

COMFORT IN ANNIHILATION: THREE STUDIES IN MATERIALISM AND MORTALITY

LIAM DEMPSEY and BYRON STOYLES¹

Trent University

Abstract: This paper considers three accounts of the relationship between personal immortality and materialism. In particular, the pagan mortalism of the Epicureans is compared with the Christian mortalism of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. It is argued 1) that there are significant similarities between these views, 2) that Locke and Hobbes were, to some extent, influenced by the Epicureans, and 3) that the relation between (im)mortality and (im)materialism is not as straightforward as is commonly supposed.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Their cemetery have upon this side; With Epicurus all his followers; Who with the body mortal make the soul” (*Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto X*, lines 12-14)

The seventeenth century witnessed a remarkable challenge to orthodox views concerning life-after-death. Christian *mortalists* denied the natural immortality of the soul, insisting instead that persons die with the dissolution of their bodies only to live again through a divine gift of bodily revitalization—i.e., resurrection. For more conservative theologians and philosophers, however, such a view is seen as religiously dangerous.² Despite this, a number of seventeenth century philosophers, including John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, endorsed this heterodox construal of death for both theological and philosophical reasons.

¹ This paper is written with equal contributions from both authors. BJS is primarily responsible for the sections focusing on Epicurus and LD for the sections focusing on Locke. Both authors contributed to the sections focusing on Hobbes.

² Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, for instance, took the denial of the natural immortality of the soul to be both socially and spiritually pernicious (Yolton, 1983, pp. 10-12).

In what follows, details of the (Christian) mortalist theories of Hobbes and Locke are compared with the pagan mortalism of the ancient Epicureans; there are significant points of connection between their positions—many more than a cursory comparison might suggest. To properly explicate the similarities and differences between these views, two issues are addressed. First, we challenge Robert Burns’s contention that, despite rising interest in Epicureanism in the seventeenth century, “[t]he pagan mortalism of Epicurus and Lucretius, which alone denied all hope of eternal life, did not contribute to the development of Christian mortalism in England; even the ideas of the more philosophical . . . mortalists stand well apart from Epicurean mortalism.” (Burns 1972, pp. 5-8) While there are clear and important differences between the *pagan* mortalism of the Epicureans and the eschatology of *Christian* mortalism, there are significant agreements among their respective accounts of the mortality of persons. In fact, we contend that both Hobbes and Locke are familiar, even sympathetic, with various aspects of Epicurean philosophy, and offer Epicurean arguments to support their own philosophical and theological positions. For one example, Epicurus and his followers argue that each person is annihilated at the moment of bodily death. Hobbes and Locke agree that bodily death is the end of the person since it marks a complete cessation of consciousness; but for supernatural intervention, which Hobbes and Locke allow for and the Epicureans deny, bodily death is personal death. Moreover, all recognize that the perpetual existence of atoms (or corpuscles) can in no way constitute *personal* immortality; and, thus, with the Epicureans, Hobbes and Locke concur that there is little to fear from bodily death *per se*.

Second, we begin to draw out an important—if under-appreciated—lesson regarding the relationship between materialism and mortality. Despite common intuitions to the contrary, a thoroughgoing materialism is perfectly compatible with the possibility that some entities are immortal. Epicurus, Hobbes, and Locke all agree that the rejection of an immaterial soul substance does not, logically or otherwise, rule out the possibility of immortality. We see this, first, in comparing Hobbes’ explicit claim that the theistic God is material with the Epicurean view that the gods, who are both material and embodied, are nevertheless immortal. As Locke later makes clear, immaterialism—i.e., the view that the soul is immaterial³—in no way guarantees personal immortality. For Locke, personal annihilation

³ We use “immaterialism” to refer to one aspect of mind-body dualism, according to which the human soul is an immaterial substance, rather than wholesale (i.e. Berkeleyan) idealism.

follows bodily death *irrespective* of whether the soul is immaterial; the immateriality of the soul is neither required for personal immortality nor does it guarantee it. In short, all agree that the question of whether or not persons are immortal is not answered by adopting either a materialist or immaterialist construal of the soul.

II. EPICURUS ON THE NATURE OF SOUL, DEATH AND THE POSSIBILITY OF IMMORTALITY

Epicurus and his followers hold that all things, including soul (*psuchē*), are composed of indestructible, material, atoms. Though both are material, the Epicureans distinguish soul from body by maintaining that the body is composed of bigger and coarser atoms than the soul whose finer atoms are diffused throughout the whole aggregate of living things.⁴ According to the Epicureans, the body is not sentient on its own; for this it needs the soul. Soul consists of fine particles resembling wind, air, and fire blended with something finer than air, wind and fire (Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 63-7; Lucretius, *DRN*, 3.262-10).⁵ The body gains the “accidental property” of sentience when the body and soul are mixed (*Letter to Herodotus*, 63-7). This is possible because soul contains the unnamed, extra-fine, fourth component which accounts for the co-affections of body and soul including the powers of sensation, feeling, and mobility within the living organism.

Epicurus is clear that soul is not sentient on its own either; it needs eyes, ears, and the rest of the bodily organs. Thus, sentience arises only when a certain interdependence of body and soul is established. Sensation, Epicurus clarifies, is what the soul “bestows on both itself and on the rest of the [body]” (*Letter to Herodotus*, 63-7). Epicurus and his followers are no less clear that individual soul atoms—even those responsible for sentience—are not themselves sentient. Sentience exists only when multiple atoms—those of body *and* of soul—are arranged in certain ways.⁶

⁴ Lucretius further distinguishes what we might call mind (*animus*) from spirit (*anima*) in *De Rerum Natura* (hereafter, *DRN*), 3.136-140.

