

NATURE'S DISTORTED MIRROR: RATIONALIZING AN OBJECTION TO LUCRETIUS' SYMMETRY ARGUMENT

Chris Gillett

Abstract: I argue that Lucretius' symmetry argument against the fear of death is flawed because the period of non-existence prior to a person's birth is not in all relevant respects the same as the period of non-existence after death. Antenatal non-existence ends with birth, but non-existence after death is permanent. This permanent non-existence means that the events of people's lives can no longer be valued by them and will have no permanent significance to them once they are dead. The fear of death is rational because most people want their lives to have value, but permanent non-existence nullifies the value of life.

INTRODUCTION

Lucretius put forth his symmetry argument to relieve readers of their fear of death by asserting that someone should no more fear the non-existence after their death than the period of non-existence before their birth. The keystone of this argument is the idea that the antenatal and postmortem periods of non-existence are fundamentally alike and therefore should be valued and feared equally little. My response to Lucretius' symmetry argument centers on the asymmetry of the duration of antenatal and postmortem periods of non-existence. Specifically, the time before someone is born is temporary from his or her perspective because it eventually comes to an end, whereas death is permanent because

a dead person will necessarily never be alive again. This disparity in duration reveals how we experience the two periods in completely different ways. Steven Luper mentions this argument in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on death, and I will expand upon it in this paper. Although Luper's argument may correctly explain why people are upset by death and not pre-birth, it does not prove that this attitude is rational. I will show that the intuitive apprehension about death is justified because the permanent non-existence posed by death prevents people from experiencing or valuing their lives again, a prospect that nullifies the value of a life to whomever has lived it, and is therefore undesirable to the rationally self-interested.

As James Warren points out, much of the academic criticism aimed at the symmetry argument has been from the perspective that people are right to view the antenatal and postmortem periods of non-existence as asymmetrical because people are naturally future-oriented in their thinking or because people's identities are anchored in the time period of their births (Warren). Although these approaches achieve the goal of showing the asymmetry of the non-existence that lies on either side of life, they do not speak to the specific nature of death in contrast to the nature of life, nor do they have anything to say about the harm of death. They explain the fear but do not prove that it is rational. These arguments, though persuasive, deal more in psychology than in philosophy, centering on how people think about the future versus the past. A more compelling response to the symmetry argument must deal with the nature of death specifically rather than assert the antenatal and postmortem asymmetry in a roundabout way by discussing how people perceive the two periods of non-existence to be different rather than how they really are. In addition, Jeremy Simon points out that a good response to Lucretius must be easily understood, relying more on common sense than on complicated academic concepts, because Lucretius' symmetry argument was intended to be understood by layman readers (Simon). I will attempt to satisfy both of these aims.

I will start by reviewing Lucretius' symmetry argument and how it should be interpreted for my purposes. I will then present a response to the symmetry argument based on the contrast between death's permanence, life's transience, and the non-existence before birth, and I will argue that the permanence of death nullifies the value of life, making the fear of death rational.

THE SYMMETRY ARGUMENT

To make the case that we should not bemoan death, Lucretius argued that the time before birth is equivalent to death. He reasoned that if we are not upset by antenatal non-existence, we should not be bothered by death either. The argument first appears in his book, *De Rerum Natura*:

Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight—anything depressing—anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep? (Lucretius 125).

Lucretius mentions both terror and depression as emotions he believes people should not feel in response to the prospect of death (125), but his pacifying argument can apply to more general negative attitudes about death. Simon points out that fears can be recast in terms of wishes (Simon). He asserts that a fear is equivalent to a wish that something not happen (418), so someone who is not afraid to die can still, for our purposes, be said to fear death if he or she wishes not to die. When I argue for the fear of death, I am referring to a wish that one not die.

