

LUCRETIUS ON THE CYCLE OF LIFE AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

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1. Introduction

Lucretius strives mightily in Book III of *De Rerum Natura* to convince the reader that death is annihilation, and hence that death should not be feared. Two of his arguments against the fear of death have received extensive philosophical analysis: the *symmetry argument*,¹ in which Lucretius argues that the infinite stretch of post-mortem non-existence is no more horrible than the infinite stretch of pre-natal non-existence, and the *no subject of harm argument*,² in which Lucretius argues that death cannot be something harmful for the person who has died because after death there is nobody there to be harmed. However, between these two arguments, Lucretius gives a third argument against the fear of death, which I will call the *cycle of life argument*, in which he argues that death should not be feared because it is a necessary part of the natural cycle of life and death. This argument has received little philosophical attention, except by Martha Nussbaum, who asserts that it is quite strong.³ However, I think that Nussbaum's view is unsustainable, and I will offer my own therapeutic reading. I will argue for the following points: (1) The cycle of life argument is quite distinct from the better-known Epicurean arguments: not only does it start from different premises, but it is a completely different *type* of argument. (2) The argument is deeply problematic. It relies on premises that are much more at home in Stoic than in Epicurean ethics, and Lucretius' appeal to nature contradicts what he says elsewhere in *De Rerum Natura*. Finally, I will consider why

¹ *DRN* III 972-977. It is preserved only in *DRN*.

² *DRN* III 862-930, echoing *Ep. Men.* 125 and *KD* 2. Listing all of the articles and books discussing these arguments would be out of place, since I do not deal with them here except in passing. However, an excellent collection of articles is Fischer (1993). Braddock (2000) offers a defense of the Epicurean arguments that also contains discussion of and references to much of the recent literature.

³ Nussbaum (1994), chapter 6, esp. pp. 222-225. This chapter is a revised version of Nussbaum (1989).

Lucretius offers what appears to be such a flawed argument, and whether something like the cycle of life argument could be offered consistently by an Epicurean. The most charitable way of reading the argument is as an *ad hominem* or dialectical argument aimed at people who still hold non-Epicurean attitudes towards nature.

2. *The Cycle of Life Argument: Exposition*

Immediately after the “no subject of harm” argument, Lucretius has the voice of nature scold us for still fearing death. The main point of nature’s speech is that the wise person can attain the good life, and adding extra years to one’s life would add nothing to one’s happiness.⁴ Then, after nature upbraids a wretched old man who is lamenting his impending death, Lucretius adds,

Such a rebuke from Nature would be right,
For the old order yields before the new,
All things require refashioning from others.
No man goes down to Hell’s black pit; we need
Matter for generations yet to come.
Who, in their turn, will follow you, as men
have died before you and will die hereafter.
So one thing never ceases to arise
Out of another; life’s a gift to no man
Only a loan to him.⁵

The first point to make is that Lucretius *is* presenting an argument here; it is not merely a piece of rhetoric, poetry, or satire, rather than philosophy,⁶ although Lucretius’ presentation of the argument is highly rhetorical. The speech of nature introduces the conclusion: that one should not fear death. Lucretius says that this assertion by Nature is

⁴ *DRN* III 931-962. This echoes what Epicurus says in *KD* 19 and 20.

⁵ *DRN* III 963-971. Translations here and elsewhere are from Humphries (1968).

⁶ This is how Furley by implication characterizes the passage. In Furley (1986) p. 82, he says that all of the latter part of Book III other than the arguments he explicitly considers are not philosophy but just rhetoric, poetry, or satire.

correct, and then, using the corroborative conjunction *enim* ('for'),⁷ he introduces his reason in support of it: one's death is a necessary part of an ongoing natural cycle in which new life emerges from the death of those who have come before. He further supports his assertion that one's own death is a necessary part of this cycle: the matter which composes present creatures is needed in order to make future ones.⁸ Three features of this argument should be noted:

(1) Unlike the better-known Epicurean arguments against the fear of death, or the previous speech in which Nature says that additional time would not make a person any happier, this argument does not consider the status and interests of the individual agent and then assert that death is not something bad *for that agent*. Instead, it invites the agent to depart from a narrow consideration of death from his own point of view and instead to look upon it from a different perspective. As Nussbaum puts it, this argument asks us that we "look at our personal situation from a wider viewpoint, the viewpoint of the lives and interests of all living things, both present and future."⁹ So, the conclusion of this

⁷ The use of *enim* gives good *prima facie* reason for viewing what follows as argumentative support for the assertion that what Nature says is right, but it is not decisive, since Lucretius could be using the word simply for metrical purposes. Bailey (1947), p. 1150, Brown (1997) p. 202, and Kenney (1971) pp. 219-220, in their commentaries, all label this passage as an additional and independent argument against the fear of death, but none give it much analysis.

⁸ I will not quibble with the empirical part of Lucretius' argument—that, in some sense, death is necessary for the continuance of life. Even if we take quite literally (as we ought not to) Lucretius' talk about our matter being needed for future generations, this could be cashed out as follows: with an infinite amount of time, if nobody ever died, and with continued reproduction, all of the matter that could be taken up by living beings would eventually be taken up, which would halt the cycle of life. (However, if this is what Lucretius is relying on, the empirical part of the argument would be flawed, because an indefinitely extended process of generation need not take up the infinite matter in the universe.) But we need not understand the argument this way. Lucretius' turn of phrase is best understood, I think, as a metaphor for the ecological need that creatures die in order to free up resources (including their own bodies as food) for future generations. If there were no death, overpopulation and resource depletion would soon rear their heads. That elements need to cycle within an ecosystem for the life of that ecosystem to continue is a commonplace within ecology. For an introduction to these issues, see Ricklefs (2001) pp. 2-??, and the diagram on p. 145 for an illustration of the cycling of materials. For an imaginative depiction, in the spirit of Lucretius, of a single atom cycling through various life-forms in a prairie ecosystem, see the section 'Odyssey' of Aldo Leopold's essay 'Wisconsin' (in Leopold (1987) pp. 104-108).

⁹ Nussbaum (1994) p. 222.

argument is not that my death is not bad *for me*, and thus should not be feared. Instead, it is that death is not a bad thing, when considered from this wider perspective, and thus should not be feared.

(2) The wider perspective that Lucretius appeals to is nature as a whole—or at least, the natural cycle of life and death in which all living things participate. Thus, Lucretius is arguing that one should not fear death because, ecologically, death is an inevitable and necessary part of life.

(3) Because this argument does not try to establish that death is not something bad *for the agent*, it does not depend on the supposition that, in order for something to be either good or bad for an agent, that agent must exist. Thus, it could be put forward by somebody who disagrees with the Epicurean thesis that death does not deprive the person who has died of anything valuable.

2. *The Cycle of Life Argument: Analysis*

Nussbaum states that “This argument is strong.”¹⁰ I disagree. At least from within an Epicurean perspective, it is quite weak. Each of the three points about this argument enumerated above fits in badly with orthodox Epicureanism, and indeed with Lucretius’ own writings elsewhere.¹¹

(1) Epicurean ethics takes as its starting-point the drives and desires of individual animals to discover what is intrinsically good *for that animal*. The mere fact that all

¹⁰ Nussbaum (1994) p. 223.

¹¹ In fairness to Nussbaum, I should note that she is using Lucretius’ argument for her own purposes, and she also admits that there are internal tensions in Lucretius’ position. Thus, her endorsement of the “cycle of life” argument should not be taken as evidence that she thinks that it can squared with all of the tenets of orthodox Epicureanism. She admits that it can’t. Although the tensions with orthodox Epicureanism that she identifies are quite different from the ones that I discuss, I strongly suspect that the elements of orthodox Epicureanism that I here identify as inconsistent with the cycle of life argument would also be ones that Nussbaum disapproves of. Her main point is that this argument seems to conflict with the “godlike detachment” that Lucretius elsewhere preaches, i.e., that one limit one’s desires to natural and necessary desires whose fulfillment cannot be frustrated by death.

humans desire pleasure for oneself for its own sake is enough to prove that pleasure is intrinsically good for oneself.¹² Thus, the appeal that Lucretius makes in the “cycle of life” argument, to adopt a wider perspective and see that death is not a bad thing from the viewpoint of nature as a whole, is profoundly alien to Epicurean ethics, since the perspective in Epicurean ethics is always a *first-person* perspective: what is valuable *for me*.