⁵ In extant texts, Epicurus identifies only the fire-like, the wind-like and the unnamed ‘fourth’ component, though Aetius reports that Epicurus also thought soul consists of all four (as cited by Long and Sedley 1987, p. 14). Lucretius identifies all four components explicitly.

⁶ We find two competing interpretations of Epicurean theory of mind. On one, Epicurus is a reductionist presenting what we now call an identity theory of mind. See, e.g., Fowler (1993, pp. 169-174). On the other, Epicurus is an anti-reductionist presenting some version

The Epicureans' account of death is closely linked to this materialist metaphysics. On their well-known view, death is nothing to the person who dies because the person who dies no longer exists (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 124-125). Though Lucretius devotes more than 80% of the third book of *De Rerum Natura* to establishing that death is the annihilation of the person who dies, the Epicureans' real aim is to show that we are no longer sentient when we die. As psychological hedonists who believe that only pain is bad, they contend that knowing that the dead are no longer sentient will quell our fear of death. Without sentience, there is no threat of pain and, without pain there is nothing bad for us in being dead.

Epicurus tells us that, even if the atoms making up a soul were to stay together after the death of the body, the surviving soul would not be conscious since consciousness depends on the body as well as the soul. Lucretius makes this point moot by clarifying that the soul cannot exist on its own. When a person dies, the soul disintegrates like smoke into the air. Although all of the soul atoms still exist, the soul—which is a certain combination of these atoms—does not.

While the Epicureans hold that the person who dies no longer exists and reject any notion of an afterlife, they recognize that, since all of the person's atoms still exist, there remains the possibility that the soul of a dead person which has scattered into the surrounding void will eventually be reconstituted. Lucretius considers this possibility explicitly. He asserts that it is not only possible that “the matter that composes us should be reassembled by time after our death and brought back into its present state . . .”, but that,

[w]hen you look at the immeasurable extent of time gone by and the multiform movements of matter, you will readily credit that these same atoms that compose us now must many a time before have entered into the selfsame combinations as now. (*DRN*, III.852-860)

To this he adds that the reconstituted person is not the same person as the original; for the reconstituted person has no *memory* of being the person who existed previously—the “chain of identity has been snapped.” (*DRN*, III.852)

The claim that personal identity consists in, or depends on, memory is asserted in more than one place in Lucretius's poem,⁷ though the extant Epicurean texts do not contain a full argument in support of this view. Without this, it is hard to evaluate the merit of the view that “the chain of

of what we now call an emergence theory of mind. See, e.g., Long and Sedley (1987) and Sedley (1988).

⁷ See also *DRN* III.671.

identity” is broken when one has no memory of being the person in question.⁸ Indeed, it would seem that on the Epicurean view, if the same atoms are in the selfsame combinations at two different times, then those two things will be exactly the same. That is, they will have the same properties in *every* respect: even their memories will be the same, for memories too are dependent on the material. This necessarily excludes the possibility of the reconstituted person having any awareness of being the person of which she is a reconstitution unless the originally constituted person also was aware of having been previously constituted in the same fashion.

Given the infinite nature of time, it might be the case that every reconstitution is of a person who, herself, was aware of her prior existence *ad infinitum*. However, Lucretius is right to observe that none of us are aware of having existed as exactly the same person at any time prior to the life we are currently living (*DRN*, III.860). Thus, although the Epicureans recognize both that life-after-death would require both re-embodiment and a restoration of memory, and that this is possible, there is little reason to think that they held out hope for anything like the Christian doctrine of resurrection.

While the Epicureans maintain that people cease to exist when they die, there is room in their materialism for the possibility of immortal entities—specifically, the gods. Consider first, that according to the Homeric conception of the afterlife, it is not their immaterial nature, but their immortal nature that distinguishes the gods from men.⁹ Likewise, on the Epicurean view, the gods are to be thought of as immortal (*aphtharton*: lit. imperishable or incorruptible) and blessed, despite their embodied nature (*Letter to Menoecus*, 123). Unlike the Homeric conception, however, the Epicureans teach that these traits are incompatible with gods who meddle in human affairs.¹⁰ Since the Epicurean gods are, like anything else in their system, composed of atoms in the void, their immortality requires that they avoid collisions with other material bodies; thus, “their abodes . . . must be unlike ours, in keeping with their tenuous bodies.” (*DRN*, 5.146ff) Since anything in an ordered universe is bound to collide with other atomic structures and, subsequently, wear down over time, the Epicurean gods must exist in the space between universes. In addition, there is evidence that the Epicureans

⁸ For a discussion of what Lucretius meant by “*persona*”, see Farrington (1985, pp. 3-12).

⁹ See Rowe (2007, pp. 147-148).

¹⁰ See Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoecus*, 123-4 and *Letter to Herodotus*, 76-7; Lucretius’s *DRN*, 5.1116ff. and 6.68-79; and Cicero’s *On the nature of gods*, 1.43-49.

believe that gods are constantly replenished with atoms.¹¹ Among other things, this would preserve them even if, as is inevitable, they lose some atoms over time. Whatever the specific mechanism of their immortality, it is certainly true that the Epicurean gods are both material and immortal.

