

Plutarch's Epicurean Justification of Religious Belief

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Abstract: In his dialogue, *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*, Plutarch of Chaeronea criticizes Epicurus for not believing that the gods are provident over human affairs and for not believing that our souls survive death. However, Plutarch's arguments are striking in that they do not offer any theoretical justification for believing either of these religious claims to be true; rather, they aim to establish that we are practically justified in adopting them if we follow Epicurus's rule that the goal of belief is not truth in its own right, but mental tranquility. I argue that this form of argument assumes a novel justificatory theory of religious belief, based in Epicurean thought, that I call 'strong doxastic hedonism.'

Keywords: Plutarch, Epicurus, pleasure, religious belief, divine providence, death, immortality, tranquility

1. Introduction

As a Middle-Platonist flourishing after the end of the Hellenistic period, the wide-ranging philosophical work of Plutarch of Chaeronea (40–120 CE), in his *Moralia*, is often stuck between the rock of systematizing Plato's metaphysical and ethical doctrines, and the hard place of defending these doctrines against Stoic and Epicurean rivals. For this reason, scholars used to identifying the philosophically valuable with the philosophically original have tended to assume that Plutarch's polemical writings, which all presuppose the truth of Platonism, contain little that is of philosophical value.¹

¹ For an overview of Plutarch's *Moralia*, see Konrat Ziegler, "Plutarchos," 636–962. Good discussions of Plutarch's Platonism can be found in Robert Jones, *The Platonism of Plutarch*; John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 184–230; and George Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement*, 85–126.

Even so, recent scholarship on these works has shown that there is more originality in them than we might expect.² In this paper, I shall argue that one of these original doctrines, which has remained unnoticed by scholars of ancient philosophy, is a novel justificatory theory of religious belief found in Plutarch's anti-Epicurean dialogue, the *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* (henceforth, *Non posse*).³

Plutarch presents the *Non posse* as a sequel to his *Adversus Colotem*, a dialogue in which he undertakes to exonerate a number of ancient philosophers from the charge—laid against them by the Epicurean philosopher, Colotes—that their doctrines about the world make it virtually impossible to live life as we know it. As a dialectical recompense, its sequel sets out to show that it is impossible to live a pleasant life by following the hedonist philosophy of Epicurus.

In the first half of the *Non posse*, Plutarch⁴ subjects Epicurus's theory that pleasure is identical to the absence of pain to a rigorous critique, and argues for the superiority of the analysis of pleasure and pain put forward by Plato in *Republic IX*. Although these discussions are often philosophically sharp, none are particularly novel.⁵ However, something unusual happens in the *Non posse*'s second half. After Plutarch's cultured defense of the superiority of the pleasures of the political and theoretical life over the life of bodily pleasure, an interlude follows. During this interlude, the participants of the dialogue, Plutarch, Aristodemus, and

² See, e.g. Daniel Babut, *Plutarque et le Stoicisme*; Jacque Boulogne, *Plutarque dans le miroir d' Epicure*; Hella Adam, *Plutarchs Schrift*; Geert Roskam, *Plutarch's De latenter vivendo*; and Eleni Kechagia, *Plutarch Against Colotes*.

³ The Greek text of the *Non posse* is the edition of Rolf Westman. Translations of the *Non posse* are from Benedict Einarson and Phillip De Lacy, *Plutarch's Moralia*, Volume XIV. Occasionally, I have modified their translations or give my own. References to works of the *Moralia* give the Latin title and the standard Stephanus pagination.

⁴ In what follows, I take it that the views expressed by the participants of the *Non posse* represent the views of Plutarch as an author. First, this is strongly implied by Plutarch's claim that he recorded the conversation of its participants for the purposes of showing that, in order to be successful in correcting particular thinkers, one must (i) carefully study their arguments and works, (ii) not criticize their arguments outside of their proper context, and (iii) attack their statements at the semantic, and not the verbal level (*Non posse*, 1086D). Second, there are explicit admissions that the speakers are repeating things that Plutarch has already expressed in his own lectures (*Non posse*, 1103F). However, even if Plutarch means to distance his own views to some extent from those of Aristodemus and Theon, this would not detract from my central claims. Insofar as the strong doxastic hedonism I discuss below can be taken as an image of the truth of Plutarch's interpretation of Platonism, in that it recommends that we believe that the gods are providentially involved in human affairs, and that the soul survives death, he can be said to agree with its recommendations for those who have not yet accepted Platonism.

⁵ On the strategy of this half of the dialogue, see James Warren, "Plutarch's *Non Posse*."

Theon, decide that what is missing from the discussion is a critique of Epicurus's doctrines that the gods do not exercise providence over human affairs, and that human souls do not survive death.⁶

Both of these topics are of central importance to Plutarch.⁷ However, they are also essential to Epicureanism. In his extant works, Epicurus insists that two of the greatest doxastic obstacles to achieving tranquility (ἀταραξία),⁸ which his philosophy posits as the ultimate practical goal of life, are the (allegedly) disturbing beliefs that (1) the gods exercise a causal influence over human affairs, and that (2) humans souls might survive death and be subject to further suffering.⁹ Since these beliefs purport to explain or to be explained by certain phenomena in the world, Epicurus thinks, one can be disabused of them by adopting scientific atomist explanations that purport to do the same.¹⁰ If one is persuaded to believe in the truth of atomist explanations of these phenomena, he argues, one will be convinced that (1) and (2) are false, and thus enter into a doxastic state more conducive to tranquility.

⁶ The discussion of this section of the dialogue is confined mostly to a single footnote in Boulogne, *Plutarque*, 170n92.

⁷ See, e.g. his systematic treatment of the coherence of the notion of divine providence in *De sera numinis vindicta*, and his attempt to reconcile Greek and Egyptian religious traditions in *De Iside et Osiride*. Plutarch's views on the survival of the soul are difficult to reconstruct, since, like Plato's views on the subject, they often occur in mythological accounts (e.g. *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet*, 942D–45A). Cf. Mauro Bonazzi, "Plutarque et l'immortalité de l'âme."

⁸ Epicurean tranquility (ἀταραξία) is a state of conscious psychosomatic stability characterized by (i) the absence of bodily pain (ἄπνοία), or the stable (καταστηματική) state of bodily pleasure, in conjunction with (ii) the absence of mental distress, or stable mental pleasure, achieved by the removal of all disturbing beliefs. See Hermann Usener, *Epicurea*, 2 and 68; Cicero, *De finibus* I.37–39; and J. C. B. Gosling and C. W. C. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure*, 388–91. A discussion of other aspects of Epicurus's theory of pleasure, which I here gloss over, such as its connection to the eudaimonist tradition of Greek ethics, can be found in Anthony Long and David Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2:102–57; and Phillip Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory*.

⁹ *Ep. Herod.* 81. It should be noted that Plutarch himself provides some of the best descriptions of these psychological torments in his *De superstitione*. See also André-Jean Festugière, *Épicure*, ch. 1.

¹⁰ In what follows, I shall use the phrase 'explanatory belief' to refer to a general proposition that is used to explain, among other things, what something is, why some kinds of events have occurred, why some kinds of events will occur, or why some kinds of action should be done. Thus, explanatory beliefs may serve to ground causal accounts of kinds of events, predictions about the future, as well as normative claims about what kinds of things it is rational for one to hope. Explanatory beliefs need not be ultimate; they may also be explained by other beliefs in explanation chains.

Importantly, both in this context, and more generally, Epicurus does not put forward scientific explanation as having the goal of giving one theoretical insight into the truth of phenomena for truth's sake; rather, he explicitly conceptualizes scientific explanation as an activity that one engages in to remove the false beliefs that hinder one from achieving mental tranquility.¹¹ This is because doxastic states themselves, according to Epicurus, especially those that take the form of having expectations about one's own foreseeable future, are productive of pleasure or pain.¹² As we shall see, Epicurus's instance that our epistemic goals are always subordinate to our ultimate practical goal of achieving mental tranquility leaves him vulnerable to the problem of what to do in cases where practical and theoretical reason might come into conflict.

Let Epicurus's theory that it is practically wise to take steps to investigate phenomena scientifically, in order to hit upon explanations that will help people disabuse themselves of disturbing explanatory beliefs, be called 'weak doxastic hedonism.' It can be formulated as the conditional moral imperative that:

IF (i) tranquility is the practical goal of human life, and (ii) one's *non-scientific* belief that *p* explains *x* naturally tends to maximize one's mental disturbance throughout life, and (iii) a *scientific* belief that *r* explains *x* would naturally maximize one's mental tranquility throughout life,

THEN (iv) one ought to take steps to replace one's belief that *p* explains *x* with a *scientific* belief that *r* explains *x*.

Although Epicurus does not express the relation between his hedonist and scientific commitments in exactly these terms, this formulation provides a plausible way to express his commitment to subordinating the goals of scientific inquiry to the practical goal of achieving mental tranquility. The knowledge produced by atomist science, on this picture, is only a *means* to mental tranquility, and never a goal in its own right. Thus, he writes,

¹¹ *Ep. Pyth.* 85. This is not of course to deny that, in order to believe that *p*, one must believe that *p* is true; it is only to say that the goal of acquiring true beliefs is not truth *simpliciter*; or, alternatively, there is no epistemic norm that is not also governed and justified by a practical norm.