For Epicureans, nothing can be good *per se*, it is always good *for some individual agent*. To think otherwise is not only false, but engenders moral skepticism. Polystratus, the third scholarch of the Garden, writes that value predicates must be thought of as relative (but nonetheless as real), in order to avoid skeptical *ou mallon* arguments. He says that “fair,” “foul,” and the like, should be thought of like “bigger,” or “healthy.” Nothing can be bigger *per se*, or healthy *per se*, but such relative predicates are nonetheless real, and we should think of value predicates in the same sort of way.¹³

It is true that, in the case of justice, Epicurus appeals to the wider social usefulness of certain practices when justifying those practices. However, when discussing the overall usefulness of these practices, this always reduces to the usefulness of the practice for each of the members of the community, and when discussing why one ought to obey the dictates of justice, the appeal is always back to the interests of the individual agent.¹⁴

(2) In particular, appealing to the “naturalness” of death—in the sense of it being an inevitable part of natural processes—in order to support the conclusion that death is

¹² See *DF* I 30-31 and Sextus Empiricus *PH* 3.194 (398U).

¹³ Polystratus, *On Irrational Contempt*, 23.26-26.23. This passage is discussed in more detail in O'Keefe (1997) pp. 126-129.

not something bad is quite out of place within an Epicurean world-view. The Stoics can quite easily make such an appeal, since they believe that every event in the world is part of a providentially organized series of events, set up by a wise and all-good God. As Epictetus puts it: "Just as a target is not set up to be missed, in the same way nothing bad by nature happens in the world."¹⁵

Epicureans vigorously oppose any such teleological thesis. Lucretius argues at length that the world is not created by the gods, and one of his main arguments is that the world is too flawed to be devised by the gods for the sake of humanity. He cites bad weather, predatory beasts, and diseases as examples of the flaws in the world. He concludes this section by emphasizing that newly-born infants rightly cry out, considering all of the sorrows that await them in an inhospitable world.¹⁶

Furthermore, Lucretius argues that the apparently purposive adaptation of organs to serve a function is not the result of any divine design or intrinsic Aristotelian teleology. Instead, function follows form, and the apparent design is the result of ill-suited organisms that were thrown up from the earth dying out in a process of natural selection.¹⁷

Thus, Lucretius believes that natural processes, although they can be given causal explanations, occur for absolutely no purpose or reason. Sometimes the results of these

¹⁴ See Armstrong (1997) and O'Keefe (2001), esp. pp. 136-140, for more description of the reasons given by Epicureans to obey the dictates of the 'justice contract.'

¹⁵ *Enchiridion* 27. Translations of Epictetus here and elsewhere are from White (1983).

¹⁶ See *DRN* V 156-234 for his general attack on the world being a creation of the gods, *DRN* V 195 ff. for his enumeration of the evils of the world, and *DRN* V 222-227 for his description of the new-born infant. It might be for this reason that Bailey (1947) p. 1150 labels the argument "strange," but unfortunately he does not give his reasons for this judgement. Kenney (1971) p. 220 tries to defend the argument from Bailey's charge by noting that it is a "biological commonplace" that the deaths of individuals are needed for the survival of the species; he goes on to say that the sentiment that life is just a loan to man is also commonplace. However, Kenney does not note that whether such biological facts and sentiments are commonplace is not the primary issue; rather, it is whether an Epicurean can cogently appeal to such facts and sentiments in order to undermine the fear of death.

processes are beneficial to us, and sometimes they are harmful, but in and of themselves they are neither good nor bad. Thus, showing that death is an inevitable part of a natural process should do nothing to establish that death is not bad.

