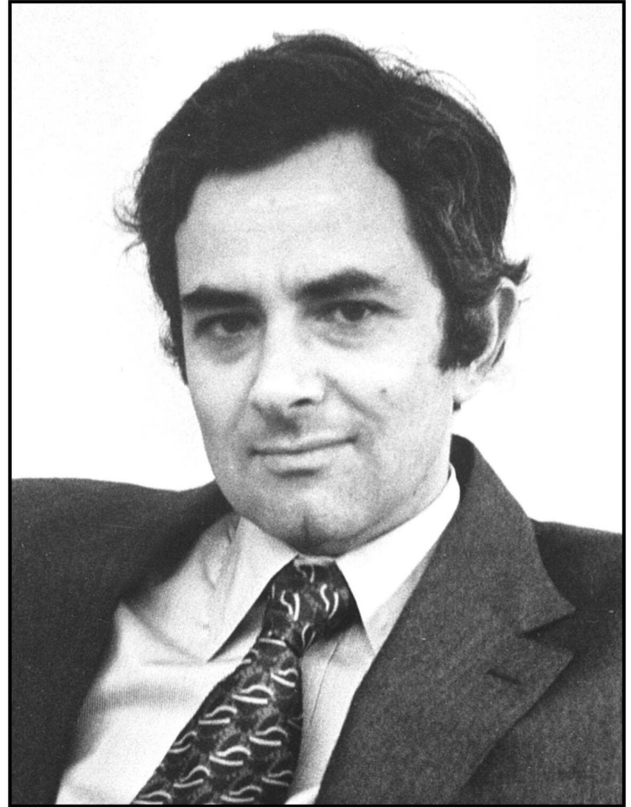
example of the creative artist who turns away from the definite and pressing human claims on him in order to live a life in which, as he supposes, he can pursue his art.

For simplicity he calls the artist Gauguin, but he considers the case abstractly without being limited by historical facts. The main issue is that when Gauguin decided to desert his family, the only justification for his action was his hope that he would fulfil his destiny (and become a great artist), and that his art would contribute significantly to human culture. The concept of moral luck is that we cannot predict the future with any certainty. Gauguin may have died in a shipwreck before he reached Tahiti. In this event, his actions would have no justification. As chance (or "luck") would have it, Gauguin did live to paint his greatest works in Tahiti, and did contribute significantly to the history of modern art. The problem is whether such an outcome can retrospectively justify the desertion of his family. Certainly not from the point of view of his family; probably not from the point of

view of those with little interest in modern art. A secondary issue is whether aesthetic values can be used as justification for behavior that is, in itself, unethical.

Thomas Nagel commented on Williams's ideas and discussed moral luck in a more general way. Both authors thereafter updated their papers (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981), and there has been much further discussion in the literature (e.g., Lang, 2019; Nelkin 2019). Nagel described moral luck as that which occurs between the intention to act and the outcome of the intended action. Though we might profess, like Kant, that moral guilt or acclaim depends upon the intension (or "will") rather than the outcome, in actuality, the outcome largely determines our sense of an action's moral worth. For example, a person who drives while impaired and winds up killing a pedestrian is considered much more blameworthy than one who was similarly impaired but, as luck would have it, did not kill anyone. Moral luck points to the issue that we do not completely control the outcomes of our actions.

The following illustrations shows Williams on the left and Nagel on the right.



The Crimes of a Colonist

At the time of Gauguin's sojourn, Tahiti and the Marquesas were French colonies. The administrators of the colonies exploited the native Polynesians; the church taught them that their own culture was worthless and that they must convert to Christianity; whatever was worthwhile in their life was appropriated and made part of European culture. It was impossible for Gauguin not to be part of this process – he was a European and French Polynesia was a colony. However, he did not act in the same way as most of the Europeans. He lived with the natives, and tried to understand their language and their ideas. He was aware of the problems:

Circumstances exposed him to the effects of recent colonization; he saw the depredation and the irrecoverable loss first-hand. He also spoke out about colonization – and thereby earned the animus of the colonial and church authorities who hounded him until the end of his life (Maleuvre, 2018).

Gauguin called the Polynesians “savages.” However, for him this was a term of praise rather than contempt. As quoted in the opening paragraph of this post, Gauguin aspired to become a savage.

Sex Tourist

Gauguin’s mistresses in Tahiti and in the Marquesas were young girls of 13 or 14 years. Although it was normal at that time for Polynesian girls of that age to have sexual relations with men, it is impossible not to deplore Gauguin’s taking advantage of them for his own sexual pleasure. Reading about these girls in his book *Noa Noa* (“Fragrance”) is terribly disconcerting:

Indeed, it is soon clear that he is not just the average Westerner exploring for the sake of broadening his understanding of the world—he is, more than anything, a sexual tourist. Even the title *Noa Noa*, which means “fragrance,” is used by Gauguin to indicate the aroma of a human body particularly in sexual situations. Although sexual liaisons similar to those described by Gauguin were regularly reported in other contemporary travel accounts, Gauguin makes them central to the story and, in doing so, transforms the normally pedestrian Tahitian sojourn into an erotic holiday. (Mathews, 2001, p 178).