¹² This idea is not unusual in ancient philosophy. Aristotle, in *De anima* 3.3, 427b21–23, claims that when we believe that something is fearful, we are immediately put into the (painful) state of fearing.

First of all, do not believe that there is any other goal to be achieved by the knowledge of meteorological phenomena, whether they are discussed in conjunction with [physics in general] or on their own, than freedom from disturbance and secure conviction, just as with the rest [of physics]. (*Ep. Pyth.* 85)¹³

Under Epicurus's weak doxastic hedonism, one is never obligated to investigate phenomena scientifically through the discovery of their causes. Still, it affirms that one will always have an overriding practical reason to engage in scientific inquiry if one finds oneself saddled with disturbing explanatory beliefs. What one does not ever have reason to do, under this theory, is to investigate the truth for its own sake.

2. Weak and Strong Doxastic Hedonism

Epicurus's commitment to weak doxastic hedonism raises a number of difficulties about the relation of his epistemology to his ethics. The most obvious one is that, in order for tranquility to be guaranteed by his scientific method, minimally, Epicurus must presuppose the following: firstly, that (I) all false explanatory beliefs are naturally disturbing; and secondly, that (II) all true explanatory beliefs are naturally pleasant. Thirdly, he must presuppose that (III) all true and pleasurable explanatory beliefs are capable of being proven, to some degree, by relying upon his criteria for scientifically confirming or disconfirming (through the causal explanations of atomist physics) beliefs about matters that are yet to appear or matters that are unapparent to the senses.¹⁴

However, each of these assumptions is capable of being challenged. For instance, against (I), given Epicurus's denial of teleological order in nature, it does not seem to be an a priori constraint of atomism that it is impossible for false explanatory beliefs—which beliefs are literally identical to physical compactions of atoms perceived by the soul—to produce mental tranquility. Further, against (II), it does not seem impossible for some true explanatory

¹³ The Greek text of Epicurus is from *Epicuro Opere*, edited by Graziano Arrighetti, throughout. Translations of Epicurus are generally from *The Epicurus Reader*, edited by Lloyd Gerson and Brad Inwood, but in a few cases, I use the translation of Cyril Bailey, *Epicurus*.

¹⁴ See Elizabeth Asmis, *Epicurus' Scientific Method*, 170.

beliefs (again, as compactions of atoms) to produce mental terror.¹⁵ Against (III), it seems possible that one could hold a pleasurable explanatory belief that is true, but this belief cannot be confirmed by the criteria of Epicurean science.

It is the possibility that certain religious beliefs produce mental tranquility, but violate (III), I claim, that Plutarch exploits in the latter half of the *Non posse*. In this half of the dialogue, he argues that, if one assumes the truth of the doxastic side of Epicurus's hedonism, there are good reasons, based upon our natural preconceptions about the gods, and the pleasures of religious experience, to take steps to retain or acquire at least two non-Epicurean explanatory beliefs, in violation of (III) above. These beliefs, which are in fact versions of the allegedly disturbing (1) and (2) above, are that (A) the gods exercise moral providence to some degree over human affairs, and that (B) the soul lives on after death so as to be subject to correction or reward.¹⁶ The former purports to explain why some good and bad events happen to people, and why they should do good actions and not bad ones; the latter purports to explain why death should not be feared.

The most striking feature of Plutarch's arguments for adopting (or retaining) these two religious beliefs, as other scholars have recognized,¹⁷ is that they do not offer any theoretical reasons (e.g. one based on Platonic metaphysics) for thinking these beliefs to be true. Instead, his arguments aim to show that, because belief that (A) and (B) naturally facilitates the practical Epicurean goal of tranquility over the course of one's life, if one is an Epicurean, then one has an overriding practical reason to take steps to believe them. This argument, I claim, offers a novel justificatory theory of religious belief that is original to Plutarch. I call it 'strong doxastic hedonism.' It can be expressed as the conditional moral imperative that:

¹⁵ Martha Nussbaum writes, "For Epicurus, every inquiry (as Marx argued well) has ethical constraints. . . . But this means that a science of nature that delivered disturbing rather than calming stories of how things are would not have fulfilled the purpose for which we need a science of nature, and would justly be dismissed as empty" (*The Therapy of Desire*, 123–34).

¹⁶ "Taking steps to believe" stands in contrast to the imperative of 'doxastic voluntarism,' the view that one's beliefs are under the immediate control of the will. This view is false. See Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 83. One of the major questions about this view is what methods would be acceptable in order to take steps to believe in some proposition. I assume that self-deception, or physical manipulations of the kinds discussed by Williams would not be ("Deciding to Believe," 149–51).

¹⁷ See Frederik Brenk, *In Mist*, 24.

IF (i) tranquility is the practical goal of human life, and (ii) a *non-scientific* belief that *p* explains *x* would *naturally* minimize one's mental disturbance throughout life more than a *scientific* belief that *r* explains *x*, and (iii) it is logically possible that *p* explains *x*,

THEN (iv) one should take steps to believe that *p* explains *x*, and to doubt that *r* explains *x*.

This ethics of belief is distinct from pragmatic arguments, like Pascal's Wager, that claim that taking steps to adopt certain religious beliefs is warranted if the risk of accepting them has a greater expected value than the risk of denying them.¹⁸ It is also stronger than the pragmatist theory of belief held by William James, who argued that, in cases where scientific evidence is lacking for the truth of a proposition, and that proposition is of great psychological importance, it is permissible to adopt it.¹⁹

Strong doxastic hedonism differs from a Pascalian wager because the motivation for accepting a proposition that falls under its scope is not the gambler's idea that, should *p* turn out to be true, one will be better off *in the future* if one risks believing that *p* in the present; it is that, if one is able to believe that *p*, one will be better off *in the present* and throughout the course of one's life, even if one's belief that *p* turns out to be, contrary to one's expectation, false. It differs from James's pragmatic view, because it advises that we adopt non-scientific explanations of *x* in every case in which this belief's scientific competitors do not naturally alleviate mental pain for human beings to the same degree that it does, regardless of how theoretically justified those scientific explanations are.

So formulated, strong doxastic hedonism is both ethically and epistemically radical. Since "taking steps to believe that *p*" might involve ignoring the theoretical evidence one has for believing that *r*, and a practical anti-skeptical motive not to suspend judgment about whether *p* is the case, insofar as Plutarch pushes this theory as the one Epicurus ought to hold, he offers what is perhaps the first set of arguments in the history of philosophy for seeing how the goals of practical and theoretical reason—under their Epicurean construal—might come apart. In doing so, he exposes a real and interesting challenge in how to understand the unity

¹⁸ For an overview of these sorts of arguments in relation to religious belief, see Jeff Jordan, *Pascal's Wager*.

¹⁹ See William James, "The Will to Believe."

of Epicurus's ethical and scientific goals, and more generally, the relationship between practical and theoretical reason.

However, whilst the *Non posse* clearly advocates the rationality of strong doxastic hedonism for those who, like Epicurus, accept that tranquility or happiness is a goal that is superordinate to theoretical inquiry, it is important to point out that, in virtue of his Platonism, Plutarch himself cannot be classed as a strong doxastic hedonist. This is because he holds, contrary to Epicurus, that scientific accounts that give a causal explanation of some phenomenon (e.g. why the physiology of a goat from Pericles's field forced it to grow only one single horn in the middle of its head) need not ever conflict with religious or teleological explanations of the same phenomenon (e.g. that the single horn was a divine sign that showed that, although there were two competing parties in the city, Pericles will eventually have sole power (Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, chapter 6).

In contrast, whilst Epicurus accepts that some phenomena, such as those in meteorology, admit of multiple explanations, any of which would suffice to establish mental tranquility (*Ep. Pyth.* 86–88), he rejects the idea that the nature of the soul, and the nature of the gods, could have more than one explanation. Atomist science, according to him, necessitates only one explanation for each: the former is mortal, and the latter has no concern for human affairs (*Ep. Herod.* 63; 77–78).²⁰ Plutarch's task is to show that, in fact, religious beliefs like (A) and (B) which reject these Epicurean explanations of the nature of the soul and of the gods are themselves able to explain phenomena in a way that naturally produces more mental pleasure than their Epicurean scientific rivals.

²⁰ Plutarch also holds a Platonic psychology according to which scientific cognition, insofar as it relies upon the contemplation of Forms, produces by nature a special form of epistemic pleasure (see *Non posse*, 1096D–E). Thus, he does not think that it is possible for condition (ii) in the definition of strong doxastic hedonism to ever be instantiated; instead, he would claim that people like Epicurus and Colotes, who (according to him) hold explanatory beliefs that are by nature non-pleasure maximizing, actually hold pseudo-scientific beliefs (although he does not ever state this in the *Non posse*). A full discussion of the similarities of strong doxastic hedonism to Plutarch's own epistemology are beyond the scope of this essay. However, I take his epistemology to be in the tradition of the Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades. In this I agree with George Boys-Stones, who in "Thrysus-bearer" and "Plutarch on the Probable Principle of Cold," claims that Plutarch's commitment to the priority of the intelligible over the sensible world produces a skepticism which, in virtue of being open to the truth, can be called "probabilist," and Jan Opsomer (*In Search of the Truth*, 178), who, in a similar vein, argues that Plutarch sees philosophical skepticism about our scientific knowledge of the world as something that "protects traditional faith."