Nussbaum writes that one result of looking at things from the perspective that Lucretius recommends is that “our own anxieties look small,” and that “contemplating and caring for the whole, we are ashamed to be wrapped up in ourselves.” She approvingly quotes Santayana: “One who lives the life of the universe cannot be much concerned with his own.”¹⁸ However noble such sentiments might sound, though, they would be anathema to an Epicurean. One’s own interests should *not* be justified in terms of how they fit into some overarching scheme of value. As Thomas Nagel notes, “Those seeking to supply their lives with meaning usually envision a role or function in something larger than themselves.”¹⁹ However, as he also notes, viewing one’s life *sub specie aeternitatis* can also lead to a feeling of absurdity, when one is unable to find an ‘ultimate justification’ for one’s concerns *sub specie aeternitatis*.²⁰ But, whereas Nagel thinks that needing to find some ultimate justification for one’s concerns *sub specie aeternitatis* is “inherent in our capacity for self-consciousness and self-transcendence,”²¹ Epicurus would regard the demand that pleasure must be shown to be good *sub specie aeternitatis*, apart from our natural pursuit and approval of it, as perverse and misguided, a remnant of the superstition that Lucretius rails against in *De Rerum Natura*. Just as the longing for immortality needs to be rejected in order to make one content with the

¹⁷ *DRN* IV 823-857 and V 837 ff.

¹⁸ Nussbaum (1994) p. 222.

¹⁹ Nagel (1971) p. 16.

²⁰ Nagel (1971) p. 15, pp. 21-22.

²¹ Nagel (1971) pp. 21-22.

mortality of life,²² so too the desire for some “larger” justification for one’s activities and desires needs to be rejected.

(3) There are many other inevitable results of natural processes that Lucretius discusses, for which a similar ecological argument for their necessity could be given. However, the way that Lucretius describes these makes it clear that he regards them as bad. Examples include Lucretius’ horrific descriptions of a person watching as he is being devoured by a wild beast, of another person slowly dying as he presses his hands over sores dripping pus after being mauled, and of the effects of the plague on Athens that closes the poem.²³ The paralyzed caterpillar may need to be eaten alive by the wasp larvae as part of the natural cycle of predator and prey that preserves an ecological balance, but it still hurts.²⁴

Finally, two other oddities of this argument should be noted. First of all, the argument appeals either to the necessity of death for the natural cycle of life as such—as Nussbaum puts it, our death is “necessary for the continued life and health of the whole”²⁵—or it appeals, instead, to the interests of “unborn others.”²⁶ However, an Epicurean should certainly realize that nothing can be good or bad for “unborn others,” so one cannot appeal to their interests. After all, imagine that one were able to stop the cycle of life by *fiat* so that one could live forever, and thereby prevent unborn others from coming into existence. Since the “unborn others” would then never exist, one cannot

²² *Ep. Men.* 124.

²³ The animal attacks are described in *DRN* V 988 ff., the Athenian plague in *DRN* VI 1138ff.

²⁴ The reproductive habits of the ichneumon wasps were a cause of great concern for natural theologians and scientists of the nineteenth century, and were cited by Darwin as one cause for his own doubts about the existence of a beneficent and omnipotent God. For more information, see chapter two of Gould (1983), “Nonmoral Nature.”

²⁵ Nussbaum (1994) p. 222.

²⁶ Nussbaum (1994) p. 223.

sensibly say that one has harmed *them*, since potential people have no interests.²⁷ So, despite its philosophical difficulties, it must be the value of the natural cycle itself that Lucretius is appealing to.

Secondly, at the end of the argument Lucretius notes that “life is a gift to no man, only a loan to him.” This is a striking echo of Epictetus’ injunction that, when things happen like one’s child dying, “Never say about anything, ‘I have lost it,’ but instead, ‘I have given it back,’”²⁸ and, to a lesser extent, of *Phaedo* 62a ff., in which Socrates argues against suicide by noting that each person is not owner of himself, but is rather the property of the gods. And earlier, in the “voice of nature” passage, Lucretius says that facing death you should “take your leave as men go from a banquet, fed to the full on life’s good feast,” reminiscent of Epictetus’ injunction that “you must behave as you do at a banquet. Something is passed around and comes to you: reach out your hand politely and take some. It goes by: do not hold it back.”²⁹

But Epictetus and Plato have the metaphysics to be able to assert, more or less literally, that things should rightly be regarded as only loaned to one, since everything that occurs ultimately is the responsibility of God or the gods, whereas none of this is available to Lucretius. Perhaps it would better to regard this part of the *De Rerum Natura* as simply a poetical way of Lucretius rendering the proposition that one should realize that one does not *deserve* any of the goods of life, and in fact, that one is alive at all is simply fortuitous. As Nussbaum puts it, “This thought...does diminish the thought of

²⁷ Lucretius himself makes precisely this point in *DRN* V 174 ff. “How would we be hurt if we were never born?...if a man has never had a taste of life...how could nonbeing do him any harm?” See Adams (1979) for an interesting application of considerations of this sort to the Problem of Evil.