III. HOBBS' MATERIALISM AND MORTALISM

According to Harold Fisch (1968, p. xxiii), it is useful to conceive of Hobbes' materialism as a "revised Epicureanism" set in opposition to the dualistic spirit-world of Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists. Like the Epicureans, Hobbes defends a thoroughgoing materialism according to which everything that exists is corporeal. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes,

The word *body*, in most general acceptance, signifieth that which filleth or occupieth some certain room or imagined place, and . . . is a real part of that we call the *universe*. For the *universe*, being the aggregate of all bodies, there is no real part thereof that is not also *body*, nor anything properly a *body* that is not also part of (that aggregate of all *bodies*) the *universe*. (XXXIV, 2).¹²

These bodies, which are subject to change, are called substances (XXXIV, 2). Thus, the notion of an incorporeal substance is incoherent. For "according to this acceptance of the word, *substance* and *body* signify the same thing; and therefore, *substance incorporeal* are words which, when they are joined together, destroy one another, as if a man should say an *incorporeal body*." (XXXIV, 2) From this Hobbes concludes that the word "spirit" must signify "either properly a real substance [i.e. something corporeal]" or be used metaphorically (XXXIV, 14). The same must be true of "soul" and "mind." On Hobbes' view, to say that something is incorporeal is to say it is "nothing at all" (XXXIV, 24). In these details, Hobbes' theory does not differ from the Epicureans'.

Hence, for Hobbes, everything—including every spiritual phenomenon—is corporeal. It is the height of metaphysical excess to think that human bodies are "possessed or inhabited" by any such things as incorporeal spirits (XLV, 8). Since "incorporeal substance" is meaningless, a substance dualism which treats spirit or soul as the antithesis of body is not coherent. In fact, Hobbes is quite radical among Christians in downplaying the

¹¹ For this evidence, Cicero's *On the nature of gods*, 1.43-49 and Sextus Empiricus's *Against the professors*, 9.43-4 as cited by Long and Sedley (1987).

¹² All references to Hobbes' ideas are to *Leviathan* unless noted. All references to *Leviathan* are by section numbers as they appear in Curley's 1994 Edition.

metaphysical significance of the human soul and spiritual phenomena like angels.¹³ To the extent that there are spiritual phenomena, and Hobbes believes that there are, they are corporeal in nature. Not only does this follow from the absurdity of “incorporeal substance,” it follows from the fact that spirits “have dimensions, and are, therefore, really bodies.” (XLVI, 15) Moreover, according to the Latin “*spiritus*” (from which “spirit” is derived) and the Greek “*pneuma*”, the soul is nothing other than a vital and sensitive wind or breath—invisible, but corporeal nonetheless (XXXIV, 3).

Hobbes’ attraction to ancient corporealistic conceptions of mind is worth some emphasis. Of particular (biblical) significance is the ancient Hebraic identification of the *nepesh* or *anima* of a living animal with its blood.¹⁴ Hobbes goes further, claiming that the “soul” in Scripture signifies, not an immaterial substance, but life and identifies life with “a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within [the living thing].” (XLIV.14)¹⁵ Elsewhere, Hobbes specifies that the vital motions in animals are those “begun in generation and continued without interruption through their whole life, such as are the *course* of the blood, the *pulse*, the *breathing*, the *concoction*, *nutrition*, *excretion*, &c, to which motions there needs no help of imagination.” (VI.1) These are the motions necessary for life, including the motions underlying what we call our mental capacities.

Given his strict materialism, it is not surprising to find Hobbes embracing the Christian heresy of mortalism which holds that persons die with their bodies only to live again after the resurrection of the body. The two most prominent forms of Christian mortalism are *psychopannychism* (soul-sleep) and *thnetopsychism* (soul-death).¹⁶ In his critique of the mortalist heresy, John Calvin (1851, pp. 419)¹⁷ characterizes the distinction thus: “Some . . . imagine that [the soul] sleeps in a state of insensibility from Death to the

¹³ In this paper, we take Hobbes’ self-identification as a Christian at face value despite long-standing suspicions that he is an atheist. If it turns out that Hobbes’ faith is “an elaborate sham” or “a concession to the prejudices of his age” (Burns 1972, p. 184) and that Hobbes’ doesn’t take his own eschatology seriously, we would have nothing to indicate his honest view. In any case, Hobbes’ published eschatology can be considered even if he would reject it privately.

¹⁴ Hobbes explicates the ancient Hebraic prohibition against eating the blood of an animal in terms of this identification of the soul of an animal with its blood (XLIV.14).

¹⁵ cf. XLVI.16. That life is motion is repeated in other places too. See, e.g., VI.58, 34-5. Hobbes claims that “no more is meant” by the spirit of vital breath than vital motion (XXXIV.25).

¹⁶ Burns (1972) characterizes both *psychopannychism* and *thnetopsychism* as “soul-sleep” and contrasts these with “annihilationism.” Though the labels we use differ, the ideas themselves are consistent with the ideas as Burns represents them.

¹⁷ As cited by Burns (1972, pp. 22-23).

Judgment-day . . . while others . . . maintain that it is merely a vital power . . . and being unable to exist without the body . . . vanishes . . . till the . . . whole man [is] raised again.” Martin Luther adopts the more conservative position of soul-sleep, arguing that “just as a man . . . falls asleep and sleeps soundly until morning . . . so we shall suddenly rise on the Last Day; and we shall know neither what death has been nor how we have come through it.”¹⁸ On this view, one has an incorporeal soul, but after bodily death it falls into a dreamless sleep until reunited with the resurrected body.

