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DEMOCRITUS, THE EPICUREANS, DEATH, AND DYING*

Democritus of Abdera's discussion of the process and ethical significance of dying has received little attention. The reason for this is not too difficult to see. First, Democritus' philosophical descendants, the Epicureans, have attracted most of the attention devoted to the subject. They made the assault on the fear of death a central part of their ethical project, and produced some arresting arguments in the process. If anyone has thought to consider Democritus' thoughts on the subject, for the most part it is only in connection with the later Epicurean tradition, and even then only as an interesting footnote. It is generally assumed that whatever Democritus had to say was probably not significantly different from what the Epicureans later said in greater detail and with greater sophistication. Second, the state of the evidence for Democritus' position is poor. We have only a handful of gnomic ethical maxims preserved by Stobaeus, and a small number of passing remarks in later sources.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask exactly what we can and cannot say about Democritus' attitude to the subject later made so prominent by the Epicureans. In doing so we might also question the assumption that Democritus' position was to all intents and purposes merely a cruder version of Epicurus'. Indeed, as I shall argue, it turns out that the Epicureans disagreed with and sought to alter what Democritus had said, especially about the process of dying. Why they should have done this sheds light on both the original Democritean theory and also the Epicureans' attitude to their atomist predecessor. The Epicureans' concerted attempt to distance themselves from Democritus and the polemical use of Democritean material by critics of Epicureanism are therefore two prize pieces of evidence for the reconstruction of the respective standpoints of the two atomists and the relationship between them.

I

A few of the Diels–Kranz 'B' fragments of Democritus deal with the subject of death.[1] Most of these come from Stobaeus' collection of ethical maxims and all bear the mark of truncated memorable *gnômai*, which might lead us to suspect their authenticity or at least be reticent to accept that they have not been altered by the intervening transmission. It is clear nevertheless that they describe a position which is in many ways just like that of the later Epicureans. For example, Democritus complains that people foolishly fear death and as a result cling desperately to life—even desiring to live long into old age and suffer the decrepitude it promises simply because they believe that any sort of life is better than the presumed evil of death (see B203, 205, 206).[2] Democritus and the Epicureans hold that living *per se* is of no positive value, and that if one's only reason for continuing to live is the

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[1] I discuss these fragments further in J. I. Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia* (Cambridge, 2002), 37–8.

[2] Also compare B160 (Porph. *De Abst.* 4.21), which although it refers to 'Democrates' rather

mistaken thought that death is worse than any sort of life, then one's values are in dire need of reassessment. Sometimes it is better to die than to live on in hardship.

Democritus similarly argues that a life worth living is a life one enjoys (see B160, 199, 200, 201). Many people take no enjoyment from life because they are overwhelmed by the fear of death. They crave a long lifetime, but take nothing of any value from it, perhaps because all the pleasures of life are overshadowed and obliterated by a constant anxiety that life is about to end. In contrast, someone who has conquered the fear of death can enjoy what life he has. This divorce of the value of a life from its duration is something that can be paralleled in Epicureanism.[3] Again, there is no reason to think that Epicurus was not to some extent influenced by Democritus in this regard, and Lucretius too echoes these Democritean themes when he notes that some people are so overwhelmed by the fear of death that they paradoxically appear to pursue annihilation—oblivious to the fact that this is the very source of their irrational and pernicious anxiety.[4]

II

Let us turn now to consider more specifically the relationship between Democritus and the Epicureans. We have already seen large areas of agreement between the two atomists, and Epicurus and his followers certainly could and on occasion did cite Democritus' views on death with approval. We have two examples from Philodemus' treatise *De Morte*, of which only the fourth book survives on fragments of papyri from Herculaneum (*P.Herc.* 1050).[5]

εἶθ' ὅταν ἐναρ|γὴς αὐτοῦ [sc. *τοῦ θανάτου*] *γένηται θεωρία*[[*ι*]], *παράδο|ξος αὐτοῖς ὑποπίπτει· παρ' ἣν αἰτίαν* | [*ο*]*ὐδὲ διαθήκας ὑπομένοντες γράφεσ*|[*θ*]*αι περικατάληπτοι γίν*[*ο*]*νται καὶ δί*[*χ'*] *ἐμφορεῖν ἀναγκάζονται κατ*[*ὰ*] *Δη*|*μόκριτον.*

(Philodemus, *De Morte* 39.9–15 Gigante)

13–14: *ΔΙ*| . *ΕΜΦΟΡΕΙΝ* P *ΔΙ*| . *ΕΜΦΕΡΕΙΝ* O *ΔΙ*| . *ΕΜΦΟΡΕΙΝ* N.

δί[χ'] *ἐμφορεῖν* Gigante; δί[σσ'] *ἐμφορεῖν* Diels, Kuiper

Further, when contemplation of death becomes clear, it assails them as a paradox. For this reason they become entirely consumed, cannot bear to write their own wills and, according to Democritus, are forced 'to be in two minds'.

than Democritus seems to me to be plausibly Democritean in content. See C. C. W. Taylor, *The Atomists: Leucippus and Democritus* (Toronto, 1999), 223–7, 238. The 'Democrates' fragments are colllected as DK B 35–115.

[3] Epic. *Ep. Men.* 124; *K.D.* 20, 21. Cf. J. I. Warren, 'Epicurean immortality', *OSAPh* 18 (2000), 231–61, at 236–44.

[4] Lucr. *D.R.N.* 3.79–82: saepe usque adeo, mortis formidine, vitae | percipit humanos odium lucisque videndae, | ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum | obliti fontem curarum hunc esse timorem.

[5] Cf. P.-M. Morel, *Démocrite et la Recherche des Causes* (Paris, 1996), 289. There are copies of the Oxford *disegni* reproduced in an appendix to W. Scott, *Fragmenta Herculanensia* (Oxford, 1885), some of which also appear in J. Hayter, *Thirty-six Engravings of Texts and Alphabets from the Herculanean Fragments taken from the Original Copper Plates* (Oxford, 1891). The most recent edition of all the surviving text is by T. Kuiper, *Philodemos over den Dood* (Amsterdam, 1925). M. Gigante, in 'L'Inizio del Quarto Libro «Della Morte» di Filodemo', in his *Ricerche Filodemee*[2] (Naples, 1983), 115–61, and 'La Chiusa del Quarto Libro «Della Morte» di Filodemo', ibid. 163–234, gives new texts for cols. 1–9 and 37–39.