Warren identifies a number of arguments that Lucretius may have intended to make in the passage, and I will address one version: the idea that just as we do not now fear the time before we were born, we should not fear the time after we die (Warren). It is unclear if this interpretation is the exact argument that Lucretius intended to make, but it is supported

by Epicureans. Epicureans subscribe to Epicurus' philosophical system, to which Lucretius was a notable contributor. Epicurus believed that experience was due to the existence of a soul and that the soul did not survive death, and he also advocated "freedom from bodily pain and mental disturbance," which would require an argument to relieve mental disturbance regarding death (Konstan). Because the third interpretation of Lucretius' arguments is supported by Epicureans, I believe it is a fair target for criticism (Warren).

Simon supplies an explicit reconstruction of the Lucretian argument:

- (P1) No one regrets that their life does not extend back farther than it actually does. This prior time is, from our current perspective, of no value (is 'nothing') to us.
- (P2) The time after our death is in all relevant respects the same to us as the time before our births.
- (P3) If two things are the same in all relevant respects, we should value them the same.
- (C1) The time after our death is, from our current perspective, of no value to us.
- (P4) We ought not bemoan the loss of something of no value to us.
- (C2) We ought not bemoan the postmortem life we will not have. (Simon 416).

For the sake of clarity, I will rewrite Simon's reconstruction of the Lucretian argument so that it specifically addresses the interpretation under question:

- (P1) No one fears the time before one's birth.
- (P2) The time after our death is in all relevant respects the same to us as the time before our births.
- (P3) If two things are the same in all relevant respects, we should fear them the same.
- (C1) We should not fear the time after our death.

Having examined the origin of Lucretius' symmetry argument, I have explained how I choose to interpret its meaning and have defended my focus on that interpretation. I will now discuss the difference between death and pre-birth.

THE RESPONSE TO LUCRETIUS

I assert that the difference in attitudes that most people have about death and pre-birth are due to a fundamental difference between the two. Lucretius asserts that they are equivalent, and he regards apathy towards pre-birth but not death as logically incongruous, according to Warren's interpretations (Warren). Those who criticize the symmetry argument have given many explanations for why death is generally regarded with apprehension, but pre-birth is mostly ignored; these rationales generally have to do with how people tend to process information and think about time, not how the nature of death is different from that of pre-birth. I will argue that death and pre-birth are different by considering other temporary periods of non-existence besides pre-birth, such as temporary unconsciousness, and by discussing how they compare to the nature of death.

It is helpful to start off by clarifying the definition of non-existence. In the context of Lucretius' symmetry argument, someone who is dead is said not to exist despite the post-death persistence of his or her material body, which remains in the physical realm, though perhaps in a state of decay. It may be confusing to hear a dead person whose body still exists to be described as being in a state of non-existence, but in our discussion of death and the symmetry argument, "existence" or lack

thereof refers to the person's mind rather than to his or her body. Kagan also uses "non-existence" in this way while discussing the symmetry argument (Kagan). A person's mind is a function of his or her body, specifically the brain, and when the brain no longer functions, the person is dead. Without a mind, experience is impossible; there is no consciousness or perception. The mind of a person no longer exists even if his or her body remains after death, so he or she is said to be in a state of non-existence for my purposes.

A discussion of the harm of non-existence should consider all states of non-existence, not just those of death and pre-birth, and there are plenty of other temporary states of non-existence that Lucretius does not address. A method for inducing temporary non-existence, anaesthesia, is practiced every day around the world. For many surgeries, patients are anaesthetized for the duration of the operation to save them from the unpleasant ordeal of being surgically cut. To prevent them from experiencing the operation, patients are placed into a state in which they can experience nothing; their senses and consciousness are suspended. Like pre-birth, this condition seems identical to that of death, but, assuming we have no reason to fear that the surgery will go wrong, our only fear when undergoing anesthesia is that too much will be administered and that we will never wake up from the anesthesia-induced state of non-existence. If we had no reason to fear a botched operation or an anesthetic mishap, we should fear anesthesia no more than we fear dreamless sleep. In fact, the unconsciousness that anesthesia induces, though identical to death in content if not duration, is generally preferred to the alternative of death.