Hobbes embraces the more radical doctrine that the soul dies with the body.¹⁹ According to Hobbes, this follows, not simply from the embodied nature of mind, but also from a correct reading of Scripture. That “the soul of man is in its own nature eternal, and a living creature independent of the body . . . otherwise than by the resurrection in the last day . . . is a doctrine *not* apparent in scripture.” (XXXVIII.4, emphasis added) What Scripture does tell us, Hobbes argues, is that Adam and Eve’s punishment for their transgression of God’s command was mortality. For being “barred from approaching the tree of life . . . they and their posterity” became mortal (III.19). This state of affairs is only “remitted by Christ’s death,” from whence the souls of the dead “shall come to life again . . . in the general resurrection of the dead” at “the day of judgment.” (*Ibid.*)

Nowhere in these passages, or any other, does Hobbes claim that materialism entails mortalism. Indeed, there are good reasons for rejecting traditional interpretations which treat Hobbes’ mortalism as no more than a necessary (logical) consequence of his materialism.²⁰ David Johnston (1989), for one, has challenged the traditional view by showing that Hobbes’ views on the nature of the soul changed over his career. Johnston contends that, in his early works, “Hobbes simultaneously asserted both his belief in the orthodox doctrine of the soul’s immortality and expounded metaphysical materialism in his natural philosophy” (1989, p. 648).²¹ It was not until later, Johnston suggests, that Hobbes came to believe that the soul is mortal.

¹⁸ *Martin Luthers Werke* as cited by Almond (1994, pp. 38-39).

¹⁹ On Hobbes’ mortalism see Burns (1972) and Almond (1994, pp. 47-51).

²⁰ For the traditional interpretation, see Straus (1936).

²¹ Hobbes’ comment, in section XXXVIII of his criticism of Thomas White’s *De Mundo*, that White’s move of identifying soul with body is “disastrous” might be taken to indicate that Hobbes was not a thoroughgoing materialist at this point. Yet, this comment is consistent with the Epicurean distinction between soul and body where both are corporeal—a distinction Hobbes himself maintains. Any other early comments about the immortality of soul (especially in *The Elements of Law* and *De Cive* from which Johnston quotes) are consistent with Hobbes’ later mortalism.

Even if Johnston is wrong in thinking Hobbes' views concerning the nature of soul had undergone radical change over his career, he is nevertheless right to think that Hobbes' materialism does not entail mortalism.²² There are two compelling reasons to think that Hobbes did not take mortalism to be a consequence of his materialism.

First, as Locke later makes explicit, having an immaterial soul substance is not required for personal immortality. Hobbes agrees that the lack of an immaterial soul substance does not preclude the possibility of personal immortality—that is, materialism does not deny the possibility of a personal afterlife in humans or other sentient beings. Again, the Christian promise of bodily revitalization is consistent with materialism; while Adam and his posterity die with their bodies, they are, nevertheless, immortal through bodily resurrection.

Second, even putting aside the resurrection, Hobbes' materialism fails to entail that all sentient beings are mortal. While his materialism precludes the existence of incorporeal substances, Hobbes does not deny the existence of spiritual phenomena like angels; he denies only that they are incorporeal. Some of these spirits may very well be, by their very nature, immortal. The best proof comes in Hobbes' materialist construal of God. There is nothing in Hobbes' work that indicates he rejects the immortality of God, yet, as he clearly states in the appendix to the Latin edition of *Leviathan*, even God must be conceived of as corporeal in nature—or else He would not exist at all (see: III, 5-6).²³ God's corporeality in no way implies his mortality. Thus, Hobbes thinks thoroughgoing materialism is consistent with the existence of naturally immortal beings.

In these details, Hobbes' view is remarkably similar to the Epicurean account of thoroughly material, yet incorruptible, gods. Although Hobbes' account of God differs from the Epicureans', understanding his theory involves recognizing that he would agree with the Epicureans about the possibility of entities that are both material and immortal. However, as Epicurus' theory makes clear, the possibility of immortality requires that certain conditions are met. For Epicurus, the gods must live in different "abodes" and avoid contact with other material beings. For Hobbes, we can presume,

²² For an opposing interpretation, see, e.g., Edwin Curley's "Introduction" to Hobbes' *Leviathan*, xlv.

²³ That this challenges orthodoxy is likely a reason Hobbes didn't make explicit his view that God is corporeal until later in his life when the Latin edition of *Leviathan* was released. Hobbes was certainly aware of what is entailed by his materialism much earlier than this: extant correspondence from Descartes made this point explicitly. See: Letter 287 in Adam and Milhaud (eds., 1947).

it is the nature of God, Himself, that accounts for His immortality—the God of theistic tradition is, as it were, self-existent.²⁴ On both accounts, materialism itself neither guarantees nor precludes immortality.

Even with the possibility of immortality, there remains an important sense in which human beings are, on Hobbes' view, mortal. The children of Adam and Eve die with the dissolution of their bodies. This is not because we are material, but because there is nothing in our nature that ensures the perpetual existence and functioning of the living body. God may very well have created beings who, despite their material composition, are immortal by their very nature. As it is, His creation was organized such that human immortality depends on His will. Hobbes maintains in the Latin Edition of *Leviathan* (XXXVIII, 2) that even Adam's original immortality was conditional; "Adam was not created immortal by virtue of his nature, but by the adventitious grace of God, i.e., by virtue of the tree of life; while he had an abundance of its fruit to eat, he could not die."²⁵ While it is true that Adam would have enjoyed eternal life on earth had he not sinned, his immortality depended on the grace of God. If not for divine intervention, then, humans are perishable.

This reading of Scripture is consistent with Hobbes' thoroughly embodied account of mind. With the Epicureans and (as we will establish below) Locke, he recognizes that the peculiarly embodied nature of mental phenomena in humans implies that consciousness depends on the body, and hence, implies that humans are not naturally immortal. Again with the Epicureans, experience suggests to Hobbes that the body is a corruptible system and, as such, can decay and die; and with the corruption of the body comes the cessation of consciousness, the locus of personhood.