This reference comes at the very end of the extant text of Philodemus' treatise. As ever with such passing references, it is unclear just how much of what proceeds is intended to be 'according to Democritus'. A more generous account offers all the previous sentence as relating Democritus' view. In that case, the early atomist noticed that some people are so paralysed by the fear of death that paradoxically they do not even manage to write a will. The least generous account restricts the reference to the immediately preceding words: δί[χ']ἐμφορεῖν, and must regard this as a Democritean expression that Philodemus feels captures the kind of paradoxical attitude to which these people are prone.[6] At the very least this is what Philodemus attributes to Democritus, but unfortunately the meaning of this Democritean observation is far from lucid. Indeed the text itself is disputed as a result of its obscurity. The two major proposals are: δί[σσ']ἐμφορεῖν (Diels, Kuiper) and δί[χ']ἐμφορεῖν (Gigante).[7]

The former possibility, δί[σσ']ἐμφορεῖν, retained in Kuiper's edition of the text and accepted in Taylor's edition of the fragments of Democritus and Leucippus, is generally understood to mean something like 'stuffing themselves with double portions'.[8] The sense of this, however, is still obscure. Kuiper suggests that it refers to a dying or condemned person desperate to pack in to his remaining life as many pleasures as possible, and therefore eating twice as much as normal.[9] However, the sense of 'taking one's fill' would be better reflected by a verb in the middle voice.[10] Instead Philodemus uses an active verb, which is most naturally translated as 'to fill (something) twice' or 'to pour in double amounts'.[11]

The latter suggestion, δί[χ']ἐμφορεῖν, is interpreted by its proposers as being equivalent to διχοφρονεῖν, 'thinking double thoughts', and further argued to mean in this context that these will-makers are producing inconsistent provisions in their wills.[12] While this does at least give an immediately comprehensible meaning to the text and is in keeping with the context of the surrounding discussion, I disagree with the interpretation offered. Rather than producing inconsistent provisions in the will, these people seem rather to be caught in two minds about whether to write a will at all. That surely must be the sense of the preceding phrases. These people are assailed by the terrifying vision of death, which Philodemus interprets as betrays a lingering commitment to some sort of *post mortem* survival. This commitment should lead them, if they were rational and consistent, to write a will in some attempt to control the fate of their lingering *post mortem* interests in the world. However—and this is why the vision of death can be called paradoxical—the contemplation of death is simultaneously so disturbing that it paralyses them and prevents them from carrying out even this action. When they come to contemplate writing a will, this involves them confronting their mortality and, rather than acting in accordance with their pre-

[6] David Armstrong, who is currently preparing a new edition and translation of Philodemus' *De Morte*, tells me that he prefers this more restricted reference to Democritus.

[7] M. Gigante and G. Indelli, 'Democrito nei Papiri Ercolanesi di Filodemo', in F. Romano (ed.), *Democrito e l'Atomismo Antico* (Catania, 1980), 451–66, at 456–8. Gigante (n. 5), 227–9 has a good discussion of previous conjectures and interpretations.

[8] Taylor (n. 2), 155.

[9] Kuiper (n. 5), 136, n. 114. Cf. Pl. *Phaedo* 116e2–5.

[10] Cf. LSJ s.v. ἐμφορέω.

[11] Gigante (n. 5), 228. Cf. Diod. Sic. 16.93.7.

[12] Gigante and Indelli (n. 7), 458, n. 35. Gigante defends this again at length in Gigante (n. 5), 227–33. He compares Plut. *De Virtute Morali* 447C: τί οὖν; φασίν, οὐχὶ καὶ τὸ βουλευόμενον τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πολλάκις διχοφορεῖ καὶ πρὸς ἐναντίας ἀνθέλκεται δόξας περὶ τοῦ συμφέροντος ἀλλ' ἕν ἐστι;. Also see LSJ s.v. διχοφορέω.

suppositions, they fall back into horrified inactivity.[13] We might recall here the paradoxical attitude displayed by the 'fools' in the Democritean fragments preserved by Stobaeus, especially B199–201.

Democritus' second appearance in Philodemus' *De Morte* is not so difficult to interpret, but again the text is in a relatively poor state and survives only in the form of an Oxford *disegno* of the original papyrus.[14]

τῆς δ' αὖ [σηπε]δόνος ἔχε[ται κατὰ] | Δημόκριτο[ν καὶ] τὸ δυσωπε[ῖσθαι] | διὰ τὴν ὀσφ[ρ]αντ[ικ]ῶν τού[των φαν]||τασ[ίαν] καὶ [δ]υσμο[ρφ]ίας· κατα[φέρον]||ται γὰ[ρ] ἐπὶ [το]ιοῦτ[ο] πάθος ὡσὰν τῶ[ν] | μετὰ τ[ῆς εὐσ]αρκίας [κ]αὶ τοῦ κάλλου[ς] | ἀποθνη[σκόν]των . . . | [κ]αὶ παραπέμπουσιν, ὅτι [πάν]||τες ἅμα τοῖς ὡς Μίλων εὐσά[ρ]κοις ὀλίγου | μὲν χρόνου σκελετοὶ γίνονται, τὸ δὲ | πέρας εἰς τὰς πρώτας ἀναλ[ύ]ονται φύ|σεις· ὑπακουστέον δὲ δῆλον ὅτι τὰ τοῖς | εἰρημένοις ἀνάλογα καὶ περ[ὶ] τῆς κα[κο|χ]ροίας καὶ συνόλως τῆς δυσμορφίας. [κε]||νότατον τοίνυν ἐστὶν τὸ λυπεῖσθαι προ|ορωμένους [τ]ὴν οὐ πολυτελῆ ταφὴν | καὶ [π]ε[ρ]ίβλεπ[τ]ον, ἀλλὰ λιτὴν καὶ προσ|τυχ[οῦ]σαν. (Philodemus, *De Morte* 29.27–30.11 Kuiper)

31 ΩΣΑΙ O; ὡσὰν Buecheler, σκιαὶ Diels, ὡς ἀπ<ὸ> Gigante and Indelli.