In order to judge the successfulness of this task, I first lay out and assess the strength of Plutarch's arguments that belief that the gods are concerned with and exercise moral providence over human affairs naturally facilitates mental tranquility better than the Epicurean belief that they do not (sections 3–5). I then lay out and assess the strength of his arguments that belief that the soul continues to be and to perceive after death naturally facilitates mental tranquility better than the Epicurean belief that it does not (sections 6–8). I then analyze and assess the *Non posse*'s attempt to refute Epicurus's argument that "death is nothing to us" (section 9). I end by raising some Epicurean objections, ancient and modern, against the claim that a belief in an afterlife is coherent enough to produce mental pleasure (sections 10–11). I conclude that these objections ultimately fail, and that Plutarch's strong doxastic hedonist arguments for believing in the soul's survival after death and divine providence are successful, and bear an interesting relation to a Kant's postulates of practical reason (section 12).

3. The Effects of Belief in Providence on the Bad and the Many

The character Aristodemus begins the critique of Epicurus's denial of divine providence (πρόνοια) in the second half of the *Non posse*.²¹ The argument begins on a conciliatory note. Aristodemus accepts that the Epicurean's denial that the gods are provident partially achieves its goal of removing mental distress. This is because people who deny that the gods are provident may, he claims, in virtue of this belief, avoid the mental distresses associated with its use in explaining one's misfortunes (e.g. that the god is making one ill because one forgot to offer a cock to Asclepius). The question, for Aristodemus, is whether or not this Epicurean denial comes at the cost of denying us certain mental pleasures as well. Whether the gods are in fact provident over human affairs is not at issue.

To cast doubt on the therapeutic value of the belief that the gods are not provident, Aristodemus first points out that the Epicureans, in contrast to the Stoics, argued that some mental dispositions are choiceworthy, despite being accompanied by pain. Amongst them is

²¹ The groundwork for this practical critique is laid in the first half of the dialogue, wherein Aristodemus suggests that the Epicureans have tampered with their preconception of god (προλήψει τοῦ θεοῦ), not by adding something foreign to it—which is Epicurus's standard explanation of how we form false conceptions (See *Ep. Herod.* 51 and Scholion; *Ep. Men.* 123; *VS* 59)—but by not allowing something in it to remain (ἀπέλιπον), namely, the notion of providence (πρόνοια) (*Non posse*, 1092B9–C2).

the disposition to weep, grieve, and be pained at the death of friends.²² The Epicureans defended this idea, he reports, by arguing that the elimination of this disposition either comes at the cost of being “cruel in character” (ὠμότητος),²³ or is grounded in a disposition associated with further pains, such as having “an uncontrolled thirst for public fame” (δοξοκοπίας ἀκράτου) (*Non posse*, 1101A). The principle that Aristodemus draws from this case is that a good Epicurean should not attempt to eliminate mental dispositions that, although they prevent some short-term pains, in the long run, hinder people from having greater pleasures (such as intimate friendships), or produce worse pains (such as being frustrated with one’s lack of fame).²⁴

If this is so, Aristodemus claims, then it seems that “atheism” (ἄθεότης), in the sense of being disposed to believe that the gods are not provident over human affairs, might similarly be detrimental to our mental tranquility (*Non posse*, 1101B–C). This is because the Epicurean removal of the mental anguish that is produced by the belief that one is being punished by the gods, he thinks, carries with it the removal of the mental pleasure produced by the belief that one might be helped by them during misfortunes. Plutarch writes,

Where their theory works successfully and is right, it does remove a certain superstitious fear (δεισιδαιμονίαν); but it allows no joy and delight to come to us from the gods. Instead it puts us in the same state of mind with regard to the gods, of neither being alarmed nor rejoicing, that we have regarding the Hyrcanians or Scyths. We expect nothing from them either good or evil. (*Non posse*, 1100F–1101A).

On the basis of the Epicurean affirmation that some beliefs and character dispositions can be choiceworthy despite producing some mental pain, Aristodemus infers that there is no reason to rule out belief in divine providence as choiceworthy, if reasons can be found that show it to be overall more conducive to mental tranquility than its denial or absence. The analogy he offers is: (1) being cruel is to (2) hindering overall tranquility, as (3) being atheistic is to (4) hindering overall tranquility.

²² He cites as evidence his own perusal of Epicurus’s lost letter to Sositheüs the father, and Pyrron the brother, of the deceased Hegesianax.

²³ According to *De virtute morali*, 445A, this is the vice of feeling excessive anger.

²⁴ Epicurus defends the principle that some pleasures are to be avoided if they produce more pain overall, and some pains are to be accepted if they produce more pleasure overall, at *Ep. Men.* 129–30.

Although the analogy is intelligible, it provides no reason for thinking that belief that the gods are provident *is* more pleasurable than the belief that they are unconcerned with human affairs. To provide this, Aristodemus asserts that we must take account of how different kinds of human beings are (or might be) affected by the former belief in contexts of moral action. To this end, he divides humanity into three moral classes: the bad, the many, and the good. For persons in each class, he argues, it is plausible to think that holding a belief that the gods are morally provident throughout the course of their life will minimize their psychological distress and maximize their psychological pleasure. This is because this belief can serve both to prevent people from doing vicious acts that put them in a bad mental state and motivate them to do virtuous acts that put them in a good mental state.

He begins with bad (φαῦλοι) people. For bad people, he claims, belief that the gods are provident primarily motivates them to refrain from vice. In virtue of this restraint, they not only avoid the natural mental torments that follow upon crime (e.g. worrying about being discovered), but also, their avoidance starves their desire for vice such that it eventually burns out (*Non posse*, 1101C–D). For them, the minor mental pain of worrying that they might be punished by the gods motivates them to not engage in actions that would cause them, in the long run, greater overall mental pain.

The effect of a belief that the gods are provident on the many is different. For the many, Aristodemus says, this belief causes them to ascribe to the gods, rather than their own effort, “every profit of their good actions” (πᾶσαν εὐπραξίας ὄνησιν). Believing that the gods are responsible for their profit evokes for them the pleasure of feeling that they have been rewarded. Although he admits that this belief comes with some mental pain, in the form of fearing that one might be punished for one’s vices, still, it produces a cheerful hope and joy that outweighs such fears “a thousand times over” (μυριάκις) (*Non posse*, 1101D). This pleasure, over the course of one’s life (it is assumed) will outweigh any fear of punishment that one occasionally thinks the gods inflict upon oneself.

Aristodemus goes on to give a phenomenological proof that the generally pleasure-maximizing nature of a belief that the gods are provident is clear by “the greatest evidences” (τεκμηρίοις τοῖς μεγίστοις) (*Non posse*, 1101E). These are that the most pleasurable visits are ones to temples, the most pleasurable occasions are holy days, and generally, the most pleasurable activities are ones that involve celebrations concerning the gods (e.g. sacrifices, choral dances, and ceremonies). When viewed through the lens of a belief in providence, which belief explains why these events take place, he claims, these basic human events—visits,

occasions, and activities—produce a form of pleasure that people do not have access to without it.

Once again, Aristodemus does not argue that we have any independent reasons to think that the gods are actually present at such events; in fact, nowhere in the *Non posse* do the interlocutors claim this. Instead, Aristodemus restricts himself to the doxastic hedonist claim that, whenever the soul “believes and reasons that the god is present” (δοξάζει καὶ διανοεῖται παρεῖναι τὸν θεόν), it “drives away all pains, fears, and worrying, and becomes so full of pleasure that it becomes drunken and playful” (*Non posse*, 1101E–F). The implication is that people who “give up belief” (ἀπεγνωκότι) in such providence, as the Epicureans do, are not acting in accordance with Epicurean practical reason, since to do so seems to require that one not give up explanatory beliefs that naturally produce mental pleasure and eliminate mental pain over the course of life (*Non posse*, 1102A). Plutarch has now made his first attempt to push Epicurus towards strong doxastic hedonism, by giving him a practical reason to doubt his theoretical beliefs about the gods.

How might an Epicurean respond to this ‘Epicurean’ argument against her religious beliefs? She might reasonably claim that, even if the sorts of pleasures that believers in providence experience in religious contexts outweigh the fears associated with superstitious beliefs (which she would affirm as dubious), these pleasures might, upon phenomenological analysis, still turn out to be nothing more than the amalgam of bodily pleasures experienced at such occasions, such as drinking wine, eating roast meats, or celebrating with others—and this in fact is just what Epicurus claims.²⁵

However, Aristodemus is aware of this objection. He argues that the pleasures that believers experience at religious events, although they certainly include bodily pleasures, cannot be reduced to them. This is because the source of the pleasure produced at religious events, he claims, is causally related to one’s belief that the gods are provident. He describes this mental state as a “good confidence and belief [ἐλπὶς ἀγαθὴ καὶ δόξα] in the presence of the god and his gracious acceptance of the acts one has done” (*Non posse*, 1102A–B). Thus, since the belief that the gods are providentially involved in human affairs provides for the many a pleasure that outweighs the pain of their superstitious fears, and this pleasure cannot be produced without this belief, Plutarch’s suggestion is that, if one desires to attain Epicurean

²⁵ It is an important part of Epicurus’s analysis of mental pleasure that it can be reduced to past recollections or future expectations of bodily sensory pleasures. See Usener, *Epicurea*, 67.

tranquility, one ought to take steps to believe that the gods are provident, even if it means discounting some of the evidences of Epicurean science.