IV. HOBBS ON RESURRECTION, PUNISHMENT, AND THE BADNESS OF DEATH

Hobbes insists that nothing he says is contrary to Scripture. In particular, nowhere in Scripture does it say that an incorporeal soul substance is required for immortality. "For supposing that when a man dies, there remaineth nothing of him but his carcass, cannot God, that raise inanimated dust and clay into a living creature by his word, easily raise a dead carcass to life again, and continue him alive forever, or make him die again, by

²⁴ See Rowe (2007, pp. 12-13).

²⁵ Cf. XXXVIII.4, XLIV.14, and Appendix to the Latin edition, I.49.

another word?" (VLIV.15) According to Hobbes, to suppose that humans have conscious incorporeal souls which separate from our bodies leads to the ridiculous consequence that "after the resurrection man will have two rational souls, viz., the one which rises again, and another which, separated from the body at death, went to heaven or to limbo or to purgatory or to hell." (*Appendix to the Latin Edition*, I.45)

Likewise, Hobbes adopts a literal and materialist interpretation of Christ's promised return and his establishment of the post-resurrection kingdom of heaven on earth (XXXVIII.12). On Hobbes' account, every person is resurrected by the grace of God. "For supposing eternal life by grace only, there is no life but the life of the body, and no immortality till the resurrection." (XLIV, 30) Upon the Final Judgment, salvation comes to those who have faith in Christ and are obedient to his laws (XLIII, 3). These people enjoy eternal life on earth in a community ruled by Christ. In contrast, the wicked are condemned. Yet, while the rewards to the righteous are eternal, Hobbes does not think the punishment of the wicked is everlasting (XXXVIII.14). Rather, he is at pains to establish that the wicked face, not eternity in hellfire, but a *second* death.

Hobbes recognizes that an eternity in hellfire is inconsistent with God's omnibenevolence; for God, "the father of mercies," would certainly not punish the transgressions of men without end (XLIV.26).²⁶ Yet, the common fear of eternal and excruciating punishment is a source of distress in this life (XII.5). Of course, this "perpetual fear" is unfounded, "accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes." (XII.6) Where there is nothing to be seen ("as it were in the dark"), our fear is directed to "some *power* or agent *invisible*" such as the Greek and Roman gods (*Ibid.*). We must, Hobbes thinks, excise such superstitions. Fear of eternal torment after judgment is just such a superstition and source of anxiety (XXXVIII.1 and XLIII.2). As with other superstitions, this one has neither philosophical nor scriptural support.

Our erroneous beliefs about hell, Hobbes suggests, are related to stories of the fiery punishment of the residents of Sodom and Gomorra, the fiery lake of bitumen, the darkness descended upon Egypt, and the fact that "hell" is the translation often used for "*Gehenna*," the perpetual conflagration of refuse outside the walls of Jerusalem where the ancient Jews used fires to "purify the air and take away the stench of carrion." (XXXVIII.7-10)²⁷ The truth of the matter, however, is that what is said in the Scriptures

²⁶ On this point see Almond (1994, pp. 50-1).

²⁷ See also *Appendix to the Latin Edition*, I.27.

“concerning hell fire is spoken metaphorically.” (XXXVIII.11)²⁸ On Hobbes’ view, sinners find themselves on earth after the judgment for both heaven and hell are on earth according to Hobbes (XXXVIII.12). The torment of hell is just the “grief and discontent of mind” experienced by the sinner “from the sight of that eternal felicity in others which they themselves through their own incredulity and disobedience have lost.” (XXXVIII.14) Damnation is, thus, being denied any hope of the eternal paradise of fellowship with God and the chosen elect. In this state, the sinners suffer the same sorts of pains as we do now.²⁹ Indeed, “amongst these bodily pains is to be reckoned also to every one of the wicked a second death.” (XXXVIII.14)³⁰ Hobbes takes this “second death” quite literally. After their first (we might say, ‘natural’ or ‘biological’) death sinners are resurrected and live for a time in sight of paradise, but then, like Adam after The Fall, they die again, “after which [they] shall die no more.” (XXXVIII.14)

What exactly constitutes the badness of death on this view? Hobbes does not identify any ultimate end or goal of human activity. Thus, nothing like the ancients’ conceptions of *eudaimonia* or happiness lies behind his moral / political theory. Instead, Hobbes identifies the ultimate evil (*summum malum*) to be avoided with *mortem violentam*—violent death.³¹ In *De Cive*, Hobbes states that death is the “greatest of natural evils” and that our aversion to death “happens by a certain necessity of nature, no less than that by which a stone is carried downward.” (*De Cive*, I.7) On Hobbes’ view, our fear of death shows that death appears bad to us since fear is “[a]version with opinion of *hurt* from the object” of fear (VI.8). We call “evil” just those things to which we have aversions (VI.7).

Despite Hobbes’ insistence that people fear death as the greatest evil, there is a real sense in which Hobbes followed the Epicureans in thinking that being dead is nothing to us. We glean some important insights into Hobbes’ view of the badness of death in his *Thomas White’s De Mundo Examined* (published in 1643). There, Hobbes writes,

²⁸ Though Hobbes insists that talk of the hell fires is metaphorical, he later makes reference to the condemned being “cast alive into the perpetual fire of *Gehenna*” (XLIV.15).

²⁹ Interestingly, in the afterlife, the reprobates marry and reproduce just as they do in this life after the fall of Adam. Thus, while no individual suffers eternally, the suffering of the reprobates does continue through each successive generation begat by the sinners (XLIV.29).

³⁰ Cf. *Revelations* 2:11; 20-6; 14; & 21:8.

³¹ „*Mortem violentam tanquam summum malum studet evitare.*» (*De homine*, XI.6; cf. *De cive*, I.7.)

