Phillip Mitsis has delivered a valiant and ingenious defense of Epicurus against the charge of *ignoratio elenchi*—overlooking or not addressing the principal reason for our worries about death. I think the defense is well taken; but in the end it does not succeed, for the simple reason that Epicurus' case, as described by Mitsis, seems to me hopeless. If Epicurus wanted to persuade us that we should be indifferent as to the prospects of dying at 18 or at 80, something must be wrong with his argument.

Let me first describe the state of the argument as I see it. I agree with Mitsis that Epicurus' notorious dictum about our non-existence after death provides quite a good argument as far as it goes—that is, to show that we have no reason to be afraid of any harm or suffering in a situation where we do not exist. I cannot make much sense of the stories about posthumous misfortunes that allegedly affect our happiness. It seems obvious to me that those misfortunes must be counterfactual. What we mean when we say, for example, that the failure of someone's most cherished projects after their death made their lives less successful, must be that they would have been distressed, had they lived to witness it. Luckily, we sometimes say, they died before it happened.

But of course all that this shows is that we need not fear being dead, not that we should not be afraid to die. For what we fear is not the state of non-existence, but the loss of our life, and the curtailment of all our plans and projects. It is not much use pointing out that we will not be there to feel the loss
or disappointment, since what we desire is not, or not primarily, our experiencing the joys of life or the fulfillment of our wishes, but the continuation of certain states of affairs or the completion of certain projects that would not be the same if we ceased to exist. Thus we do not want our children to grow up as orphans, or we may want to finish writing a book or painting a picture. To be sure, people who want to finish a book will want for themselves to finish it, not somebody else, but that, we might say, is because it is their book, and it would not be the same work if someone else finished it. This does not mean, I think, that posthumous events do affect us after all. Once we are dead, we can no longer worry—but why should that prevent us from worrying now?

This is the argument Epicurus ought to have addressed—and, as Mitsis points out, to some extent he seems to do so. I agree with Mitsis that the lines he quotes from Lucretius are not a mere repetition of the previous argument about non-existence: they refer to our present attitudes to the time before our birth or after our death, inviting us to realize that we have no more reason to be concerned about our posthumous future than about our prenatal non-existence. If we are concerned about “duration per se” (I take this to mean mere length of life, as opposed to, say, quality), then surely it should not matter where the extension comes, at the beginning or at the end. But we seem, oddly, to be concerned only about future additions or losses—we are distressed to think we might live three years less, but we do not seem to mind at all that we were not born three years earlier. It would have made a difference if we had been around earlier, and it will make a difference, we hope, if we are no longer around. But we do not seem to be upset by the thought of what we missed before we were born, so why do we worry about what we would miss after we have died? Why should we entertain such an irrational bias toward the future?

Mitsis examines a number of recent arguments that attempt to justify our asymmetrical attitudes, but finds them inconclusive.

1. This is not quite correct: consider the child who wishes he were born three months earlier so he could enter first grade together with his best friend. But then he is not concerned about duration—he might equally well wish that his friend were born three months later.