According to Democritus people shrink from decay because of the impression of [foul] odours and the unpleasant appearance. For [bodies?] are reduced to such a state, just as those belonging to people who die in good physical condition and with beautiful appearance [. . .] and they give a funeral escort because everyone becomes a skeleton in a short time, those as beautiful as Milon just as quickly, and finally they are dissolved into first natures. So it should be heeded that it is clear that things analogous to what has been said are also the case for [those with] an ugly appearance and in a generally poor physical state. Therefore it is with utter foolishness that people are disturbed who foresee not a rich and well-arranged funeral but a cheap and hasty one.

At this point in the text Philodemus is canvassing various possible objections to his thesis that death is 'nothing to us'. There is a lacuna in column 29 between lines 18 and 27, but in what text we have before the quotation above Philodemus has been discussing whether it is better to die in battle than from a plague or illness, and offers the examples of Themistocles and Pericles as well as Metrodorus and Epicurus as honoured men who died from various diseases.

Then Philodemus cites with approval Democritus' claim that the reason we tend to feel disgust at the sight of corpses is merely aesthetic. He sides with Democritus in denying any moral or theological significance to the common repulsion felt when faced with a dead body. Philodemus explains that this process occurs rapidly even to those who when alive had a beautiful physical appearance like Milon.[15] They too rapidly dissolve into their physical constituents, losing their beauty as they decay. He concludes from this that it is therefore irrational to feel distress at the prospect of not being properly buried, and in later columns points out that many great men have not been buried properly, and that in any case since death is the end of all sensation no harm or benefit can come to anyone whatever is done with their corpse ([ὑπ]ὲρ γῆ[ν ἢ] ὑπὸ |

[13] This raises a number of questions about the rationality of writing a will if one is convinced, as Epicurus professed to be, that there are no *post mortem* interests. See J. I. Warren, 'Epicurus' dying wishes', *PCPhS* 47 (2001), 23–46.

[14] Col. 29 appears as fr. 17 in Scott (n.7), appendix, plate xxviii.

[15] A six times Olympic victor from Croton in the late sixth century. He was considered to be a beautiful physical specimen. Cf. *RE* s.v. (2).

γ[ῆ]ν ἀναισθ[η]τε[ῖ]ν, 32.23–4). It is once again unclear how much of this material can be said to be 'according to Democritus'. At the very least, Democritus provided the explanation for the repugnance most people experience when faced with a decaying corpse. It is plausible to suppose that this diagnosis was at least in part aimed at offering an alternative explanation to the more common view that decaying, untreated bodies are a source of pollution.[16] According to Democritus, decaying corpses are not intrinsically or morally repugnant. Rather, the process of putrefaction causes unpleasant smells and a repellent appearance—two properties that have therefore been misinterpreted generally and made the basis for an unjustified moral stance. The Epicureans can heartily agree with this explanation, and also endorse the thought that we should stop feeling so concerned with the preservation and disposal of our own corpses.[17] Not only would this help to quell any residual superstitious concerns their audience might have about the welfare of the corpse after death, it also contributes generally to their desire to insist on a strict separation between the *ante mortem* individual and his *post mortem* remains. These latter do not constitute the person in any way, and therefore are of no concern to us. However, this very insistence will lead them into conflict with some of Democritus' other claims about death.

III

The Epicureans were not always so positive about their atomist predecessor, and one of the areas of disagreement was over the question of the nature of death—or more specifically over the nature of dying, by which I mean the process of passing from life to death. There are a number of sources which suggest that Democritus undertook some minimal empirical research into the process of bodily decay. They report that as a result of his observations Democritus argued that the soul lingers for a while in a corpse and even that some psychic activities continue after the apparent point of death. In some sources it is even suggested that Democritus allowed that corpses retain some degree of perception. These sources are collected in DK A 117 and 160 (also see Taylor §112).

quin etiam vir iure magni nominis Democritus ne finitae quidem vitae satis certas notas esse proposuit, quibus medici credidissent: adeo illud non reliquit, ut certa aliqua signa futurae mortis essent. (Celsus *De Med.* 2.6.14)

Indeed, Democritus too, a man of justly great reputation, proposed that there are not even sufficiently sure signs of when life has come to an end—which doctors had trusted in previously. He went so far as also to deny that there were certain sure signs of imminent death.

Plato, etsi quas vult animas ad caelum statim expedit, in Politia autem cuiusdem insepulti cadaver opponit longo tempore sine ulla labe prae animae scilicet individuitate servatum. ad hoc et Democritus crementa unguium et comarum in sepulturis aliquanti temporis denotat. (Tertull. *De An.* 51.2)

Plato, even though he immediately releases whatever souls he pleases to heaven, nevertheless alleges in the *Republic* that the corpse of one particular unburied individual was preserved without any damage, not doubt because of the indivisibility of the soul [sc. from the body]. On

[16] See R. Parker, *Miasma* (Oxford, 1983), 32–48.

[17] D.L. 10.118: οὐδὲ ταφῆς φροντιεῖν [sc. τὸν σοφόν]. Diogenes of Oinoanda 73.1.8–2.1 Smith declares that he feels no concern about the eventual putrefaction of his corpse. Lucretius *D.R.N.* 3.581 offers the putrefaction of the body after death as evidence for the interdependence of body and soul.

the same topic, Democritus too notes the continued growth for some period of time of the nails and hair of those awaiting burial.

ὁ δὲ Δημόκριτος πάντα μετέχειν φησὶ ψυχῆς ποιᾶς, καὶ τὰ νεκρὰ τῶν σωμάτων, διότι ἀεὶ διαφανῶς τινος θερμοῦ καὶ αἰσθητικοῦ μετέχει τοῦ πλείονος διαπνεομένου. (Aëtius 4.4.7)

Democritus says that all things share in soul of a sort, including dead bodies. For these always clearly have a share of a certain perceptible heat, although most has been exhaled.

τὰ νεκρὰ τῶν σωμάτων αἰσθάνεται, ὡς ὤιετο Δημόκριτος.[18] (Alex. Aphrod. *in Arist. Top.* 21, 21)

Dead bodies perceive, as Democritus thought.