In my opinion, not to exist is preferable to existence in such a state [of eternal torment].³² The nature of goodness consists in its pleasing [us] or in its being eagerly desired, but of evil in its being repellent or despicable. We may say, then: ‘Nothing is worse or more to be shunned than the greatest evil, from which we can never extricate ourselves’. But if ‘not to exist’ were *worse* than to suffer everlasting affliction, ‘not to be’ would be more hateful than torment, because clearly non-being endures no pain; therefore [non-being] is not evil. (*De Mundo*, XXXIX, 3)

Hobbes’ sentiments are strikingly Epicurean. First, he thinks that eternal non-existence is nothing to fear, holding instead that non-existence is not an evil at all. While some might object that “we prefer a torment *which lasts [only] for a fixed, finite, and short period* to perishing or to death”, this is not due “to the loathsomeness associated with death or with our ceasing-to-be, but either to the hope of receiving, with life itself, the joys of life, or to the fear of [suffering] pain as we die.” (*De Mundo*, XXXIX, 3) Understanding this, Hobbes implies, should bring us some comfort; after all, a second death, rather than eternal torments, is the ultimate fate of the wicked. But why, then, does Hobbes maintain that death is the greatest evil?³³ Aside from the painful consequences of dying a violent death, the badness of death lies in the fact that it denies any hope of receiving the continued joys of life. Our first death is bad because it deprives us of the joys of continued life here and now, and our second death is bad because it deprives us of the eternal felicity of life in the Kingdom of God.

V. LOCKE ON IMMORTALITY, IMMATERIALITY, AND THE BADNESS OF DEATH

Locke espouses a corpuscular theory not unlike Epicurus’ atomism.³⁴ Though Locke agrees that the bare fact that the corpuscles constituting a person persist after the person dies in no way guarantees personal immortality, he goes further than both the Epicureans and Hobbes in arguing that even the possession of an immaterial soul substance is neither religiously

³² The first bracket is added. The others appear in Jones’ translation.

³³ Another motivation for defending this particular eschatology is that it supports his political theory. We do not consider this motivation for the fact that nothing we say in this paper hangs on doing so. On this, see Johnston (1989) and Tuck (1993).

³⁴ See also II,23. All references to Locke’s *Essay* correspond to the book, chapter and, where appropriate, section numbers in Nidditch’s edition (1979). On Locke’s corpuscularism, see, e.g., McCann (1994, pp. 56-88).

relevant nor metaphysically interesting since even an immaterial soul substance is no guarantee of personal survival after bodily death.³⁵ And, in agreement with both the Epicureans and Hobbes, it is *personal* immortality—the persistence of the self after natural death—that is of consequence. Despite all of this, Locke is like Hobbes in espousing the possibility of a person’s surviving death. To properly characterize Lockean immortality, we must determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for the continuation of the self after death.

Famously, Locke (1979, 4.3.6) entertains the possibility that God might have organized matter such that it thinks.³⁶ Unlike Epicurus and Hobbes, however, Locke is not prepared to *reduce* thought and perception to either matter in motion or something that emerges from matter in motion. Mind, according to Locke (1979, 4.10.19), is the ineliminable agent of voluntary movement and cogitation.³⁷ Hence, Locke is careful to characterize the possibility of thinking matter in terms of God’s possible “superaddition” of consciousness to the material constituents of the body. In any case, “it is not of such mighty necessity to determine one way or the other . . . the immateriality of the soul,” since “[a]ll the great ends of morality and religion are well enough secured, without philosophical proofs of [its] immateriality . . . [since] . . . he who made us . . . sensible intelligent beings . . . can and will *restore* us to the like state of sensibility in another world.” (1979, 4.10.19, emphasis added) With Hobbes, Locke accepts some version of Christian mortalism,³⁸ defining “Death” in his *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (first published in 1695) in terms of a complete loss of consciousness, that is, the complete “cessation of sense and perception.” (p. 14)

On Locke’s view, consciousness must be restored at the resurrection in order for the selfsame person to live again; for “*Self* is that conscious thinking thing.” (*Essay*, 2.27.17) It is that “sensible” thing which is “conscious of Pleasure and Pain” and “capable of Happiness or Misery.” (*Ibid.*) This being the case, the self “is concern’d for it *self*, as far as that consciousness extends.” (*Ibid.*) Hence for Locke, personal immortality must involve the preservation—or restoration—of a conscious thing, a thing which remembers its actions in life, and retains the capacity for sensation. This is of the utmost importance for Locke since, according to his eschatology, an immortal self must be capable of enjoying the happiness, or suffering the

³⁵ See Dempsey (*forthcoming*).

³⁶ Cf. 2.27.17. On thinking matter, see Yolton (1983, p. 14 *ff.*), Bennett (1994), and McCann (1994).

³⁷ Cf. 4.10.17. See also Bennett (1994) and Dempsey (2009, 49-51).

³⁸ On Locke’s mortalist views, see Marshall (2000) and Snobelen (2001, p. 20).

misery, meted out at the Final Judgment; it must be “capable there to receive the Retribution [God] has designed to Men, according to [its] doings in this Life.” (1979, 4.3.6)

Locke’s mortalist construal of death in terms of the cessation of consciousness is suggestive of the Epicurean doctrine that being dead is nothing to us since death marks the end of consciousness. Persons are conscious thinking things and death is the complete cessation of consciousness; if not for the grace of God, this utter lack of consciousness is permanent. So, unlike the Epicureans who were inclined to view bodily death as the end of the story, Locke is like Hobbes in taking all of our hopes for, and fears of, an afterlife to rest upon the resurrection of the body. But for the miraculous intervention of God, then, Locke agrees with the Epicureans.