A person may lose consciousness temporarily for a number of other reasons, such as a blow to the head, a comatose state, or sleep. It is true that fear of a blow to the head is widespread and reasonable, just as Epicureans acknowledge that it is rational to fear the process of dying (Kagan 294), but the actual period of non-existence resulting from that unconsciousness is not the subject of our fears. A comatose patient

undergoes protracted periods of unconsciousness, sometimes for weeks or longer. There are fears associated with being in a coma such as the prolonged incapacitation that affects one's work, living arrangements, and so on, and there is also the fear that one may never wake up from the coma. However, the actual state of non-existence induced by the coma—the temporary suspension of consciousness and senses—does not cause us anxiety. Sleeping people could also be considered temporarily out of existence. Dreams are, of course, a unique feature separating sleep from death, but this does not negate the point that sleep and death are both periods of non-existence. While it is true that a person's mind may exist in a dream world, the person's mind does not exist in the context of the world that we all inhabit; the waking mind is unconscious.

We do not fear unconsciousness from anesthesia or the other similar periods of non-existence, so they must be different from death in some way. I accept Lucretius' premise that people fear death but do not fear pre-birth, and I also think it is true that people fear death but do not fear anesthesia-induced non-existence. I will show that death is considered differently because it is actually different from anesthesia, pre-birth, and other periods of non-existence, not because of psychological factors impacting perceptions of death.

All of these periods of non-existence that are not death (anesthesia, pre-birth, sleep, etc.) are equivalent to each other. The length of the period of non-existence and how it comes about does not matter because non-existence is an absolute, binary value. The period of pre-birth is temporary, spanning from the beginning of time to birth. From the subjective perspective of someone who is born, pre-birth and anesthesia are temporary in comparison to death because they eventually end, whereas death does not. I have defined non-existence as a period of unconsciousness, and there is no intrinsic subjective difference between being unconscious because you have not been born yet and being unconscious because you are under anesthesia or in a coma. Therefore, if Lucretius wishes to assert that death is no more deserving of fear than pre-

birth, he must also accept that death is no more deserving of fear than any period of non-existence, such as sleep or anesthesia. This strikes me as intuitively wrong.

If you accept antenatal and postmortem equivalence as Lucretius does, you should hold identical views about pre-birth and anesthesia, etc. as about death, given the similarity between pre-birth and anesthesia. Although that seems wrong, this does not prove that pre-birth and death are different. We must examine the nature of death and whether it differs from other periods of non-existence to know if the symmetry argument is correct.

The nature of death is permanent non-existence. Anything less (temporary non-existence) is not death and is therefore tolerable to most people. The critical difference between death and pre-birth, sleep, anaesthetics, and every other period of non-existence is that death never ends. Death is far worthier of our fear than is any other cause of non-existence because it is complete finality and absolute personal extinction. No matter the length of non-existence, be it eight hours in the case of sleep or billions of years in the case of pre-birth, we do not necessarily fear periods of non-existence that eventually come to an end. In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius refers to death as more restful than the soundest sleep. Perhaps even he recognized that, although sleep and death are equivalent in terms of both being states of non-existence, death is fundamentally different because it is far more restful by virtue of being permanent. The time after our death is not in all relevant respects the same to us as the time before our births; the time before our births ended, but death never will.

To help illustrate this point, imagine how anesthesia would be considered if it were induced permanently. If patients were somehow eternally kept alive but permanently unconscious under anesthesia, people would want to avoid that fate just like they want to avoid death. Though the patient's body and mind are perfectly healthy, most will agree that, in this state of permanent non-existence, the patient may as well be dead. Those who do not wish to die would equally wish to avoid undergoing this

operation because, even though the patient is alive in a medical sense, the nature of this surgery is equivalent to the nature of death—permanent non-existence. This helps us understand how death is different from antenatal non-existence and periods of non-existence caused by surgery, sleep, and so on. Surgery with anesthesia is common, and, assuming no one has reason to fear that something will go wrong, few fear the temporary non-existence that it creates. However, our hypothetical surgery is understandably undesirable even though it is only different from normal surgery in its duration. This shows that it is not the non-existence that results from death that we fear but the permanence.