4. The Effects of Belief in Providence on the Good

Predictably, Plutarch reserves the most positive consequences of belief that the gods are provident for the morally good. Good people, he has Aristodemus claim, in virtue of their being just and temperate, are able to infer from this belief that they are “friends of the gods” (θεοφιλή) (*Non posse*, 1102F). In this argument, the high value that Epicurus assigned to friendship is exploited.²⁶ For Epicurus, friends are not only a source of social pleasure, but also a source of confidence for the protection of one’s present and future interests.²⁷ Aristodemus alleges that believing oneself a friend to the gods, which one can do naturally if one is virtuous and believes the gods to love virtue, serves both of these functions. The belief that the gods are provident thus serves to explain why one should be confident about one’s future if one is good.

If Epicurus can receive joy and confidence from being friends with mortals like Metrodorus, Aristodemus claims, then surely he could have even greater joy and confidence if he believed that he was a friend to the immortal gods themselves (*Non posse*, 1103A). To show this, he mentions some examples of the pleasure that might flow from someone’s belief that they are a friend of the gods, including the pleasure that resulted from Socrates’s belief that he had a *daimon*, and the pleasure that came to Pindar when he believed he heard the god Pan singing his music. The argument again rests upon an analogy with Epicurus’s own views: (1) belief in mortal friendship is to (2) mortal pleasure and confidence, as (3) belief in divine friendship is to (4) divine pleasure and confidence.

Once more, the view expressed here is not that people have good theoretical reasons to believe that it is true that the gods are friends to good people. It is that, as a matter of religious experience, there are people who believe that they are beloved by the gods on account of their virtue, and this belief is pleasurable to have because it gives them confidence about being well-treated by the gods in the future. If this is so, Plutarch suggests, then on what ethical grounds is Epicurus justified in denying to good people the pleasure of this belief, especially given his view that our goal in scientific inquiry is subordinate to our practical goal of mental tranquility?

²⁶ See *KA* 27; and Cicero, *De finibus* I.65–70.

²⁷ See *VS* 39.

Ethically speaking, Epicurus's best response is to say that having a belief that one is a friend to the gods still involves the pain of superstition, such as worrying that the gods might arbitrarily end the friendship. This, it seems, is why Aristodemus thinks it to be a good idea to put forward an analysis of our preconception of divine goodness. This not only helps to show why the gods would not arbitrarily end their friendship with good people, but at the same time, it presents a challenge to Epicurus's first principle doctrine, which is

That which is blessed and indestructible itself has no troubles [πράγματα], nor does it cause them for anything else, so that it is neither constrained by feelings of anger nor gratitude. For all such things lie in weakness. (*K1* 1)

In this doctrine, Epicurus suggests that our preconception of a being that is “blessed” (μακάριον) and “imperishable” (ἄφθαρτον) includes the concept of an inability to be troubled or concerned with the actions of human beings. For him, what is blessed can neither grow angry at, nor feel gratitude for, anyone's actions. To have any concern at all for anything, whether good or bad, Epicurus claims, is conditional upon weakness, and weakness is incompatible with our preconception of the divine as blessed and immortal. Given such a doctrine, gods could be neither friend nor foe of anyone.

Plutarch argues that this characterization of our preconception of the divine is flawed. He agrees with Epicurus that our preconception of god does not include any attributes that imply weakness. He also agrees that suffering anger is a weakness. Where Epicurus goes wrong, he thinks, is in his belief that all affections are weaknesses. Instead, he argues that, if commonly acknowledged virtues, such as the disposition to feel gratitude, are strengths, and commonly acknowledged vices are weaknesses, then it is coherent to think that the gods (if they exist) could be subject to the former without being subject to the latter. If so, they could in fact be friends to good people.

To show this, he offers a sample classification of virtues and their opposed vices. The virtue of “graciousness” (χάριτος) and “goodwill” (εὐμένεια), he argues, are opposed to “vicious anger” (ὀργή) and “bitterness” (χόλος); similarly, he claims, the virtues of being disposed to “love humanity” (φιλόανθρωπος) and “friendliness” (φιλόφρονος) are opposed to the “vices of hostility” (δυσμενές) and the disposition to incite “disturbance” (ταρακτικόν) (*Non posse*, 1102E–F).

In conceptualizing these commonly acknowledged virtues and vices as strengths and weaknesses, respectively, Aristodemus is able to claim that the gods can be believed to perform

beneficent acts by nature and without burden, in the same way that heat by nature causes warmth but not cold (*Non posse*, 1102E–F). Based on this schema, he offers an amendment to Epicurus’s *K1* 1. He claims:

Thus, it is not that God is constrained neither by “feelings of anger” nor “gratitude;” rather, because God by nature is gracious and gives help, he does not by nature become angry and do harm. (*Non posse*, 1102E)

Whilst on its surface this seems to be a theological truth claim, in context, Aristodemus is only defending the coherence of the preconception of god affirmed by good people, and challenging Epicurus’s denial of this coherence.²⁸

5. The Effects of Belief in Providence during Life

Plutarch has now argued that, for each class of human being, in virtue of its power to motivate people to act in a way that puts them in a more tranquil mental state, belief that the gods are provident serves to maximize pleasure and minimize pain over the course of life. In virtue of having this belief, (a) bad people feel more pleasure by choosing to avoid vicious actions that would naturally cause them long-term mental disturbance, (b) the many feel the added doxastic pleasure involved in seeing divine favor as explaining the good results of their good actions, along with the added doxastic pleasure of believing the gods to be present at religious events, and (c) the good feel these pleasures and the further doxastic pleasure of thinking that they are personally loved by and friends to the gods. Thus, for each kind of human being, Plutarch claims, if pleasure is the goal of life, it is practically rational, on Epicurean grounds, to take steps to believe in divine providence, and to discount Epicurus’s scientific reasons to the contrary.

With this accomplished, Aristodemus pushes Epicurus’s position towards strong doxastic hedonism even further by reminding his interlocutors that the sole function of Epicurean philosophy is to provide therapeutic relief from the mental distresses associated with disturbing beliefs. One part of Epicurus’s therapy, as we have seen, consists in being persuaded that the gods have no concern for human beings; another part consists in being persuaded that

²⁸ This conceptual analysis is taken from Plato’s analysis of the concept of goodness as incompatible with the concept of productive of harm. See *Republic* 379b1–80c7.

death is something that should not be feared. According to Epicurus, because death entails the end of perception, and it is not rational to fear that which one will never perceive, death is something that should not be feared. In response, Aristodemus argues that this explanation of death, when scrutinized, is naturally more troubling than therapeutic.

Aristodemus begins with the example of an anxious sailor whose ship is caught in a storm. Epicurus's advice to others for dealing with severe distress in life, and death itself, he says, can be compared to someone attempting to reassure this anxious sailor by informing him that, although the ship has no captain, and although no one is coming to rescue him, "nevertheless, there is nothing to be afraid of, since at any second the ship will be swallowed up by the sea or will soon crash upon the rocks and be shattered" (*Non posse*, 1103D).

Sailors would be better served, Aristodemus suggests, by trusting that there is a captain on the ship, and hoping that, despite all odds, they might be saved. Moreover, they could be encouraged further still were they to believe that, if their vessel breaks up, they might swim to land and to safety. If the analogy holds, Aristodemus suggests, then, as souls inhabiting bodily ships, we ought also to hope that there is a captain looking out for our bodies during the storms of illness, and for our souls to be saved at the shipwreck of death (*Non posse*, 1103C–E). The analogy is: (1) hope in a captain and a nearby shore is to (2) good assurance to sailors in a storm, as (3) hope in divine providence and the soul's survival is to (4) good assurance to humans undergoing difficulties in life.

The argumentative strategy here is again practical, and not theoretical: If tranquility includes justified hope for an absence of future pain and a corresponding expectation of future pleasure, as Epicurus claims,²⁹ then believing that the gods are provident may provide a firmer ground for this hope during life than belief in this proposition's denial.

6. The Effects of Belief in an Afterlife on the Bad

Having argued that a belief that the gods are provident over human affairs in this life is conducive to living a more tranquil Epicurean life for the bad, the many, and the good, Plutarch takes himself to have shown that Epicurus's commitment to the goal of tranquility is in direct conflict with his scientific theory in the case of certain natural religious beliefs. In order to maintain the priority of practical over theoretical reason, Plutarch suggests, a good Epicurean

²⁹ See *Non posse*, 1087D. David Furley, "Nothing to Us?," 90, also notes this as one of Epicurus's most difficult claims about ἀταραξία, citing *VS* 33, as well as *KA* 34 and *KA* 35.

should accept the strong doxastic hedonism that justifies a belief that the gods are provident. It is implied that the Epicurean will need to discount her scientific evidence for denying providential concern to the gods, but not, at this stage, her belief in atomism as a whole.