Consequently, on Locke’s view the question of the immateriality of the soul is not important to questions of immortality. Indeed, without bodily resurrection, even the immateriality of the soul wouldn’t guarantee immortality. For even if an immaterial soul is indestructible, as the substance dualist supposes, this does not entail a continuation of the person; indeed, experience suggests the opposite conclusion. According to excerpts from Locke’s journal (20 April, 1682), those convinced by this sort of argument “perfectly mistake immortality,” which requires not “a state of bare substantial existence and duration, but a *state of sensibility*.” (emphasis added) While proponents “distinguish betwixt duration and life” in the case of body, they do not in the case of the soul and argue that it cannot “cease to think and perceive.” (*Ibid.*) However, “this is manifestly false, and there is scarce a man that has not experience to the contrary every twenty-four hours.” (*Ibid.*)

The loss of consciousness is seen every night in a dreamless sleep, “whereby it is plain that the soul may exist . . . for some time without sense and perception.” (*Ibid.*)³⁹ And if the soul, because of changes in the body, can exist without sensing pain and pleasure for an hour, “it may also have the same duration without pain or pleasure . . . to eternity.” (*Ibid.*) At most, then, the soul’s immateriality shows that it has “eternal duration,” but this “is to prove no other immortality of the soul than what belongs to one of Epicurus’s atoms, viz. that it perpetually exists, but has no sense either of happiness or misery.” (*Ibid.*) Better that we should say that “spirit be in its own nature as durable as matter . . . they may *both lie dead and inactive*, the one *without thought*, the other *without motion*, a minute, an hour, or to eternity, which wholly depends upon the will and good pleasure of the first Author.” (*Ibid.*, emphasis added)

³⁹ Cf. *Essay*, 2.1.13.

As Locke sees it, consciousness, the locus of personhood, can and does cease under certain conditions, and these conditions follow from changes in the body. Locke, thus, anticipates what we might call David Hume's *principle of proportionality*: changes in the mind are proportional to changes in the body, especially the brain. "The weakness of body and . . . mind are exactly proportioned," as is the vigour of both in adulthood, "their sympathetic disorder in sickness, their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death." (Hume 1983, p. 95) Similarly, Locke points to the example of sleep to highlight the capacity of the soul to lose consciousness following changes in the body. He also points to the examples "apoplexy" and "swooning" as instances of changes in consciousness being attended by changes in the body (Locke 1858, p. 129).

Interestingly, this principle of proportionality finds its historical roots in the Epicurean texts. One of the many arguments Lucretius presents in the third book of *De Rerum Natura* is just the one we find in the pages of Locke and Hume: "the mind is begotten along with the body, and grows up with it, and with it grows old . . . [we also see it] falling to pieces at the same time worn out with age." (3.456-459) The Epicurean argument is bolstered by additional evidence of the sort alluded to by Locke: the mind is pained when the body is diseased, the mind suffers when the body is unwell, wine affects both body and mind, epilepsy shakes both body and mind, and so on (*DRN*, 3.459 *ff.*). Indeed, what could be more natural than to think that the mind dies with the body to which it is dynamically coupled in birth, maturation, and old age? For both the Epicureans and Locke, the dissolution of consciousness results from the dissolution of the body. That Locke refers to the Epicurean atoms explicitly in making this point and that one of Locke's arguments is distinctively Epicurean suggests, if not direct influence, at least a concurrence of thought. Yet according to Locke, but not the Epicureans, the righteous may rightly hold out hope for an afterlife.

VI. LOCKE ON RESURRECTION, PUNISHMENT, AND THE BADNESS OF DEATH

On Locke's view, the resurrection of the body marks the beginning of the divine judgment. With Hobbes, Locke maintains that the righteous are rewarded with eternal life in communion with God. For the wicked, however, the punishment is permanent annihilation through the all consuming con-

flagration of hellfire.⁴⁰ Rather than persisting in hell for eternity, then, the wicked, according to Locke, are (painfully) consumed by the hellfire. In a personal copy of his *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (first published anonymously in 1695) Locke appends the following note: “That *Death* (*i.e.* a cessation of sense and perception) shall at last . . . be a punishment of the unrighteous is plain from *Gal. VI. 8* where *corruption* is set in opposition to *life everlasting*, the one the fruit of righteousness and the other of unrighteousness.” (1999, p. 14) Thus, whereas the Epicureans argue against the fear of death on the grounds that annihilation eliminates the possibility of pain or displeasure, Hobbes and Locke take post-resurrection annihilation to be the ultimate punishment for the wicked and restored eternal life the reward of the righteous. Contrary to Hobbes’ view, however, Locke maintains that the second death of the wicked is itself quite painful.

Thus, for mortalists like Locke, the rejection of eternal suffering in hellfire was not meant to deny divine punishment. For Hobbes, between resurrection and second death, the wicked are conscious of their loss, and are subject to the same pains of aging and death as before. For Locke, the punishment of the wicked lies not in annihilation itself, but in the mode whereby they are annihilated: *fiery incineration*. Like Isaac Newton’s erstwhile friend and colleague William Whiston, Locke believes that the requirements of religion are well enough met by annihilation through incineration.⁴¹ On Locke’s view, there will be, in effect, two grades of resurrection; the good will be resurrected with spiritual bodies, while the wicked will be resurrected with physical bodies, bodies which will eventually be consumed by hellfire.⁴² In these details, Locke’s view differs from Hobbes’.