THE RATIONALITY OF THE FEAR OF DEATH

If you permanently cease to exist, you can never again value the events of your life, and they will have no permanent significance to you. A person's life could be remembered by others and have second-order effects on the world, but these effects are extrinsic measures of value for a person's life. From the perspective of each individual who is faced with death, the prospect of permanently losing consciousness represents a nullification of the personal value of his or her life. The length and quality of individuals' lives or whether they were even born in the first place are immaterial to them if they die. This is an upsetting idea to most people because it robs their lives of much of its purpose. What is the point of continuing to pursue our goals if it will not make any difference to us in the end? If we accept that there is only non-existence after death, we are faced with this unpleasant prospect. I will argue that the fear of death is rational because permanent non-existence prevents people from valuing their lives.

Hypothetical Case: Temporary Simulation

To demonstrate that permanent non-existence nullifies the value and consequences of previous existence to him who no longer exists, I will propose a hypothetical case in which a mind is created and exists only briefly before being destroyed. This case supports my claim that a

temporary existence is equivalent to no existence at all from the subjective perspective of a mind that exists temporarily and then permanently does not exist.

Imagine that an exact copy of your mind is run in a computer simulation. In this simulation, this mind is conscious and experiences a virtual world that cannot be distinguished from true reality. I will accept for the sake of argument that this copy of your mind is a perfect copy and that the copy would continue to identify as you and desire self-preservation. This simulation offers a world with which you can interact and in which you can do whatever you like. The simulation will end after five months, and the consciousness that exists in the virtual environment will permanently cease to exist upon the end of the simulation.

If a researcher working on a cure for a horrible disease were put in the simulation and used her five months to work uninterrupted by the distractions of ordinary life, she would likely make progress on her work, but her efforts would not make a difference because they would all be lost when the simulation ended. Once the simulation is completed, it does not matter to the now non-existent consciousness if the simulation lasted for five months or five years. It also does not matter to the researcher if her experience in the simulation was positive or negative because permanent non-existence nullifies the value of her now-extinguished conscious experience.

The connection between this example and our own lives is that, in both cases, permanent non-existence following a period of consciousness nullifies those experiences that are then lost to the individual who ceases to exist. In the hypothetical case, the simulation permanently ends and the events of the simulation ultimately make no difference to anyone, especially not the consciousness that has passed away. Similarly, when people die, they can no longer value their lives any more than a hypothetical person who was never born can value his.

Argument for the Rationality of the Fear of Death

Having briefly explained why I believe that the fear of death is rational given the unique nature of non-existence, I will provide a formal reconstruction of my argument for the sake of clarifying my conclusions. I will then address each premise and defend it.

- (P1) When we die, we cease to exist forever.
- (P2) We cannot experience anything when we do not exist.
- (P3) Something only has value if we can individually experience it.
- (C1) Our lives have no value to us as individuals upon death.
- (P4) It is rational to want our lives to have value.
- (C2) It is rational to prefer not to die.

The first premise of my argument is that we cannot experience anything when we do not exist. Again, I am referring to non-existence in the context of mental consciousness. While a dead person's body may still exist, his mind has been destroyed; the part of him required for consciousness no longer exists. Likewise, when a patient is anesthetized for surgery, his body may be perfectly healthy, but his consciousness and senses have been suspended temporarily. For our purposes, we can say the person does not exist. Those who agree with Lucretius will likely agree with this premise because they often argue that death could not be unpleasant if we experience nothing while we are dead (Konstan).

My second premise—death results in permanent non-existence—may be a valid target for criticism. Those who hold religious beliefs do not agree that death marks the end of experience or existence; they therefore avoid the conclusion that their lives have no value if they die. There also may be valid arguments for the existence of an immortal soul, but I will not address them here because this issue is outside the scope of this paper.

It is not my intention to argue that there is no life after death but only to prove that the fear of death would be rational if this were the case. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that there is not an immortal soul and that we permanently cease to exist upon death.