The *Non posse* then turns to discuss another belief that the Epicurean should accept for its pleasurable consequences, namely, that the gods are provident over the soul's affairs in the afterlife. Although there is no a priori connection between the claim that the gods provide moral rewards and punishments to humans during this life, and the claim that human souls survive death, Plutarch tacitly takes for granted his claim, from *De sera numinis vindicta*, that belief that the gods are provident is naturally connected to the belief that souls survive death. This is because, as he argues there, it is difficult to believe that the gods would be providentially concerned with beings who live only briefly and then perish; moreover, he asserts, the gods speak through oracles, and these command that honors be paid to the deceased (*De sera numinis vindicta*, 560B–F). Such commands presuppose, he thinks, the survival of the soul. Even so, the reasons Plutarch gives for believing in the soul's survival in the *Non posse* concern only the efficacy of this belief in promoting pleasure.

Taking up Aristodemus's division of humanity into three moral classes—the bad, the many, and the good—and his practical strategy of showing how belief that the gods are provident affects the pains and pleasures of each class, the character Theon now takes over the conversation. He attempts to justify the idea that believing that the gods will care for our souls in the afterlife is also conducive to the tranquility of each class of people during life.

He begins with an Epicurean reason for thinking that it would be useful to the bad to believe that the gods punish people for their vices in the afterlife.

Epicurus supposes that fear of punishment is the only motive to which we can properly appeal in deterring injustice. It follows that we should fill them even fuller with superstitious fear [δεισιδαιμονίας]. . . . For they are better off avoiding injustice for fear of the things that come after death than doing injustice and spending their lives in insecurity [ἐπισφαλῶς] and apprehension [περιφόβως]. (*Non posse*, 1104B)

Although Theon's argument might seem to repeat the one that Aristodemus gave earlier in defending the idea that belief that the gods are provident helps bad men to refrain from vice, it is different in two respects. First, the former argument aimed to show that belief that the gods are provident over our affairs during *this life*, not the afterlife, deters us from vice; second, it made no direct appeal to Epicurus's own motivational theory. Theon, however, is concerned

about how the gods treat us in the *afterlife*, and presents his claim as one that follows from Epicurus's own instrumental view of justice. For Epicurus claims,

Injustice is not a bad thing in its own right, but [only] because of the fear [φόβος] produced by the suspicion that one will not escape the notice of those assigned to punish such actions. (*K1* 34)³⁰

Because the fear of being found out for one's injustices is for Epicurus a mental disturbance, and mental tranquility is for him our practical goal, the fact that injustice always (supposedly) produces some fear of being found out is ultimately the explanation for why he thinks we should refrain from committing unjust acts.³¹

Theon uses Epicurus's analysis of the instrumental value of justice to argue that, if doing unjust things detracts from one's mental tranquility, and fear of punishment in this life motivates bad people to refrain from doing unjust things, then, by analogy, fear of punishment in the afterlife should also provide a further, and greater, reason for people to refrain from injustice. If this extra reason is effective, it follows that bad people who fear providential punishment in the afterlife will move closer to mental tranquility in this life than those who do not fear it. The structure of the analogy parallels Epicurus's reasoning: (1) fear of human punishment in this life is to (2) motivating just action, as (3) fear of divine punishment in the afterlife is to (4) motivating just action.

As with Aristodemus's earlier argument about the motivational efficacy of a belief that the gods are provident, an Epicurean might plausibly argue that these cases are disanalogous because people do not fear divine and human agents in the same way. On the one hand, explanations that appeal to the regular behavior of humans in meting out punishment might be thought to carry more motivational weight, since such behavior is easily accessible to perception, memory, and experience. Divine behavior, on the other hand, might be thought to carry less motivational weight, since it is not directly epistemically accessible, but inferred. Even so, it is certainly not unreasonable to think that persons with stable beliefs about divine agency and the soul's afterlife would be motivated to refrain from injustice, and it is certainly

³⁰ Cf. *K1* 35.

³¹ This is why, in *K1* 17, Epicurus can affirm, "The just life is most free from disturbance, but the unjust life is full of the greatest disturbance." Cf. *VS* 7 and *VS* 70. For a contrary assessment, see Julia Annas, "Epicurus on Pleasure."

true that some people would claim that they are so motivated. If so, the Epicurean, once again, has an ethical reason to discount her evidence that the gods are not provident, as the strong doxastic hedonist claims.

7. The Effects of Belief in an Afterlife on the Many

Theon goes on to claim that, for the many, who do not need such a radical motivation to refrain from vice, the pleasurable rewards of a belief that one's soul will survive death are different. Although the many also might be motivated not to commit unjust acts by the belief that they will be punished in the afterlife, their reward mainly consists in the pleasure afforded by their belief that divine providence will grant them continued existence after death.

To defend this claim, Theon does not challenge any of the theoretical reasons that Epicurus sets out in *Ep. Herod.* 63–67 for believing that the soul is dissolved and no longer experiences perception after death. Instead, he offers a practical argument that attempts to put the Epicureans in a position where they have to choose either to deny that mental tranquility is our overall practical goal, or to discount the causal reasons that justify Epicurus's account of the soul's mortality.³² To do so, Theon begins to challenge Epicurus's reasons for thinking that death should not be feared.³³

Epicurus defended this idea on the basis of his analysis of death as the dissolution of the soul-body relation. From this, he argued that

Death is nothing to us [οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς]. This is because, what is dissolved has no sensation, and what has no sensation is nothing to us. (*KA* 2)

Scholars are generally agreed that what Epicurus took himself to be showing by this argument (among other things) is that the fear of death, in part, is caused by the mistaken belief that one will continue to exist as a subject of sensation after its occurrence and be able to be pained at the things one has lost. Since death, for him, is identical to the elimination of the two-fold subject of sensation, and he gives arguments that purport to confirm that sensation requires the existence of this two-fold subject, soul atoms enclosed in a body, it follows that the belief that one can experience anything after death is false. The fear of death, Epicurus asserts, is based

³² See Asmis, *Epicurus's Scientific Method*, 169–70.

³³ Cf. *Ep. Men.* 125.

on the irrational or unjustified belief that we can, or will, have sensation after death. Once we replace this belief with the scientific belief that our soul atoms will be dispersed into the void, Epicurus thought, we can experience the peaceful pleasure of knowing that death is nothing to be afraid of.

To refute the therapeutic consequences of this explanation of death's non-fearfulness, Theon begins by arguing that the sorts of mental terrors that Epicurus associated with holding a belief that some traditional Greek story of the afterlife is true are in fact greatly outweighed by the mental pleasures associated with believing in these same stories. This is because, insofar as they all generally affirm that the soul will continue to be after death, they promise to fulfil the most fundamental of human natural desires. This natural desire he labels "the longing for being" (ὁ πόθος τοῦ εἶναι) (*Non posse*, 1104C).³⁴ For Theon, religious myths explain, even if only inchoately, how this natural human desire will be fulfilled.

Theon defends the idea that the longing for being is a natural human desire along two lines: first, by an appeal to what people naturally prefer for others; second, by an appeal to what people naturally prefer for themselves. He first argues that, given a choice, people will naturally prefer that those they have lost—family and friends—exist somewhere (εἶναί σου), even if in hardship, over their being destroyed. He provides evidence for this by appealing to the small pleasures that the many derive from using common linguistic expressions that suggest the survival of beloved ones after death, such as when they claim someone "to have departed" (μεθίστασθαι), or "to have moved on" (μεταλλάττειν), rather than, for example, "to have been annihilated" (γεγονέναι μηδέν) (*Non posse*, 1104C).

What Theon is attempting is the beginning of a proof that Epicurus offered the wrong explanation for why people fear death. He lays the groundwork for a different diagnosis of this fear by claiming that death's true face is marked by the prospective features of "insensibility, oblivion, and knowing nothing" (τὸ τῆς ἀναισθησίας καὶ λήθης καὶ ἀγνοίας) (*Non posse*, 1004E), not the irrational fear that one will still exist in order to lament one's post mortem losses, as Epicurus alleges. On this basis, Theon says that Epicurus's argument that death is nothing to us—which rests in part upon his atomist arguments that the soul will be dissolved at death—does not remove the fear of death at all; rather, it serves as a demonstration of its fearfulness, and fosters mental pain in those who are still alive (*Non posse*, 1105A). What

³⁴ The soul's longing for "being," also identified with "the good," and "the divine," is a view that is fundamental to Plutarch's metaphysics. See, e.g. *De Iside et Osiride*, 372D; *De defectu oraculorum*, 423D; and *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet*, 944D.

Epicurus's view actually explains, on Theon's account, is why humans will *not* have their most fundamental desire fulfilled. This is because, according to him, it is the "nature" (φύσις) of human beings to experience mental pain at the thought of their dissolution into non-being (*Non posse*, 1105A). Indeed, Theon claims that this natural desire for being is so strong that, "All men and women are ready to be chomped by the fangs of Cerberus and carry water to the leaky urn, if only they may continue to be and not be blotted out" (*Non posse*, 1105A). Given the naturalness of the pain produced by the thought of ceasing-to-be at death, and the Epicurean goal of tranquility, Theon infers that people are justified in holding beliefs that promote hope in the soul's survival. He concludes that, to take away people's religious belief that their soul (and the souls of others) will experience a life after death is to take away one of the greatest and most pleasant hopes of the many (*Non posse*, 1105C). If so, he suggests, it is also anti-Epicurean.