Despite his belief that the condemned will suffer the torments of the hellfire, Locke follows Hobbes in arguing that no sinner shall suffer the torments of hell eternally, for this is inconsistent with the omnibenevolence of God. As he puts it,

it seems a strange way of understanding a Law . . . that by *Death* should be meant *Eternal Life* in Misery. Could any one be supposed by a Law, that says, *For Felony you shall die*, not that he should lose his Life, but be kept alive in

⁴⁰ On this see, e.g., Fraser (1890, pp. 259-260). On heretical seventeenth century views of hell in general, see Walker (1964) and Almond (1994).

⁴¹ On Whiston’s eschatology, see Almond (1994, p. 129 *ff.*). On Whiston’s complicated relationship with Newton, see Snobelen (2004).

⁴² Locke makes this claim and elaborates his views on the resurrection in a short tract entitled *Resurrectio et qua sequuntur* in King (1830, pp. 148 *ff.*). See also Almond (1994, p. 129).

perpetual exquisite Torments? And would any one think himself fairly dealt with, that was so used? (Locke 1695, pp. 5-6)

Like the fires of *Gehenna*, the “unquenchable fire” of hell is never-ending. However, while *Gehenna* may have been unquenchable, this in no way implies “that the bodies that were burnt in it were never consumed.” (Locke 1830, as cited by Almond 1994, p. 129) Indeed, the physical bodies would likely be consumed quickly by the divine furnace. In any case, final annihilation, on Locke’s view, implies more than just the loss of present and future desserts; it is also excruciatingly painful, even if relatively brief. Contra Hobbes, then, Locke thinks talk of hellfire is more than mere metaphor.

VII. CONCLUSIONS: FROM ATOMIC DEATH TO BODILY REVITALIZATION

These three studies in materialism and mortality point to interesting similarities and differences between the views of Epicurus, Hobbes and Locke concerning the nature of death. Despite the fact that the material systems with which humans are most familiar are corruptible, all three accept the possibility of immortal—yet material—beings. Far from being guaranteed by materiality, however, if a material being is immortal, it must owe its immortality to some additional feature of that being. For Epicurus, it is the gods’ special position between ordered universes that ensures they do not break down in the manner of other material entities. For Hobbes and Locke, eternalness and self-existence are intrinsic attributes of God. And while Locke disagrees with Hobbes’s materialistic construal of God, both agree that the immortality of human beings depends on God willing our resurrection.

Unlike Hobbes and the Epicureans, however, Locke resists reducing thought and perception to matter in motion or what emerges from matter in motion. Nevertheless, he follows the others in the puzzlement he expresses over the very notion of an immaterial substance. Indeed, as one of the seventeenth century’s most important advocates of atomism, Locke entertains the possibility that humans lack an immaterial soul. However, neither Hobbes nor Locke sees a challenge to immaterialism as either metaphysically or religiously problematic. In fact, Locke most clearly articulates a point on which all three concur: immateriality is not a necessary condition for immortality. Moreover, Locke contends that immateriality is not even a sufficient condition for immortality.

Contrary to the Epicureans' more austere construal of death, both Hobbes and Locke believe that personal immortality for humans is possible. However, in agreement with the Epicureans, neither takes persons to be naturally immortal. For not only do Hobbes and Locke accept the psychological hedonism of the Epicureans, they agree with the Epicurean contention that consciousness—the locus of personhood—depends on the body. In other words, all believe that consciousness ceases upon bodily death, and that this results in the death of the person. Accordingly, none believe that the perpetual existence of the atoms that once constituted the body (or the soul, for that matter) is in any way sufficient for personal immortality.

While both Locke and Hobbes accept the possibility of divine punishment at the Final Judgment, both believe that between death and resurrection we are without consciousness, and thus, without the capacity to experience either happiness or misery. Accordingly, Hobbes and Locke adopt the Epicurean view that there is nothing painful or bad about bodily death *per se*. Nevertheless, they do accept that death can *eventually* be bad for the wicked. According to Hobbes, the wicked will eventually suffer a painful second life, painful both because they will be conscious of what they are missing out on, and because they will be susceptible to the disease and decay which precedes their second death. Locke goes further suggesting that this second death will be particularly painful, even if its duration is finite.

A careful comparison of these theories, then, indicates that the central difference between ancient pagan mortalism and the Christian mortalism of Hobbes and Locke concerns whether or not bodily death is permanent. All three philosophers consider the possibility of life after death; all three hold that meaningful survival of the person would necessarily involve a reconstitution of the material body. Yet, their views diverge in relation to their religious commitments. For the Epicureans, death results in permanent annihilation; they held out no hope of bodily resurrection. For Hobbes and Locke, the resurrection of the body with a restoration of consciousness is the promise of Christ's own death and resurrection.

Finally, while the evidence for Epicurean influence is largely circumstantial, it is, nevertheless, substantive. Both Hobbes and Locke knew of the Epicurean account of death and adopted very similar views. Locke even refers to the Epicurean view to emphasize aspects of his own theory and presents an argument that finds its historical roots in an Epicurean text. Yet, it is of little surprise that they should refrain from acknowledging explicitly any real debt to the Epicureans. For one thing, early modern philosophers did not demand of themselves a particularly high standard

for acknowledging sources. There would be nothing odd, then, for Hobbes or Locke to proffer Epicurean arguments without acknowledgement. More importantly, Hobbes and Locke had good reason to keep any debt to the (presumed atheistic) Epicureans concealed. This is especially true when the debt relates directly to those views that challenge Christian orthodoxy.⁴³ After all, the Epicureans are those ignoble pagans who, along with the heretics who followed them in advocating a material and mortal soul, are condemned to the sixth circle of Dante's *Inferno*.

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⁴³ If, as many assume, Hobbes were actually an atheist, Books III and IV of *Leviathan* would, themselves, be clear evidence that Hobbes thought it prudent to put forward a clever and substantial concealment of his lack of faith.

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