Most historians believe that the sores on Gauguin’s legs and the heart problems that led to his death were caused by advanced syphilis. However, since the discovery of the causative agent (*Treponema pallidum*) and the definitive Wassermann test did not occur until after his death, we cannot be sure. A recent examination of Gauguin’s teeth did not show evidence that he had taken the mercurial compounds that normally were used to treat the disease at that time (Mueller & Turner, 2018). Nevertheless, the prevalence of syphilis then was high – about 10% in urban populations and likely much more in those who frequented prostitutes. If Gauguin did have

syphilis, he almost certainly gave the disease to his young mistresses.

The following is from a poem *Guys like Gauguin* (2009) by Selina Tusitala Marsh. Louis Antoine de Bougainville was a French naval captain who explored the Pacific Ocean in the late 18th century:

thanks Bougainville
for desiring 'em young
so guys like Gauguin could dream
and dream
then take his syphilitic body
downstream to the tropics
to test his artistic hypothesis
about how the uncivilised
ripen like pawpaw
are best slightly raw
delectably firm
dangling like golden prepubescent buds
seeding nymphomania
for guys like Gauguin

The Artist as Monster

Gauguin as a person was not easy to like. He was concerned only with his own presumed genius. He treated his family and his mistresses egregiously. Does this mean that we should not consider his paintings – that he should be, in our modern idiom, “cancelled” (e.g., Nayeri, 2019)? Many artists have done monstrous things (Dederer, 2003), and it is often difficult to consider their art independently of their immoral lives. We should not shy away from their sins. We should not call Gauguin’s Polynesian mistresses “young women” but clearly state that they were girls who were seduced by a sexual predator. Nevertheless, we must consider the art for its own sake. Gauguin’s paintings are powerful: they make us experience things differently.

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“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.

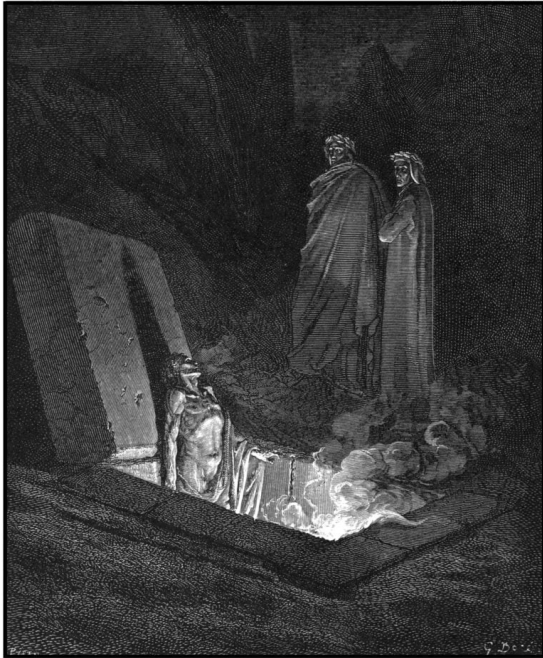
(Epicurus, reported by Diogenes Laertius, translated by Inwood and Gerson, 1997, p 32; another translation is by Yonge, 1983, p. 474).

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 fired graves just as in life the Epicureans were consumed by their heresy.

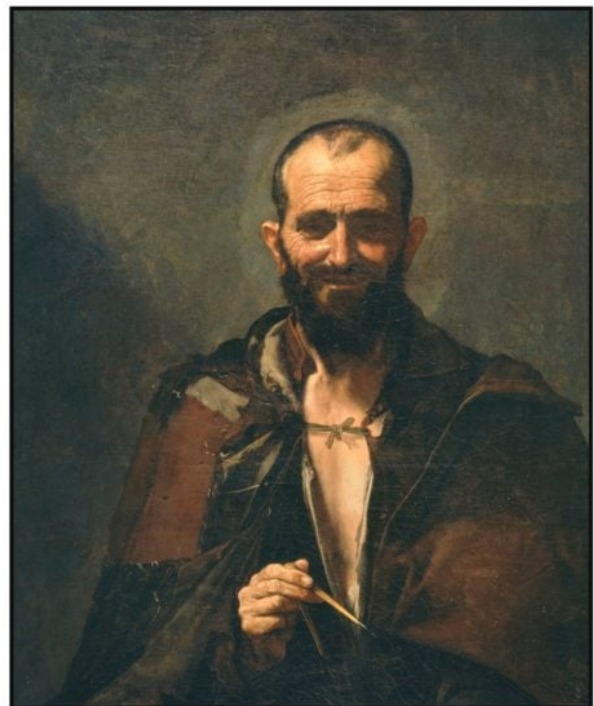
As the Western world moved away from the dogmatism of the Middle Ages, the idea that man was not immortal was once again considered. Those who now reject any belief in an afterlife sometimes adopt the bravado of the Epicurean epitaph. But more often than not they care deeply about death as the defining 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 are 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.