8. The Effects of Belief in an Afterlife on the Good

Plutarch has now argued that belief that the soul survives death is (a) good for bad people in this life, because it further motivates them to refrain from acts of injustice that would cause them psychological turmoil, and (b) good for the many, who, whilst retaining minor fears of punishment in the afterlife, are able to have a warranted hope that they and their beloved ones will continue to exist and be together after death. Theon now turns to (c) the pleasures of holy and good men produced by their belief that their soul will survive death.

Good people who believe that their soul will survive death, he says, like athletes, can be inspired by the rewards they hope to receive from virtue. Simultaneously, they also have the pleasure of expecting to see the wicked finally come to justice (*Non posse*, 1105C–D). They further have, to the utmost degree, an ability to remain untroubled by many of the bodily harms that come to them during life. This is not because, like Epicurus, they believe that bodily harms are always short lived.³⁵ It is because they view the condition of their body as being less important than the condition of their soul. Finally, in virtue of their belief that they will survive death, they are able to view death as a great blessing at which the soul is released from the dreamlike world of this life, in order to live a truer life in another world (*Non posse*, 1105D–E).

³⁵ See *K1* 4.

Whilst these descriptions are not convincing as they stand, Theon goes on to offer an analogy that more plausibly conveys how the pleasure that can be experienced by Epicureans in virtue of their explanation of death falls short of that which can be experienced by good people who believe in their soul's survival. He points out that one of Epicurus's most important doctrines is that our memories of deceased friends are a source of pleasure and can give one comfort whilst we are in pain.³⁶ From this, he infers that, if the memories of one's now deceased friends can serve as a source of delight, so also should the hope of being able to see those friends again in the afterlife. It follows that, by removing this hope, one will deprive oneself of an even greater joy than fond memories (*Non posse*, 1105E). The analogy is: (1) fond memories of deceased friends are to (2) mental pleasure, as (3) the expectation of meeting deceased friends in the afterlife is to (4) mental pleasure.

To solidify the importance of the analogy, Theon reminds his interlocutors that one's memories of dead friends are, according to Epicurean physics, literally lifeless films or husks of atoms, "likenesses" (εἶδωλα) previously cast off from their bodies during life and retaining their structure in miniature form. In a striking analogy, he compares the attitude of the Epicureans towards their deceased loved ones to the attitude of the Trojans to Aeneas in *Iliad* V. In this episode, whilst Aeneas is secretly taken away by Apollo from battle in order for his wounds to be healed, he is replaced with a "likeness" (εἶδωλον) that appears as his dead body.³⁷ Theon points out that when the god places the real Aeneas back on the scene, the Trojans are filled with joy,³⁸ leave the εἶδωλον, and run to the man himself. In contrast, the Epicureans, Theon suggests, are like people who remain with the apparently dead εἶδωλον and shun the living Aeneas. To avoid this tragic way of living, Theon exhorts his interlocutors:

Should we not also embrace and join that part of us that thinks and loves with that person who loves and thinks, when argument shows that is possible to reunite truly with the dead [ὡς ἔστιν ἐντυχεῖν ἀληθῶς τοῖς τεθνεῶσι]? (*Non posse*, 1106A)

In these lines, Plutarch finally introduces a central epistemic stricture on the sorts of propositions that can be believed by the strong doxastic hedonist. This stricture provides condition (iii) in the formulation of strong doxastic hedonism above: such propositions must

³⁶ Usener, *Epicurea*, 213. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, IV.722–61.

³⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, V.449–53.

³⁸ Homer, *Iliad*, V.515–16.

be supported by an argument or account that shows their logical possibility. These lines also show that the arguments given in favor of holding a belief that the gods are provident and that the soul survives death are meant to be normative (conditional upon the truth that tranquility is the goal of human life). This suggests Plutarch's approval of (iv) in the formulation, since Theon claims that we ought to take steps to adopt such beliefs, given their beneficial nature.

That Plutarch has in mind logical, and not theoretical, possibility, is evidenced first by the fact that the arguments of the *Non posse* itself, as I have argued, make no appeal to theoretical considerations apart from conceptual analysis. Second, and importantly, Plutarch's examples of religious accounts that fall under the imperative of strong doxastic hedonism offer conflicting accounts of the afterlife. He affirms that the hedonist consequences of believing in a reunion with friends and loved ones after death can be shown to be possible by multiple accounts, whether they affirm multiple afterlives of the soul, like Platonism and Pythagoreanism, or a single afterlife, such as the account found in the Homeric epics (*Non posse*, 1105E–F) and certain strands of Stoicism (*Non posse*, 1107C). Regardless of which of these conflicting religious accounts one were to accept, Theon claims, since they all affirm that the soul survives death, and this is a human being's most natural desire, one will be justified in taking steps to adopt any of them over Epicureanism if tranquility is the human good (*Non posse*, 1105E).

9. Plutarch's Argument that Death is a Harm "in Thought"

Having already suggested that the fear of death is not based in the supposed harm of regretting one's loss of life under the false conception that one can look backward from the other side of death, but in the prospective belief that one *will* cease to be, Theon moves to clarify this claim more rigorously in the final section of the dialogue, by presenting a counter argument to Epicurus's argument that death is nothing to us.

Like Aristodemus earlier, he begins by giving some credit to Epicurus. He is right, Theon says, that the prospective belief that one will cease to be can provide some pleasure to those who are suffering, since the belief that one will cease to exist at death justifies the hope that one will be released from one's present pains, and hope is a pleasurable mental state (*Non posse*, 1106B–C). However, for good people, Theon claims, this belief has only negative consequences; indeed, he claims that the belief of good people that they will cease to be will "thwart their cheer in every manner, guiding them out of the blessed life into not living or being at all" (*Non posse*, 1106C).

To defend this claim, Theon attempts to refute Epicurus's argument for concluding that the fear of death is irrational. To do so, he offers an analysis of the structure of human desire that posits a symmetry between the mental pleasure and pain we experience at the thought of obtaining or losing the same thing. He claims that

The thought of losing good things is naturally painful to the same degree as the assured prospect or present enjoyment of them brings delight. (*Non posse*, 1106C)

Call this Plutarch's 'symmetry principle of desire.' Theon points out that some Epicureans seem to have affirmed something like this symmetry principle, insofar as they held that the belief that their souls will be dissolved could be equated to the fictional "thought of having been released" (τὴν ἐπίνοιαν τοῦ λελύσθαι) from incessant and indefinitely long post mortem evils. The thought of being released from this (falsely) expected pain, these Epicureans claimed, acted for them as a source of mental pleasure (*Non posse*, 1106D).

Using the symmetry principle, Theon argues that if we naturally feel mental pleasure in believing that we have escaped an expected evil—even an evil whose referent does not exist, such as indefinitely long pains after death—then we should also naturally feel mental pain in believing that we have lost an expected pleasure. Theon infers that if the thought of being released from a hypothetical infinite woe is pleasant, then the thought of being deprived of a hypothetical eternal pleasure must be painful (*Non posse*, 1106D). More formally, the argument is structured as follows:

1. The thought of losing good (evil) things is naturally painful (pleasurable) to the same degree that the thought of obtaining good (evil) things is pleasant (painful).
2. Thus, if the thought of obtaining release from future pains is pleasurable, then the thought of losing future pleasures is painful.
3. Thus, if the thought of obtaining an indefinite period of future pleasures is naturally pleasurable, then the thought of losing an indefinite period of future pleasures is naturally painful.

Although this argument is valid, we can see how an Epicurean could challenge its universal applicability. First, it relies upon an assumption about the default beliefs that persons hold about the post mortem state of their soul. If person *A* starts with the belief that her soul will

only experience pain but no pleasure if it survives death, it seems likely that Epicurus's teaching would remove this fear and facilitate *A*'s mental tranquility.

However, Plutarch seems right that, if person *B* starts with the belief that her soul will not experience pain if it survives death, but only more future pleasures, then it is likely that Epicurus's teaching will remove this hope and cause *B* to be mentally disturbed. At best, Plutarch has shown that Epicurus's teaching on death will be helpful only to those who start from the former belief.

However, there is a more fundamental worry about Plutarch's symmetry argument. It might be thought that he has misunderstood the nature of Epicurus's claim that death is nothing to us. This is because he might still be taken to be asserting that the pain associated with excising belief in a pleasurable post mortem existence is something that rests upon the Epicurean-Lucretian fallacy of positing a subject who continues to have experiences after death. In this case, however, the fallacy would consist in positing a subject of experience that exists after death and looks over not its prior worldly losses, but over the godless expanse of its non-existent posterior prospects in the afterlife and its never-to-appear future pleasures.

However, Plutarch is at pains to point out that this is not what he is arguing. He explicitly claims that human nature does not fear the loss of sensation "as the beginning of something different" (ὡς ἀρχὴν ἑτέρου)—the fallacy, diagnosed by Epicurus and Lucretius, of assuming that a subject exists in a different way after death. Instead, Plutarch claims that human nature fears the loss of sensation as being deprived of "the present goods" (τῶν παρόντων ἀγαθῶν) that we now enjoy (*Non posse*, 1106E). By "present goods," he does not seem to mean simply the external goods that we now possess, like friends, family, and shelter. Instead, he means any intentional object whose goodness can be present to one's mind whilst alive—whether in the mode of past, present, or future.