I take my third premise from the Epicureans. Those who wish to soothe anxieties about death often argue that death is nothing to him who has died because a dead person cannot experience anything (Konstan). I argue that, for the same reason, life is nothing to him who has died. Konstan describes Epicurus' view that death "is nothing to us, since... when our death occurs, we do not exist" (Konstan). I build on the idea that existence is necessary for something to be experienced as negative by saying that something can only be pleasant or beneficial if we exist to experience that thing. If we do not exist, nothing has any value to us—positive or negative.

From these premises, I am led to the conclusion that people's lives have no value to them once they no longer exist to value those lives. To support this argument, I have offered the hypothetical example of a five-month-long computer simulation. After all, what is the point of taking a vacation or eating a delicious ice cream if you will not remember the experience? The Epicureans already know the answer. Just as they assert that positive experiences of which we are deprived due to death are of no value to us because we do not exist to experience that deprivation (Warren), I assert that positive experiences obtained during life are of no value to us once we have died because we do not exist to experience the memory of them. If we cannot remember an experience, it may just as well have never happened, and if it may just as well have never happened, it does not have any value to us. True value is not in the temporary sensations of an experience but in what we retain in our memory. If death brings eternal non-existence in which we can experience nothing, and if that which we cannot experience is of no value to us, then life is of no value to him who has died. If we accept the three premises that I asserted, we are

therefore led to the conclusion that our lives have no value to us as individuals upon death.

Many people seek to mitigate their fear of death through selfless actions that continue to affect others positively after they have died. This is a good way to secure a legacy, be remembered, and make an impact, but these things that occur after death make no difference to the person who has died. While alive, a charitable, selfless person may be secure in the knowledge that her memory will live on through the fruit of her living works, but whether they do or not is ultimately immaterial to someone who does not exist. Take the case of Vincent van Gogh, a painter who died believing himself to be a failure and his paintings to be forgotten. Years after his death, his work was discovered, received great acclaim, and now hangs in the finest museums in the world. Does van Gogh derive any benefit from this postmortem praise? No, he does not. It is possible for one's life to have value for the world even after one's death, but the individual who dies retains no internal value after death.

Death's power of erasure having been established, the question then turns to the rationality of the fear of death. The framework of rationality that I use to evaluate attitudes towards death is based on self-interest: rational people do and want what is good for them and do not do or want what is bad for them. Because the fear of death, as I have pointed out, refers not just to the apprehension towards death but generally to the desire not to die, the question of the rationality of the fear of death is whether or not it is in someone's interest for one's life to have value.

A rationally self-interested person would want his life to have value. The value of one's life is not important only in a hypothetical sense; it represents that accumulation of all the enjoyment and accomplishment of each individual's existence. When death nullifies the value of a person's life, it reduces the experience of an individual who may have had an extraordinary life to that of someone who never existed to experience anything in the first place. Just as a cure for a rare disease may as well have never been invented if it is lost, a person may as well never be born

if he dies. If someone can truly be apathetic about whether or not he would ever exist in the first place, he is not rational. Furthermore, the perception that one's life has value is of immediate importance to the psychological well-being of all people.

The field of psychology has established a link between the perception that one's life has meaning and health and mental wellness outcomes. Zika and Chamberlain found that there is a "substantial and consistent relation between meaning in life and psychological well-being" (135). Their study "found life meaning consistently to relate more strongly to the positive dimensions of well-being than to the negative dimensions" (Steger et al. 143) acknowledge perceived meaning in life as an "important aspect of well-being, highlighted particularly in humanistic theories of the counseling process" (80). Other research has shown that, following the loss of a loved one, those who are able to find meaning in the death are better able to recover from the tragedy (Davis et al.). These studies show that there is a tangible benefit to a purposeful life, and this benefit is manifested in the well-being of individuals.

Given its clear importance in physical health and psychological well-being, it is obvious why a rationally self-interested person would, *ceteris paribus*, prefer that her life has value and meaning than not. The perception of meaning in one's life provides the motivation and direction we need to work hard and achieve goals, helps us to make sense of and deal with hardships in our lives, and even renders health benefits. It is rational to want not to die in part because death is a major challenge to one's sense of meaning and purpose, which we know is a cornerstone of a happy and productive life.