These various *testimonia* contain a number of different claims, all centred around the discussion of the possibility of psychic functioning of some sort being present in things which are not or are no longer alive. Tertullian, for example, suggests that Democritus took the apparent growth of fingernails and hair on a corpse to be a sign that the soul was lingering in some form in the body.[19] Aëtius offers a more generalized claim: everything contains a soul of a sort, or perhaps some amount of psychic material. Even corpses show signs of the continued presence of heat after much of the warmth that characterizes a living human has dissipated. Alexander of Aphrodisias simply relates that, according to Democritus, corpses perceive. While most of these sources seem happy to talk as if Democritus asserted that 'the dead' showed signs of such residual psychic processes, Celsus takes Democritus to be arguing that there is no definite criterion by which we can determine whether a person is dead or alive. This could follow from the same empirical observations as referred to in the other sources: warmth, usually a sign of life, is present even in bodies commonly designated as dead. Similarly, hair and nails continue for some time to grow on such bodies. Perhaps, therefore, the boundary between being alive and being dead is neither simple nor clear. In that case, when the other *testimonia* refer to dead bodies or corpses, perhaps they are echoing an original Democritean assertion of the following sort: 'What *we call* a corpse still retains warmth, still grows hair and nails, and (perhaps) still perceives.'

When modern commentators look at these sources in a bid to explain the disagreements between Epicurus and Democritus, they tend to connect them with Democritus' psychological theories. Two points of divergence between Democritean and Epicurean psychological theory are generally noted. It is pointed out, sometimes with reference to the testimony of Aristotle's *De Respiratione* 471b30ff. (DK A106), that Democritus considered that respiration maintained an equilibrium between psychic atoms within the body and those in the surrounding atmosphere. As a result, death might be a

[18] Alexander reports this as a coda to an example of a particular kind of fallacy. Corpses undergo *kinêsis* and *alloiôsis*; things which perceive undergo *kinêsis*; therefore corpses perceive. There is no need to think Alexander is accusing Democritus of supporting the fallacy, merely its conclusion.

[19] In fact, these observations are misleading. A. Fatteh, *Handbook of Forensic Pathology* (Philadelphia, 1973), 250: 'The growth of hair stops at death, but sometimes the beard appears to be more prominent than it should be. The apparent growth after death is caused by postmortem shrinkage of the skin and greater exposure of hair shafts above the epidermis.' I am reliably informed that the growth of fingernails is also an illusion caused by shrinkage and desiccation of the skin. Any real growth which occurs after death is negligible.

protracted process as this equilibrium gradually fails.[20] Democritus also insisted that soul and body atoms alternate throughout the organism, whereas the Epicureans placed the atoms of the *animus* (*τὸ λογικόν*) deep within the chest, and those of the *anima* (*τὸ ἄλογον*) in particular places through the rest of the body in order to function as a sensory and proprioceptory system (see *Σ* to *Ep. Hdt.* 66, Lucr. *D.R.N.* 3.370–80).[21] Therefore the disruption of the complex of soul atoms is for Democritus potentially a more protracted event. I do not deny that Democritus and the Epicureans differed on these points, but I think it is possible to offer an interpretation of Democritus' interest in the process of dying which better explains the criticisms levelled against it by the later Epicurean sources. In particular, the Epicureans were, I suggest, dissatisfied with Democritus' views transmitted to us in the *testimonia* just surveyed, because they threaten either to allow psychic activity to bodies correctly classified as dead or to make the very distinction between death and life vague and unclear.

As we have seen, in general terms the Epicureans could be happy with Democritus' attitude towards death. Both Epicurus and Democritus considered the state of being dead to be one in which the soul is dispersed and in this sense death is the annihilation of the individual. As a result 'being dead' is nothing to us (*K.D.* 2: *ὁ θάνατος οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· τὸ γὰρ διαλυθὲν ἀναισθητεῖ, τὸ δ' ἀναισθητοῦν οὐδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς*).

Although this mode of argument has never met with universal approval, it is certainly a position that the Epicureans were keen to maintain. But it is also a position that focuses on the state of being dead rather than the process of dying, and asks us to think primarily of the former as the source of our anxiety. It also relies heavily on there being a clear distinction between the state of being dead, which is 'nothing to us', and the state of being alive. In that case, it is perhaps not so hard to see why they might have had difficulties with Democritus' insistence that corpses retain psychic functions, especially if, as Alexander suggests, this included the power of perception. By emphasizing the protracted nature of dying, Democritus has made the distinction between being alive and being dead less clear.[22] The possibility that dying might necessarily be a protracted and perceptible process is one that the Epicureans are keen to de-emphasize, if not avoid entirely. For example, in the section of the *Letter to Herodotus* which deals with the relationship of body and soul (64–5), Epicurus insists on two claims. First, once and as soon as the soul leaves the body all perception is lost. Second, the soul may survive considerable damage to the person and still perceive—in which case the person is still alive.[23] The picture which emerges is that either the soul is

[20] See Morel (n. 5), 145ff., M. L. Silvestre, *Democrito e Epicuro: il Senso di una Polemica* (Naples, 1985), 93–6.

[21] See D. N. Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge, 1998), 68–72.

[22] J. Salem, *Démocrite: Grains de Poussière dans un Rayon de Soleil* (Paris, 1996), 206. Compare modern difficulties in defining a precise moment of death, especially given the modern ability to maintain certain brain functions artificially. See P. Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of our Traditional Ethics* (Oxford, 1994), part 1; F. Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death* (Oxford, 1992), part 1.