On this basis, he argues that death, which Epicurus claims "is nothing to us" (οὐ πρὸς ἡμᾶς), is already "something to us in thought" (ἤδη πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐστι τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ) (*Non posse*, 1106E). The perspective to which Plutarch appeals to judge the fearfulness of death is thus not a hypothetical post mortem one. Rather, it is the perspective of one presently living, who, looking forward in her mind, grasps death as a state of affairs that entails the negation of the

present goods she is able to perceive during life. Plutarch's allegation is that it is the belief *that* death ends one's perceptive life—not death itself—that is a harm to living persons.³⁹

Although this is a defensible claim, Epicurus has a weighty response to it. In *Ep. Men.* 125, he writes,

So that man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation [λυπεῖ μέλλων]. For that which gives no trouble when it comes, is but an empty pain [κενῶς λυπεῖ] in anticipation. (*Ep. Men.* 125)

Here we see Epicurus adding a restriction to Plutarch's symmetry principle of desire. Epicurus asserts that the only expectations that count as "real" mental distresses, as opposed to "empty" ones, are those expectations that (a) can be expected by an existing subject to be painful to the subject once they come to pass, and (b) can be confirmed as painful by an existing subject in the present if they come to pass. Since death, by definition, can meet neither requirement, the fear of its arrival, which might subjectively be painful in expectation, Epicurus classes as an empty pain.⁴⁰

I do not think Plutarch's position is vulnerable to this criticism. To see why, it should first be noted that he agrees with Epicurus that the lack of perception does *not* count as a harm to persons once they cease to exist (*Non posse*, 1106E). Since both Epicurus and Plutarch agree that death will not (or would not) be painful when it arrives, whether the expectation of it counts as an 'empty' or a 'real' mental pain would seem to rest upon the question of whether the continuation of one's own perceptive existence, as such, is a natural or rational object of desire. To assert that the fear of death is an 'empty' mental pain simply because one will not exist to perceive it as painful when it arrives is to beg the question against the person who claims that the object of her mental distress consists precisely in fearing *that* she will cease to perceive pleasure or pain once death arrives.

However, Epicurus has at least one good reason to deny that the desire to continue to be indefinitely after death is a rational one. He thinks that the fear of death is connected to

³⁹ Although Cicero anticipates (and may even be) the source of some of Plutarch's arguments, e.g. the idea that bodily pains are often extreme and long lasting (cf. *De finibus*, II.94), and that we have intellectual pleasures that are not bodily (cf. *De finibus*, V.25–26), this one, as Adam, *Plutarchs Schrift*, 80, notes, is unique to Plutarch.

⁴⁰ See Stephen Rosenbaum, "How to be Dead," 223.

another empty desire, produced by the psychological state that he calls the “longing for immortality.” This longing for immortality, which is conceptually equivalent to Plutarch’s “longing for being,” he considers unnecessary and hence unnatural. This idea is spelled out in the *Letter to Menoecus*. Epicurus writes,

And therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable—not by having added on some limitless time, but by taking away the longing for immortality [τὸν τῆς ἀθανασίας πόθον]. For there is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. (*Ep. Men.* 124–25).

In this passage, Epicurus contrasts the way in which his philosophy purports to take away the fear of death with another alternative that might also make death be “nothing to us,” namely, one that “has added on some limitless time” (ἄπειρον προστιθεῖσα χρόνον).

Epicurus believes that life after death would not be more pleasurable than a finite life because he holds the controversial idea that the pleasures experienced by someone in a state of tranquility are not additive. Because the mental and bodily state of tranquility is the *limit* of pleasure, not one pleasure amongst others, the pleasant consciousness associated with it, he claims, cannot be added to or “increased” (ἐπαύξεται); instead, the pleasures of this conscious state can only be “varied” (ποικίλλεται) by different activities.⁴¹ On this basis, he affirms,

Unlimited time (ἄπειρος χρόνος) and limited time contain equal pleasure, if one measures out the limits of pleasure by reasoning. (*KA* 19)⁴²

Thus, Epicurus thinks that, even if one could survive death and experience pleasure in the afterlife, one’s experiences there would not make one quantitatively or qualitatively better off than one can be in this finite life. At best, one could vary one’s tranquility and contentment in terms of different objects or activities. However, if this argument goes through, then Epicurus is subject to a major difficulty. Although it saves him from having to accept Plutarch’s claim that the longing for continued existence is a fully rational desire, it does so at the expense of

⁴¹ *KA* 18.

⁴² Cf. *KA* 9, and *KA* 20.

committing him to the odd idea that to desire to continue to live a mentally tranquil life for more than the time it takes to appreciate this tranquility is irrational.

We can see this problem best in contexts where Epicurus makes remarks on how the wise person views the value of life. For instance, in *Ep. Men.* 126, he writes, “The wise man neither deprecates life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad.” Here, Epicurus tries to argue that one can be content with life (or lack negative feelings towards living) without having negative feelings towards death. However, in affirming that one should be indifferent to death, accepting it neither as a good nor as an evil, it seems that Epicurus also removes any reason for thinking that the *continuation* of one’s life is something that could rationally be desired by a wise person.

By making tranquility the sole source of ethical value, it seems that Epicurus cannot give a strong reason why those who have reached the goal of tranquility ought to take care to prolong their life further, since they cannot increase its pleasure; nor can he give a strong reason why persons ought not to commit suicide if they have strong reasons to think their life will not attain this goal, or reasons to think that they will soon be put in a situation where their tranquility cannot be maintained. The problem is not that Epicurus would have affirmed that suicide is ever a rational Epicurean choice (despite Cicero’s testimony to the contrary);⁴³ the problem is that he would have a hard time explaining why, in general, it is not perfectly rational, given that the pleasures experienced in tranquility are not additive, and people can be in situations in which they justifiably think that their tranquility is or will be impossible.⁴⁴ It seems that Epicurus would have to claim that suicide was neither rational nor irrational for the wise man, given his indifference to life and death.

Thus, in order to refute Plutarch’s claim that the longing for being and the fear of death are both natural and rational, it seems that Epicurus must accept that the continuation of one’s life is not intrinsically desirable or valuable during life, and that there are cases in which suicide would be rational or at least not irrational. Whether this is a problem or not depends on the stance one takes about the intrinsic desirability of life. What it does show is that the beliefs that Plutarch associates with meeting the criteria of strong doxastic hedonism allow this kind of hedonist, unlike Epicurus, to accept tranquility as the goal of life, and at the same time, to affirm that the continuation of one’s life is always rationally choiceworthy.

⁴³ See Cicero, *De finibus*, I.49.

⁴⁴ Cf. Warren, *Facing Death*, 219. Warren also argues that Epicurus’s arguments for death being nothing to us might seem to undercut any strong reasons to prolong life. Cf. Usener, *Epicurea*, 487.

10. Modern Epicurean Objections: Williams's Character-Activity Dilemma

If one does accept that the continuation of one's perceptive life is intrinsically valuable on the basis that the pleasures associated with it are additive in some way, this acceptance weighs in favor of Plutarch's idea that the longing for being is something natural, and that religious beliefs might satisfy this desire better than Epicurean ones. Even so, this does not mean that just any religious belief automatically meets the criteria of strong doxastic hedonism.

A number of modern philosophers have argued that accepting the desirability of continuing to be does not commit one, as Plutarch thinks it does, to the desirability of continuing to be forever. In particular, Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum have made the case that belief in the soul's indefinite evasion of destruction, or its immortality, is something that is either incoherent, or intrinsically undesirable. Their arguments can be viewed as working within the framework of Plutarch's strong doxastic hedonism, insofar as they attempt to show that, even granted a natural desire for immortality, any logically coherent description of an afterlife will include features that make such a life undesirable.

Williams offers what I call the 'character-activity dilemma,' whilst Nussbaum offers what I call the 'bad exchange argument.' Williams argues that, if sufficient identity conditions were found that would allow a person to see herself in the afterlife, or in her series of afterlives, as an object of concern, a further condition would need to be satisfied in order to make this life desirable, namely, "something that makes boredom *unthinkable*" throughout eternity.⁴⁵

Williams raises a number of possibilities that purport to satisfy this condition, but concludes that none is plausible. In particular, he mentions the solution, consistent with Plutarch's Platonism, of an unending life of "intense intellectual inquiry."⁴⁶ He finds this solution unsatisfactory, however, because he thinks that any life worth having is based on a desire for freedom, which includes a desire to express and develop one's character; a life of inquiry, however, is itself (like any other kind of life) the product of one's character. If one is free to adopt new goals during the course of one's immortal development, he thinks, then this implies that one could eventually become someone who gets bored with inquiry, and hence someone who desires not to be immortal. In order to deny that this could happen, he thinks, one would have to postulate that the activity of inquiry must be completely absorbing; but if

⁴⁵ Williams, "The Makropulus Case," 95.