If death nullifies the value of life, anyone who wants to experience the value of life will also be rational to want not to die. The happy moments in our lives, time with family, professional achievement, vacations, and so on, are pleasant only because we can experience them. We fear death because, so long as we die, we will ultimately have no memory of the pleasant parts of life, and therefore they will ultimately have no value to

us. As Miguel de Unamuno wrote, “nothing is real that is not eternal” (36). Assuming that rational people are self-interested, one would expect people generally to want to receive value if it is greater than the cost to receive it, and one would also expect people to be against whatever would nullify the value that they receive. The harm of death is deprivation of the value of life. Insofar as it is rational to want not to have value taken away from you, it is rational to want not to die.

CONCLUSION

The fear of death is rational because it is important to most people that their lives have value, but permanent non-existence nullifies life. The fact is now clear that death, though similar in terms of the suspension of consciousness and senses, differs from pre-birth on the basis of its permanence. Pre-birth is a period of non-existence that must necessarily precede living existence, making it inherently temporary. On the other hand, permanence is the defining feature of death; what is dead can, by definition, never exist again. If Nature holds up pre-birth as a mirror to show us what lies beyond our lifespans, that mirror must be distorted because death dwarfs pre-birth in duration. This stark contrast between the non-existence on either side of life greatly challenges the symmetry argument and lies at the heart of Lucretius’ logical failure. This non-equivalence also speaks to the frightening nature of death. If permanent non-existence is inevitable, life will soon be nothing to us in the same way death is. Our life experiences and accomplishments will ultimately come to nothing. This is an upsetting prospect indeed, and it is why all rationally self-interested people are right to want not to die.

Chris Gillett
Texas A&M University | 2020
cgillett@tamu.edu

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Dr. Abraham Witonsky for his feedback on an early draft of this paper and especially the *Aletheia* Editorial Board for their feedback and assistance.

WORK CITED

- “Art: ‘Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism.’” *The New York Times*, 27 Jan. 1981, www.nytimes.com/1981/01/27/arts/art-van-gogh-and-the-birth-of-cloisonism.html.
- Carus, Titus Lucretius. *Lucretius on the Nature of the Universe*. Translated by R. E. Latham, Penguin Books, 1951.
- Christopher G. Davis, Camille B. Wortman, Darri, Davis. “Searching For Meaning In Loss: Are Clinical Assumptions Correct?” *Death Studies*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2000, pp. 497– 540. doi:10.1080/07481180050121471.
- Kagan, Shelly. *Death*. Yale University Press, 2012.
- Konstan, David. “Epicurus.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 16 Apr. 2018. Web. 09 May 2018.
- Lacy, P. H. De. “Lucretius and the History of Epicureanism.” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 79, 1948, p. 12, doi:10.2307/283350.
- Luper, Steven. “Death.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 17 Oct. 2014, plato.stanford.edu/entries/death/.
- Simon, Jeremy R. “Playing the Odds: A New Response to Lucretius Symmetry Argument.” *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2010, pp. 414–424. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0378.2009.00357.x.
- Steger, Michael, et al. “Assessing Meaning in Life on an International Scale: Psychometric Evidence for the Meaning in Life

Questionnaire-Short Form among Chilean Households.”
International Counseling Psychology, vol. 53, no. 1, 2006, pp.
80—93. doi:10.1037/00222-0167.53.1.80.

Unamuno, Miguel de. *Tragic Sense of Life*. Dover Publications, 1954.

Warren, James. *Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics*. Oxford
University Press, 2004.

Zika, Sheryl, and Kerry Chamberlain. “On the Relation between
Meaning in Life and Psychological Well-Being.” *British Journal
of Psychology*, vol. 83, no. 1, 1992, pp. 133–145.,
doi:10.1111/j.2044-8295.1992.tb02429.