²⁸ *Enchiridion* 11.

²⁹ *Enchiridion* 15.

injustice that frequently accompanies the thought of death.”³⁰ But even regarded this way, the sentiment is rather strange, since the Epicurean hatred of pain, and disparagement of it as an evil, does *not* rely on thinking that one *deserves* pleasures and *deserves* not to be in pain—notions of entitlement or desert do not enter into the equation at all. Similarly, a person who regarded death as a loss could say that Lucretius’ assertion introduces a red herring into the discussion, since the person who fears death need not think that he *deserves* eternal life.

4. *The Cycle of Life Argument: Rehabilitation?*

It appears, then, that the cycle of life argument is profoundly misguided. Although this sort of argument can be given, it should really be given by a Stoic or a Platonist, not a good Epicurean. So why would have Lucretius presented such a broken-backed argument? Three types of answer can be given: (1) Lucretius did not realize how bad this argument was; (2) Lucretius knowingly presented a bad argument that he thought would nonetheless be therapeutically effective; and (3) the argument is not as bad as it first appears. Let us explore each of these answers.

4a. *Unwitting Ineptitude*

(1), obviously, is not very appealing, but it cannot be ignored. Much if its plausibility depends upon the strength of the arguments against the “cycle of life” argument presented above. Therefore, I will not spend much time examining it here. However, the question arises: why ignore the principle of charity here, and attribute to Lucretius fairly glaring inconsistencies? Two replies can be given: (i) Lucretius is primarily a poet, and not a philosopher. Therefore, he presents some fairly sophisticated arguments in *De Rerum Natura*, but he cannot be credited with any great philosophical

³⁰ Nussbaum (1994) p. 223.

insight. If he had devised or picked up arguments that were blatantly inconsistent with what he said elsewhere, perhaps he did not notice this inconsistency. (ii) The period in which Lucretius wrote was much more eclectic and less agonistic than the period in which the various Hellenistic philosophies were first devised. It's quite plausible to suppose that Lucretius was exposed to some arguments and imagery, probably of Stoic provenance, regarding the place of death within the cycle of life, found them appealing, and incorporated them into *De Rerum Natura* without realizing that they did not fit within his own Epicurean viewpoint.

4b. Ad Hominem Therapy

(2) can best be defended as follows: Lucretius realizes that the mere fact that death is part of some "natural" cycle cannot be used, from an Epicurean point of view, in order to give a cogent argument that death is not a bad thing. Nonetheless, he also realizes that many people still have some sort of reverence for the processes of nature, and he also recognizes the point that Nagel makes: many people find it comforting to see their concerns as fitting into some larger process with which they identify. As Nagel puts it, they "identify enough with the larger enterprise to find their role in it fulfilling."³¹ Thus, Lucretius could be tapping into the irrational passions of those who might be receptive to the general Epicurean philosophy in order to help them attain *ataraxia*. After all, Lucretius says that many people who believe that death is annihilation still have irrational fears about what will happen to their bodies after they die, based upon an unacknowledged half-conviction that a part of them will still somehow survive their deaths.³² Similarly, even those who consciously believe that the processes of nature occur

³¹ Nagel (1971) p. 16.

³² *DRN* III 870-911.

for no purpose whatsoever may still harbor a wish to have their lives fit into something larger than themselves, and Lucretius is tapping into this sort of sentiment in order to induce *ataraxia* and to counteract the harmful passions that are still in the souls of Memmius and ourselves. We may still worry about our legs being gnawed by worms after our deaths, but then we counterbalance this unpleasant thought with one in which we fit this picture into a larger one in which the gnawing of our legs fulfills an overarching purpose with which we identify.