[23] Epic. *Ep. Hdt.* 64–5: *διὸ ἀπαλλαγείσης τῆς ψυχῆς οὐκ ἔχει [τὸ ἄθροισμα] τὴν αἴσθησιν. οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ταύτην ἐκέκτητο τὴν δύναμιν, ἀλλ' ἑτέρωι ἅμα συγγεγενημένωι αὐτῶι παρεσκεύαζεν, ὃ διὰ τῆς συντελεσθείσης περὶ αὐτὸ δυνάμεως κατὰ τὴν κίνησιν σύμπτωμα αἰσθητικὸν εὐθὺς ἀποτελοῦν ἑαυτῶι ἀπεδίδου κατὰ τὴν ὁμούρησιν καὶ συμπάθειαν καὶ ἐκείνωι, καθάπερ εἶπον. διὸ δὴ καὶ ἐνυπάρχουσα ἡ ψυχὴ οὐδέποτε ἄλλου τινὸς μέρους ἀπηλλαγμένου ἀναισθητεῖ· ἀλλ' ἃ ἂν καὶ ταύτης ξυναπόληται τοῦ στεγάζοντος λυθέντος εἴθ' ὅλου εἴτε καὶ μέρους τινός, ἐάν περ διαμένηι, σῴζει τὴν*

present, one perceives, and is alive, or the soul has departed, one no longer perceives, and has died. Democritus' model of a gradual loss of life is implicitly rejected since Epicurus offers no intermediate position between these two.[24] The second *Kyria Doxa*, of course, makes a lack of perception an essential characteristic of the state of being dead—and it is this anaisthesia which guarantees that death is 'nothing to us'. I have already noted that the Epicureans wish to insist on a strict separation between an individual and whatever remains of him after the point of death. Lucretius gives the following picture of someone concerned with his remains, although he says he is convinced that after death there is no sensation.

> proinde ubi se videas hominem indignarier ipsum,
> post mortem fore ut aut putescat corpore posto
> aut flammis interfiat malisve ferarum,
> scire licet non sincerum sonere atque subesse
> caecum aliquem cordi stimulum, quamvis neget ipse
> credere se quemquam sibi sensum in morte futurum. (3.870–5)

So whenever you see a man complaining to himself, that it might turn out after death that when his body is laid out he might rot, or might be subject to fire and the jaws of wild animals, then it is clear to see that he does not sound true and that some hidden impulse lies in his heart even though he himself denies that he thinks he will retain any perception when dead.

Here the person betrays a continuing belief that the corpse constitutes his self despite his protestations that he is convinced—like a good Epicurean should be—that there is no perception after death. By being concerned about whether the corpse is left to rot or is cremated or even preyed upon by wild animals he shows that his original claim of non-identification with the body is hollow and insincere.[25] Given this Epicurean preoccupation, it is not difficult to see that they would wish to resist the Democritean suggestion that there may indeed be some residual psychic activity in whatever is placed upon a pyre or left open to predation. Whether or not these remains are classified as 'dead', the suspicion would arise that the person still lingers to some extent and we may therefore with justification begin to feel the very sort of concerns which in this passage Lucretius wishes to demonstrate are absurd.

Two sources explicitly refer to this disagreement between Epicurus and his predecessor. The first is a passage from Cicero's first *Tusculan Disputation.*

> fac enim sic animum interire ut corpus: num igitur aliquis dolor aut omnino post mortem sensus in corpore est? nemo id quidem dicit, etsi Democritum insimulat Epicurus, Democritii negant. (Cic. *Tusc.* 1.82)

αἴσθησιν. τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν ἄθροισμα διαμένον καὶ ὅλον καὶ κατὰ μέρος οὐκ ἔχει τὴν αἴσθησιν ἐκείνου ἀπηλλαγμένου, ὅσον ποτέ ἐστι τὸ συντεῖνον τῶν ἀτόμων πλῆθος εἰς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς φύσιν. καὶ μὴν καὶ λυομένου τοῦ ὅλου ἀθροίσματος ἡ ψυχὴ διασπείρεται καὶ οὐκέτι ἔχει τὰς αὐτὰς δυνάμεις οὐδὲ κινεῖται, ὥστε οὐδ' αἴσθησιν κέκτηται.

[24] C. Segal, *Lucretius on Death and Anxiety* (Princeton, 1990), 28.

[25] Compare the Ps.-Platonic *Axiochus* 369e3–370b1. Some people have seen in this passage an approximation to the idea of the unconscious. This person rationally believes one thing, but cannot entirely rid himself of some other link to the body. Cf. M. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, 1994), 202–3. K. R. Gladman and P. Mitsis, 'Lucretius and the unconscious', in K. Algra, M. H. Koenen, and P. H. Schrijvers (edd.), *Lucretius and his Intellectual Background* (Amsterdam, 1997), 215–24, at 217–18, resist ascribing any notion of the unconscious on the basis of this passage. Instead, the person in question holds two conflicting beliefs which undermine one another. This is expressed in the Axiochus passage in terms of a *peritropê.*

Grant then that the soul dies with the body. Surely then there will be no pain or perception at all in the body after death? Indeed no-one does say there will be. Even if Epicurus invents this charge against Democritus, the Democriteans deny it.

Cicero's character M. is arguing that even if the soul does not survive death and fly off towards heaven, death might not be an evil. His main reason for arguing such a thesis is the familiar thought that if the soul does not survive death then there is no *post mortem* sensation and therefore no pleasure or pain or anything else for that matter is perceived after death. In passing, he notes that no one who does hold that the soul does not survive death thinks that there can be sensation and pain after death, and that although no one does in fact say this, the Epicureans accuse Democritus of doing so.

Next, M. points out that although Epicurus made this accusation, it is false. Democritus said no such thing, and the 'Democriteans' oppose Epicurus' attack. Whoever these people are (and even if they are an imagined group of representatives of Democritus' view—since it seems unlikely that there was any distinct Democritean school at this time),[26] we can imagine the response they would give and the possible grounds for M.'s support. First, Democritus or his supporters could deny that sensation is one of the psychic functions which persists. After all, the evidence which Democritus used to argue for continued psychic functioning would point only to persistent growth and respiration, not perception. Alternatively (if the report of Alexander of Aphrodisias is accurate), he could instead argue that while any psychic functions remain the subject is not yet 'dead', but merely 'dying'. If, as Celsus relates, Democritus argued that there is no definite criterion for judging a moment of death, then Epicurus is certainly being unfair to him by charging that he is allowing 'the dead' to perceive—since whether or not these people are yet dead is precisely the question that Democritus wants to leave open. Perhaps, then, we should reclassify these still warm bodies as still 'alive'. Democritus can nevertheless agree with Epicurus that when (at last) the individual has died, from that moment on no harm or benefit can apply, since there is no longer a subject to be benefited or harmed.