⁴⁶ Williams, "The Makropulus Case," 96.

this were so, one could hardly think of this life of inquiry as one's own. Such a form of life, he alleges, could not be an object of concern to someone wishing for *personal* immortality. Thus, the character-activity dilemma is that, on the one hand, any realistic account of a *personal* immortal life will assume that people have changeable characters, which suggests that one's immortal life might become boring and undesirable; on the other hand, any realistic account of a *desirable* immortal life, in which boredom is unthinkable, seems to be an all-absorbing one that is no longer characteristically personal.

I do not think that Plutarch, or philosophers in other traditions who might wish to take up his hope in the soul's survival, should be upset by this dilemma. First, one might plausibly hold that the development of character does have a general final end at which all people characteristically aim, for example, 'human flourishing,' which could include a plurality of different characteristic activities that could be engaged in at different times by people who wanted to adopt new characteristic goals. Second, it is unclear if we, or Plutarch, should be worried about the loss of some degree of our mundane personality. Plutarch himself, like other ancient philosophers, tends to see our intellect as a higher form of self than the self that is bound up with the body and its needs (e.g. *De genio Socratis*, 591D–E; *De facie in orbe lunae apparet*, 944F–45A). To the extent that this is plausible (e.g. if some mundane characteristics turn out to have little or no aesthetic or moral value), some degree of independence from these characteristics might in fact be a necessary component of a desirable afterlife.

Finally, Williams's own view rests upon his contention that our desire to continue to be is essentially connected to the possession of contingent "categorical desires" upon which our desire to live hangs. However, this claim is contentious. One might think, as Plutarch does, that we cannot rationally hold a fully analyzed desire to cease to be as such (as Williams assumes). This is because it is plausible to hold that all specifications of this desire that purport to be categorical (e.g. a desire to die rather than suffer a debilitating disease) are ones in which a person confusedly conceptualizes death under the aspect of its being instrumental to the accomplishment of a goal which itself requires one to continue to be (e.g. the goal of enjoying the freedom of being released from one's debilitating disease). If so, then Plutarch's "longing for being" might turn out to be a *necessary* categorical desire, which as such cannot be trumped by other desires. Even so, Williams's dilemma does show something important: Anyone who wishes to champion Plutarch's position needs to do a lot of work to show that it is logically possible for the soul to survive death and still have a desirable personal afterlife.

11. Modern Epicurean Objections: Nussbaum's Bad Exchange Argument

Martha Nussbaum, in a similar vein, argues that, if we were able to exchange finitude for immortality, we might discover that the divine values of immortal beings are worth far less than those of human beings. In defense of Epicurus, she argues that death provides “the constitutive conditions of human finite value,”⁴⁷ and that, were we to be immortal, we would be like the Olympic gods, unable to engage in those valuable human activities that require real risk and difficulty. If so, then Plutarch’s strong doxastic argument against the Epicureans for taking steps to believe that the soul survives death, if not his argument for taking steps to believe that the gods are provident, may only work at a superficial level: once its likely logical consequences are thought through, it will turn out that acquiring immortality would force us to give up other more valuable goods that only humans with finite lives can possess. Thus, holding a fully analyzed belief in the soul’s immortality will cause one more mental distress than pleasure.

This argument is faulty. Even if it is true that individual experiences, projects, and relationships must themselves be finite or subject to risk in order to have value, it does not follow that the *life* that underpins the acquisition of these goods needs to be temporally finite. One does not look back at one’s past projects, for instance, and intuitively think that they would be valueless if one were not going to die.⁴⁸ As long as belief that the soul can continue to exist indefinitely after death does not entail the belief that it is omnipotent, there seems to be no reason to think that the acquisition of immortality is logically incompatible with the belief that we can continue to possess finite human goods in the afterlife. Thus, both Williams’s character-activity dilemma, and Nussbaum’s bad exchange argument, fail to refute Plutarch’s idea that the belief that the soul survives death, which offers an explanation of how our natural desire to continue to be will be fulfilled, is naturally pleasure-maximizing. If so, his strong doxastic hedonist arguments against the Epicureans in favor of adopting this belief stand.

12. The Merits of Strong and Weak Doxastic Hedonism

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 231.

⁴⁸ However, Nussbaum admits that, concerning the value of immortal existence, “we have, of necessity, far too little understanding of the structure of the ‘language’ of such a life even to investigate that question well” (*The Therapy of Desire*, 229).

Despite the strength of Plutarch's arguments that I canvassed above, it still might seem that Epicurus's weak doxastic hedonism is still epistemically and psychologically more plausible than strong doxastic hedonism. First, it might be difficult, if not impossible, to take steps to believe in a proposition about which one has sufficient theoretical doubts. Second, it might be self-defeating to claim that we ought to take steps to hold explanatory beliefs that naturally maximize pleasure—no matter how theoretically justified or unjustified they are—just as long as the content of those beliefs is possibly true. This is because the imperative to maximize pleasure through such beliefs, so the Epicurean could claim, leads to cases where such beliefs conflict with theoretical evidence (e.g. the causal accounts of Epicurean physics), and, in virtue of such conflicts themselves being mentally painful, violate the imperative of strong doxastic hedonism.

However, strong doxastic hedonism is able to avoid this difficulty. It claims that, in cases where we have good theoretical reasons to believe that r explains x (e.g. that the dissolution of the soul and body explains why death should not be feared), and r gives some mental pleasure, in cases where it is also pleasurable to believe some non-scientific proposition that p , which also explains x , where p entails the denial of r (e.g. that the existence of an immortal soul explains why death should not be feared), we only need to reason whether belief that p or belief that r explains x would likely give us more mental pleasure over the course of our lives; if belief that p would likely give more pleasure, the strong doxastic hedonist would claim, then it is rational to take steps to find reasons to doubt that r , or to take steps to question our epistemic access to it so as to minimize the mental pain of vacillating between believing that p or r explains x . One might be able to accomplish this by using non-invasive non-philosophical strategies, such as avoiding thinking about r , or by using philosophical tools, such as those provided by the skeptical tradition, for finding arguments that cast doubt on whether r explains x , or, as Pascal thought, by becoming a member of religious communities that fostered p -beliefs.⁴⁹

Finally, even if Epicurus could give adequate reasons to show that no explanatory propositions that naturally produce pleasure in virtue of their content could be non-scientific, it is important to note that there is evidence that he would still accept that, in principle, there can be cases in which taking steps to believe in a claim without theoretical evidence is

⁴⁹ It might also be objected that, for cases like belief in the soul's survival, it is possible that this belief is equally as painful or pleasant as its denial, in which case it becomes something indifferent. However, it does not seem like all religious beliefs would be like this, and in any case, this objection would be of no help to Epicurus.

practically rational. This is because he openly admits that some false beliefs would be more worth having than others, if they have the right hedonist consequences. Thus, he writes,

For it would be better to follow [κατακολουθεῖν] the stories told about the gods than to be a slave to the fate of the natural philosophers. For the former suggests a hope of escaping bad things by honoring the gods but the latter involves an inescapable and merciless necessity. (*Ep. Men.* 134)

Given this admission, it seems that Plutarch can be judged as having brought Epicurus to an impasse. He has argued, in detail, that the latter's commitment to the primacy of tranquility should force him to accept strong doxastic hedonism, and to accept as justified the religious beliefs that meet its criteria. This sort of hedonist, he claims, should discount the evidence of certain causal explanations in order to pursue her practical goal effectively, and in particular, do so in cases where religious beliefs about the gods' moral care for humans and the survival of the soul are potential objects of belief.

To defend himself against Plutarch's charges, Epicurus would need to find a way to secure a necessary link between atomist scientific explanations and the attainment of mental tranquility, against the possibility that non-scientific or non-Epicurean explanations might be better suited to its attainment. For this to be so necessarily, Epicurus would need to show a priori (perhaps on the basis of his theory of preconceptions), that his criteria of truth cannot come apart—or in Kantian terms, demonstrate the unity of practical and theoretical reason. Plutarch, as I have suggested above, is not subject to this worry, both because he is committed to a Platonist metaphysics that explains why the goals of practical and theoretical reason cannot come apart, and because he holds that some events have both a scientific and a religious explanation.

If the above account is correct, strong doxastic hedonism turns out to be one of Plutarch's most original, and most provocative, contributions to philosophy. Not only is this theory coherent, but it also represents a powerful critique of eudaimonist ethical theories like Epicurus's that subordinate theoretical reason (by which we judge the extent to which beliefs are scientifically justified) to practical reason (by which we judge the means of achieving mental tranquility). In the *Non posse*, Plutarch shows that accepting the priority of practical over theoretical reason in the way that Epicurus does leaves open the possibility that adopting scientifically unjustified explanatory beliefs, such as certain religious beliefs, might be our sole means of achieving mental tranquility.

In doing so, Plutarch anticipates the critical idealism of Immanuel Kant, who in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and elsewhere, in parallel arguments about the rationality of hoping in claims about happiness that lack theoretical evidence, argues that we are in fact warranted, on the practical ground that happiness is an essential part of reason's notion of the highest good, to postulate without theoretical evidence that our souls will continue to exist and progress in virtue after death, and that there is a God who will providentially reward our virtue with happiness.⁵⁰ We may place hope in this account of happiness, Kant claimed, because, “theoretical reason decides nothing with apodictic certainty about it, and with respect to this there can be a moral interest which turns the scale” (*CPrR* 5:145).⁵¹

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⁵⁰ On the postulates, see Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*.

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