Two considerations can be brought in favor of this interpretation of the argument: first of all, the psychology behind it is plausible. Many people who are not theists, or who even consciously repudiate any sort of teleology in the world as a whole, still have an emotional identification with at least certain parts of the (non-purposive) “natural order.” After all, in presentations of the Problem of Evil is it often protested, even by non-theists, that supposed “evils,” such as disease and earthquakes, are only evils when viewed from the point of view of humans, and when viewed of terms of “nature,” are both inevitable and necessary to preserve the ‘natural balance’ and keep down population.³³ Secondly, the Epicureans give a purely instrumental justification for the value of arguments—arguments are good insofar as they promote *ataraxia*—as they give a purely instrumental justification of much else. Sextus Empiricus says that the Pyrrhonist will sometimes deliberately put forward weak arguments when he believes that they will be causally effective for promoting the tranquility of the patient, and given the entirely

³³ See the sources referred to in footnote 8 for the biological justification of such appeals. Biology and ecology textbooks often explicitly mention moving from a limited anthropocentric to a broader ecocentric viewpoint when viewing unpleasant natural processes, *e.g.*, “Fungi are highly effective decomposers... [and] are the primary agents of rot—unpleasant to our senses and sensibilities, perhaps, but very important to ecosystem function.” (Ricklefs (2001) pp. 8-9) See also the Leopold selection on an atom’s journey for a depiction of the ‘cycle of life’ in such a way that it would reinforce the attractiveness of viewing things from this point of view.

instrumentalist account that Epicureans present of the value of rationality, there is no reason in principle why they should not do the same.³⁴ A similar therapeutic strategy could be one of the factors underlying Lucretius' invocation of nature as Venus at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura* and his extended description of earth as a mother-goddess.³⁵ One of the main emotional obstacles facing those who might otherwise embrace Epicureanism is that they still want to believe in something larger than themselves, and, as a provisional measure at least, Lucretius is trying to transfer this emotion, which otherwise would attach itself to positively harmful ideals like the Stoics' all-pervading *logos* or the Olympian deities, to the purely mechanical and purposeless dance of atoms in the void, which throws up *cosmoi* and life for no reason whatsoever.³⁶

However, two arguments can be brought against this interpretation. First of all, Lucretius repeatedly talks about how only reasoned argument can work to dispel the turmoil most people feel. Although it might be true that a purely instrumentalist justification of the value of arguments is given within Epicureanism, this is quite compatible with thinking that—as a matter of fact—only rationally compelling arguments will be effective. This seems to be Lucretius' own belief.³⁷ In this way, the Epicurean attitude toward cogency in argumentation would be similar to their attitude toward virtue—although both might be only instrumentally valuable, both are still necessary, and so one is not justified in giving bad arguments or in performing vicious actions. It is not clear how strong this counter-argument is, however. After all, the rhetoric of rationality is

³⁴ Sextus Empiricus *PH* III 280-1. For much more on this topic see Nussbaum (1986).

³⁵ *DRN* I 1-43, II 594-660.

³⁶ Lucretius admits that the Epicurean world-picture might seem harsh to those who first run across it, which causes them to shrink back from it *DRN* I 943-945, *DRN* IV 18ff.; in *DRN* I 80ff. he fears that Memmius will think Epicureanism impious, and he says in *DRN* V 110 ff. many people think that the heavenly bodies are divine and eternal

³⁷ Cf. *DRN* I 146-148 *DRN* II 47-61, *DRN* III 14-17, *DRN* III 87-93, *DRN* III 1068-1075, *DRN* VI 35-41

most often deployed by those who use extra-rational methods of persuasion, in order to mask from their targets the true nature of what is going on and to convince them that their beliefs are based entirely on rational considerations.³⁸ Secondly, Lucretius is adamant enough about the terrible effects of superstitious attitudes that it seems unlikely he would deliberately introduce and reinforce superstition as an aid to salvation.