Even this second response, however, may leave him open to further Epicurean discontent. It is clearly advantageous for the Epicurean project of alleviating anxiety about death for them to concentrate on the state of being dead rather than the process of dying. This latter can—it seems—certainly be painful and therefore in Epicurean terms a harm. The Epicureans did offer some thoughts about the process of dying, but these tend to be rather implausible. For example, Philodemus (in his *De Morte* col. 8) offers a rejoinder to some unnamed opponents who insist that the separation of body and soul must *always* be accompanied by great pain. He allows that there is a certain συμπάθεια between body and soul, but asks rhetorically how death could be a painful experience given that it occurs so quickly—as soon as pain might be felt anaisthesia occurs. The speed of death and the onset of anaisthesia is established by noting how small and mobile the atoms of the soul are, and therefore how quickly they disperse. Philodemus also claims that the dissipation of the soul can even on occasion be a pleasurable experience.[27] (The same argument is given at Cic. *Tusc.* 1.82.)

[26] There is a discussion of the relevant evidence in Warren (n. 1), 23–4.

[27] In Gigante's heavily restored text (8.20–4 Gigante): [ἐ]κ τίνος [δὴ] κἂν | εἴπ[ωμ]ε[ν ἀλγηδόν]ο[ς] αἰτία[ν εἶναι] | τὴ[ν τῶν τοιούτων διά]κρισιν λί[αν δε]‖δοίκα[σιν, ἧς τάχιστ' ἀ]ποτετελεσ|με[νης ἀναισθητήσομεν;] . . . (8.30–4 Gigante): κ]ἂν εἴ τις ἐπειδήπερ [ἐκ | τῶν] τοιούτω[ν] συνέστηκεν [ἀ]ξιώιη δ[ὴ | ταρ]αττόντων κατὰ τὴν σύνκρισ[ιν | οὕ]τως μεθ' ἡδονῆς γίν[εσθαι τὰς | τε]λευτάς, οὐκ ἂν ἀπίθαν[ον λέγοι . . .]. Cf. Sen. *De Prov.* 6.9: ipsum

The most famous example of composure in the face of death provided by the Epicureans is equally peculiar. Certainly, not everyone can be expected to show the same amount of composure as Epicurus, who famously declares on his deathbed that although he is suffering from a terrible kidney complaint, he nevertheless retains his *eudaimonia*. The reason given for this composure is the claim that physical pain can be counteracted effectively by recollecting or anticipating pleasant experiences.[28] Epicurus spends his time remembering philosophical conversations, and the pain dissipates. Both Cicero and, later, Plutarch leap eagerly to attack this claim, and make a great fuss about how ludicrous it is (Cic. *Fin.* 2.96–108; Plut. *Non Posse* 1089D–E).

In fact, the extensive Epicurean treatments of death tend not to dwell very much (if at all) on the process of dying except to say in passing that it does not have to hurt too much or last too long, and treat the pain of dying as they treat any pain—as easily avoidable or merely temporary. Sometimes they even peddle the sophism that 'if protracted, pain is tolerable, if intolerable, it does not last long' (that is, because it rapidly produces death).[29] It is therefore far better for them if they swiftly move on to discuss the state of being dead, where they are on much safer ground. Lucretius, for example, tends like Philodemus to stress the fragility of the soul's position in the body, implying that dying will be a momentary process as the fragile soul dissipates.[30] To be sure, Lucretius does include in his poem pictures of violent and savage pain and mutilation. He describes horrific and fatal injuries sustained during war, for example (see 5.994–8). But while he agrees—as he must since this is the reason why he thinks Epicurean therapy is so necessary—that life can be painful and full of injury, he equally insists that it need not be. These examples serve to turn the reader towards Epicureanism and its promise of constant pleasure and a death that causes no anxiety or pain. The overall message is that life can be lived in pleasure and death need not be painful or lingering.

At this stage it is worth stepping back to ask why, beyond mere scientific curiosity, Democritus was so interested in the study of corpses. We can only speculate on this point, but I suspect that by stressing the gradual dissolution of both body and soul during the process of dying, Democritus was offering empirical support for his materialist conception of the soul, which did not leave room for *post mortem* psychic existence. The soul is mortal because it gradually decays and dissipates in just the same way as the body.[31] Whereas the decay of the body is obvious and uncontroversial, the gradual loss of the soul must be inferred from visible clues such as the continued growth of fingernails for a period after death. If Democritus was

illud quod vocatur mori, quo anima discedit a corpore, brevius est quam ut sentiri tanta velocitas possit.

[28] See the letter to Idomeneus at D.L. 10.22, which Cicero quotes, but thinks was written to Hermarchus, at *Fin.* 2.96.

[29] Epic. *Ep. Men.* 133; *K.D.* 4; *S.V.* 4; Diog. Oin. 42 Smith (lower margin), 105 Smith; Cic. *Tusc.* 2.44; Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 24.14, 78.7; Plut. *De Poet. Aud.* 36B. See Us. 446–7. This argument is a sophism because it trades on an equivocation of the word 'tolerable': (1) it can be endured in the sense of not being very painful; (2) it can be endured in the sense that I can withstand the pain without dying. Arguing that a particular pain is not intolerable (i.e. the contradictory of sense 2) does not suffice to show it is tolerable in sense 1.

[30] Lucr. *D.R.N.* 3.208–30. Cf. Segal (n. 26), ch. 3. Also: *S.V.* 31: *πρὸς μὲν τἆλλα δυνατὸν ἀσφάλειαν πορίσασθαι, χάριν δὲ θανάτου πάντες ἄνθρωποι πόλιν ἀτείχιστον οἰκοῦμεν.* This image is reused at Philodemus *De Morte* 37.27–9. Cf. Gigante (n. 5), 194.

[31] B297: *ἔνιοι θνητῆς φύσεως διάλυσιν οὐκ εἰδότες ἄνθρωποι, συνειδήσει δὲ τῆς ἐν τῶι βίωι κακοπραγμοσύνης, τὸν τῆς βιοτῆς χρόνον ἐν ταραχαῖς καὶ φόβοις ταλαιπωρέουσι, ψεύδεα περὶ τοῦ μετὰ τὴν τελευτὴν μυθοπλαστέοντες χρόνου.* (= Stob. 4.34.62).

arguing against the view that at the moment of death an incorporeal soul departs the body, he would have good reason to stress that there are signs of residual psychic activity in an already decaying corpse. From this he can argue that the soul does not depart the body at the moment of death, but it too gradually dissipates as the body decays. If so, then there is a certain irony in Epicurus' return to a picture of a soul being released from the body at the moment of death. But this materialist version of death as the escape of a delicate soul held within a fragile container is something Epicurus is willing to promote in order to avoid the potentially worrying consequences of allowing a lengthy intermediate period between living and being dead.