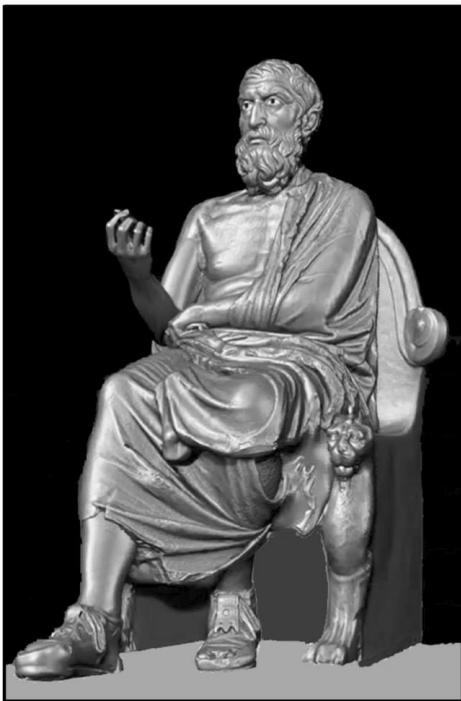
Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away (*Hamlet*,
V:1)

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 genatrix, 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;

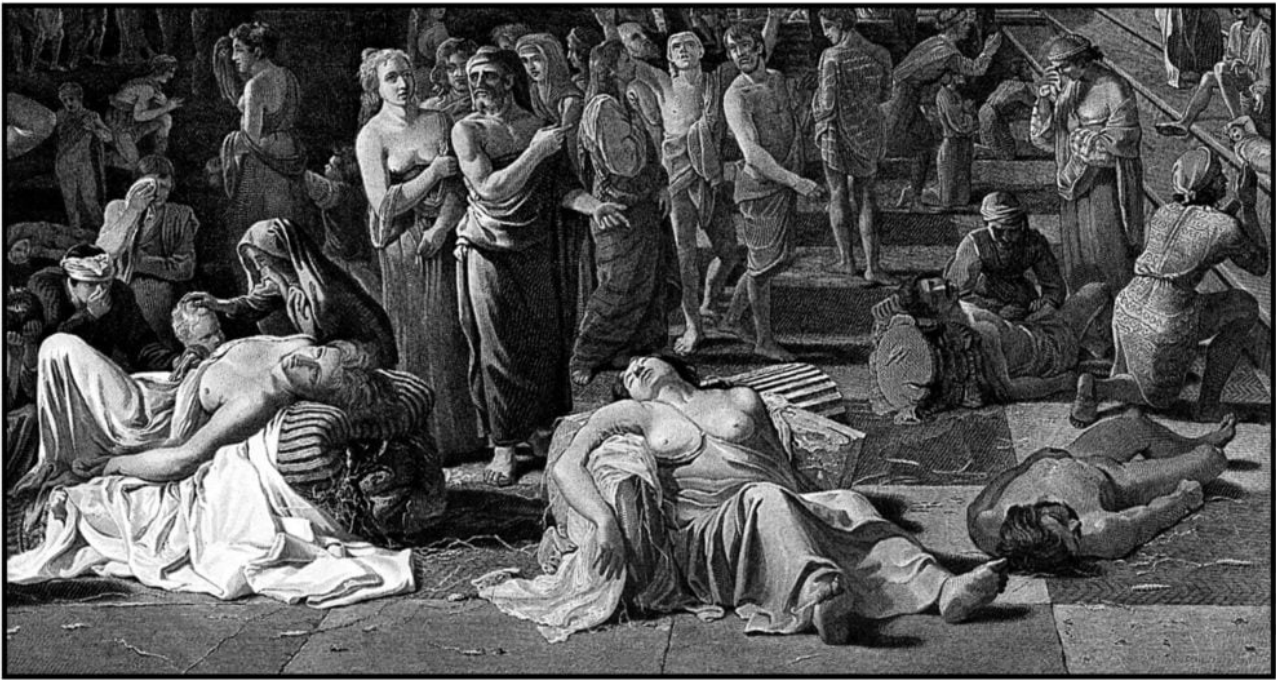
Pleas mingled with moans. Ceaseless retching, lasting day

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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