To be sure, arguments can be found in Lucretius' third book of the *De Rerum Natura* which also seek to prove the mortality of the soul by the interconnection of body and soul, stressing for example that they grow, mature, and become senile together.[32] One of these arguments is particularly interesting.

> denique saepe hominem paulatim cernimus ire
> et membratim vitalem deperdere sensum;
> in pedibus primum digitos livescere et unguis,
> inde pedes et crura mori, post inde per artus
> ire alios tractim gelidi vestigia leti.
> scinditur atque animae haec quoniam natura nec uno
> tempore sincera exsistit, mortalis habendast. (3.526–32)

Then often we see a man pass away gradually and lose his vital sense limb by limb. First we see the toes and nails on the foot lose their colour, then the feet and legs die, and then the tracks of icy death progress creeping through the other limbs. And so, since this nature of the soul is divided and does not step away whole at a particular moment, then it should be thought to be mortal.

It is tempting to read this picture of cold death creeping from the extremities inwards as a deliberate recollection of the effects of hemlock as related in Plato's *Phaedo* 117e4–118a8.[33] But here the gradual loss of sensation is made to show that the soul is mortal—quite the opposite to Socrates' preferred conclusion. If I am right, Lucretius and Epicurus inherited this form of argument from Democritus, and are obviously happy to return to this material when arguing for the mortality of the soul and specifically contrast their conclusion with the view that the soul departs from the body instantaneously and intact (*nec uno tempore sincera exsistit*). Nevertheless, in contrast to some of the Democritean *testimonia*, Lucretius avoids saying that the soul continues to function after death, insisting merely that since sensation can be lost gradually *before* death, the soul must be a destructible compound. The emphasis in this passage is certainly on the gradual loss of all sensation rather than any accompanying perception or pain.

Lucretius also talks about the gradual putrefaction of a corpse, but he maintains that this only begins to occur when the soul has been entirely destroyed. Indeed he makes the destruction and dispersal of the soul the cause of the body's decay: 3.341–3, 580–81. In this way he follows Epicurus in insisting on the interdependence of body

[32] For the general strategy of stressing the interconnection of body and soul, see Lucr. *D.R.N.* 3.445ff. (body and soul mature and grow old together), 459ff. (body and soul both susceptible to disease), 558ff. Also cf. Diog. Oin. 73.1.8–2.1 Smith: οὐδὲ φρίτ[τω] τὴν μύδησιν ἐν[θυ]μούμενος τὴν | [τοῦ σ]ώματος, πεπει[σ]μένος γε] οὐκ εἶ[ν]αι πά[θος | ἡμεῖν τῆς] ψυχῆς ἀ[να]ισ[θητούσης], οὐδ' ἄλλο οὐδὲν.

[33] A possibility noted by Kenney ad loc. Of course, Lucretius does here claim that we often (*saepe*) see this occurring and deaths by hemlock can never have been particularly common.

and soul. The body acts as a container and protection for the delicate soul (*vas*, *τὸ στεγάζον*) but it can only function as such a container so long as there is a soul present to maintain and organize the body.[34]

Elsewhere in Book 3 Lucretius also avoids any hint that the dead or decaying body may still perceive, even though he does describe twitching severed heads and limbs: 642–56. (But even here, at 645–6, he insists that no pain is noticed because the injury is so abrupt.) He does, of course, allow that some psychic atoms remain in a decaying corpse, since these are the matter from which are formed the maggots and other living creatures that emerge from the body (3.713–21, cf. 2.886–930). Again, Lucretius avoids any implication that the corpse is still in any sense alive, or that any psychic activity persists in the decaying body. Rather, some of the atoms that once functioned as part of the soul may remain and can be recycled to form other ensouled creatures.

The second of the sources which point to a rift between Democritus and Epicurus comes from Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Republic*.

τὴν μὲν περὶ τῶν ἀποθανεῖν δοξάντων ἔπειτα ἀναβιούντων ἱστορίαν ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ τῶν παλαιῶν ἤθροισαν καὶ Δημόκριτος ὁ φυσικὸς ἐν τοῖς Περὶ τοῦ Ἅιδου γράμμασιν. καὶ τὸν θαυμαστὸν ἐκεῖνον Κωλώτην, τὸν Πλάτωνος ἐχθρόν, Ἐπικούρειον ὄντα πάντως ἔδει [τὰ τοῦ] καθηγεμόνος τῶν Ἐπικούρου δ[ογμάτων] μὴ ἀγνοῆσαι μηδὲ ἀγνοήσαντα ζητεῖν, πῶς τὸν ἀποθανόντα πάλιν ἀναβιῶναι δυνατόν. οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁ θάνατος ἦν ἀπόσβεσις, ὡς ἔοικεν, τῆς συμπάσης ζωῆς τοῦ σώματος, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ μὲν πληγῆς τινος ἴσως καὶ τραύματος παρεῖτο, τῆς δὲ ψυχῆς οἱ περὶ τὸν μυελὸν ἔμενον ἔτι δεσμοὶ κατερριζωμένοι καὶ ἡ καρδία τὸ ἐμπύρευμα τῆς ζωῆς εἶχεν ἐγκείμενον τῶι βάθει· καὶ τούτων μενόντων αὖθις ἀνεκτήσατο τὴν ἀπεσβηκυῖαν ζωὴν ἐπιτήδειον πρὸς τὴν ψύχωσιν γενόμενον.
(Procl. *in Remp.* 2.113.6ff. Kroll)

Many other ancients have put together a discussion of those who appear to have died but revive—including Democritus the natural philosopher in his work *On Hades*. So that wondrous Colotes, Plato's enemy, being an Epicurean, ought not to have been ignorant of the teachings of Epicurus' master, nor to ask in his ignorance how it is possible for someone who is dead to revive once more. For [in Er's case] death was not—so it seems—the dwindling of the whole life of the body, but came about perhaps through some blow or wound, but the bonds of the soul remained rooted about the innermost part and the heart kept the vital fire lying in the depths. And with these remaining, the body was still fitted out for animation and it rekindled the burned-out life.

It is easy to see how readers of the story of Er the Pamphylian from Plato's *Republic* 614b ff. might recall Democritus, especially if he sought to establish the very un-Platonic thesis of the soul's mortality by observing corpses. Er dies in a war and his body is left on the battlefield. But when his comrades return after ten days to gather their dead they notice that his corpse has not decayed at all. (Plato marks how unusual this is by contrasting the bodies of the other soldiers, 614b4–5: *ἀναιρεθέντων δεκαταίων τῶν νεκρῶν ἤδη διεφθαρμένων, ὑγιὴς μὲν ἀνῃρέθη.*)[35] Two days later,

[34] See *Ep. Hdt.* 63–6 and J. Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley, 1992), 147–51.

[35] An undecayed corpse is a sign of divine concern for the fallen warrior: Hom. *Il.* 19.32–9, 24.18–21, 24.413–14. On collecting and identifying the remains of hoplite dead, see P. Vaughn, 'The identification and retrieval of the hoplite battle dead', in V. D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience* (London, 1991), 38–62, V. D. Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (Berkeley, 1991), 203–9. The defeated army could retrieve their dead only once the victors had left the field and had completed stripping the bodies of

when placed on a pyre, Er revives and tells them that in the meantime he has been to the world beyond and has been sent as a messenger to tell mortals about the fate of their immortal souls. Proclus is responding to the Epicurean Colotes' attack on Plato's story of Er. Colotes argues that Er could not have revived, as Plato says he did, after ten days.[36] Proclus responds by pointing out that many natural philosophers have related similar stories, or have thought that such things are possible.[37] He then reproaches Colotes for not knowing this, since one of those natural philosophers was Democritus, Epicurus' philosophical predecessor, writing in a work *On Things in Hades*.[38]

Evident once more is Democritus' interest in the notion that the process of dying is gradual and can in fact be reversed. If it takes some time for the process of passing from full psychic functioning (life) to none (being dead), and that process takes the form of a gradual loss of psychic functions as the body/soul complex dissolves, it might indeed be possible for that process to stop and perhaps even reverse.[39] Whether Colotes disapproved merely of this particular story of revival, or opposed the very possibility of anything like this happening, is unclear.[40]

There is in any case a pleasing irony in Proclus' use of a renowned materialist to support a Platonic text against the attacks of Democritus' own materialist successors, especially if I am right in thinking that Democritus' views were constructed as part of a criticism of views like those to be found in Plato. In addition to trading on the common idea that Epicurus is Democritus' successor and therefore ought to be aware of and in agreement with his predecessor's views, Proclus is offering his dialectical move against the background of the known disagreement between Epicurus and Democritus on this matter. The Epicurean opponent is placed in a particularly uncomfortable position. Either Colotes turns out to be ignorant of his predecessor's views and therefore can be presumed to be on shaky ground when criticizing Plato, or he has omitted some important preliminary arguments. Before he can turn to attack Plato, Proclus insists that Colotes ought to be clear about the disagreements within his

trophies. After ten days lying in the open, and prone to predation in a climate such as that in the Mediterranean, the putrefaction of a corpse would be quite advanced. Identification of individuals' remains would be quite difficult after such a period. Cf. Menander *Aspis* 68–72: (*Σμ.*) *ἐν δὲ τοῖς νεκροῖς | πεπτωκότ' εἶδες τοῦτον;* (*Δα.*) *αὐτὸν μὲν σαφῶς | οὐκ ἦν ἐπιγνῶναι· τετάρτην ἡμέραν | ἐρριμμένοι γὰρ ἦσαν ἐξωιδηκότες | τὰ πρόσωπα.* For further details, see B. Knight, *Forensic Pathology* (London, 1991), 47–86.

[36] Colotes is also reported at Proclus' *In Remp.* 2.116.19ff. as arguing that Er could not have been dead for ten days without putrefying. He seems to have offered an extended discussion of this section of the *Republic*, identifying Er with Zoroaster and accusing Plato of plagiarism. Proclus' *In Remp.* 2.109.7ff. summarizes the ensuing debate. Also see 2.105.23ff. for more of Colotes' criticisms.

[37] He gives two lengthy examples of such stories at 2.114.3–116.18.

[38] D.L. 9.46, and Athenaeus 168b refer to a work *Περὶ τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου*, which Proclus probably intends here. Diels–Kranz print the references to Democritus in Philodemus' *De Morte* as also coming from this work, but there is no evidence that this is correct. H. Gottschalk, 'Democritus FV 68 B1: an amputation', *Phronesis* 31 (1986), 90–1, argues that Proclus takes no more from Democritus than the fact that he mentions the possibility of dying people coming back to life. The explanation Proclus provides is remarkably like a passage from Plato's *Timaeus* 73b. Cf. J. H. Waszink, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De Anima* (Amsterdam, 1947), 529 for a similar suggestion.

[39] Cf. Pliny *N.H.* 7.189–90: similis et de conservandis corporibus hominum ac reviviscendi promisso a Democrito vanitas, qui non revixit ipse.

[40] Tertullian also notes the miraculous preservation of Er's body alongside Democritus' interest in the continued growth of corpses' fingernails (*De An.* 51.2). He accuses both Plato and

own atomist faction. He ought to provide and properly articulate some relevant distinction between his view and that of Democritus since, on the story Proclus gives, Democritus supports rather than undermines the plausibility of Plato's myth.

The difference of opinion between Democritus and the Epicureans was not solely and probably not primarily a consequence of their slightly different physical theories about the number and position of atoms in the soul and the relationship of the soul and the body. Rather, Democritus' initial investigations into the process of dying served an ethical purpose by bolstering his materialist conception of the soul, and making that conception work as a premise for an argument against the existence of an afterlife. The Epicureans warmly welcomed that goal and on occasion returned to Democritean-style arguments in their own proofs of the soul's mortality, but they preferred to do without Democritus' gradual model of the process of dying. They felt that their claim that death is 'nothing to us' and the benefits for living a happy life which flow from removing the fear of death would be best defended if the distinction between living and being dead were clear, sharp, and immediately recognizable.

Corpus Christi College, Cambridge J. I. WARREN
jiw1001@cam.ac.uk