However, just because the argument proceeds from considerations that a committed Epicurean would not find convincing, it does not follow that the argument is either dubious or a piece of *underhanded* therapy. There is a large difference between presenting a shoddy argument and presenting an argument from premises that one does not oneself accept. Perhaps the 'cycle of life' argument is best viewed as a dialectical *ad hominem* argument, that draws upon premises and attitudes that an orthodox Epicurean would disavow in order to reach Epicurean conclusions. "Even if p (which I do not grant), nonetheless q" need not be a disreputable way of convincing people that q. The Academic skeptics use this form of argumentation constantly,³⁹ and Lucretius is willing to use such arguments also. For instance, in *DRN* III 843 ff., right after giving a huge array of arguments to prove that the soul cannot survive or be sentient apart from being contained in the body, Lucretius says that *even if* the soul did survive the death of the body and was sentient, death would nonetheless be nothing to *us*, since we are a union of soul and body, and death is the end of that union.

³⁸ See Nussbaum (1986) for a discussion of practices within the Epicurean communities, such as the use of group pressure, informers, and rote memorization of canonical doctrine, that seem to undercut the proclaimed allegiance of Epicureans to only rational methods of persuasion. And in *De Fin. 2*, Cicero charges that Epicureans use a rhetorical slight of hand by equivocating on the term 'pleasure,' between boring katastematic pleasure when trying to make their view seem respectable, and exciting, active pleasure when trying to sell their view to the crowds.

³⁹ A prime example of this would be Arcesilaus' *ad hominem* attack on Zeno's epistemology, which starts from the Stoic premise that the sage will never err by assenting to anything non-evident, in order to derive the quite un-Stoic conclusion that the sage will have to withhold judgement on everything. See Cicero *Luc. 77*. Also see Couissin (1983) for more on the Academy's use of *ad hominem* argumentation.

4c. Argumentation aimed at Epicureans

The dialectical interpretation of the cycle of life argument assumes that Lucretius, in order to foster tranquility in his subjects, has been appealing to emotions and beliefs about nature that would not be shared by an orthodox Epicurean. However, if Lucretius is really putting in his descriptions of the wonders of the natural processes as a ruse, he's more convincing than you would expect. Lucretius also gives a paean to the wonders of the heavens, minus the anthropomorphic language, in *DRN* II 1030-1039, and in *DRN* III 28-30 he says that having the working of nature exposed to him fills him with a sort of "divine pleasure" (*divina voluptus*) and "shuddering" or "trembling awe" (*horror*). Although it is possible that he is simply a skilled dissembler, he seems to be quite honestly in awe of natural processes, in the passages mentioned, and thus not to be deploying them merely dialectically, as (2) suggests.

An appeal to the "cycle of life" in order to combat the fear of death is most easily justified in a theistic system like the Stoics', where the natural processes are providentially and morally organized, or at least within a system where the natural processes are recognized as being teleologically aimed in some laudable way, such as Platonism. Such appeals to the goodness of the ways of nature certainly cannot be countenanced in Epicureanism. Lucretius makes it quite clear that nature is nonmoral. Despite this, the ways in which he describes the processes of nature seem to show that he does regard nature with awe.

Suppose that Lucretius does genuinely feel certainly emotions of awe when regarding natural processes. At the same time, he openly acknowledges that these processes have no purpose or plan behind them, and thus are not "for the best." Nonetheless, since he does have (to this extent at least) projected feelings of

identification and awe when viewing certain aspects of nature, and these feelings are ones that he finds at times useful, then appealing to them is not illegitimate. According to the position which I am sketching here, it is not the intrinsic goodness or purposes of nature that would make our place in the cycles of nature good. Instead, our emotional identification with those cycles, occasioned by the sorts of feelings of awe that Lucretius evokes in many sections of the *De Rerum Natura*, can make viewing our deaths as a part of these cycles comforting. By appealing to these emotions, Lucretius is inviting the reader to take up a view towards his own death that will help him regard it with equanimity.

Even if the argument can be rehabilitated along the lines suggested here—which is dubious—at best it would have a supplemental function. On its own, it cannot conclusively show that death is not a bad thing for the agent. Instead, it is simply an appeal to certain emotions that a good Epicurean could have, an appeal which may help one view one's death in a way that helps promote one's *ataraxia*.

But for this argument to work for an Epicurean, such feelings of identification and awe before natural processes must not be either damaging or illegitimate within Epicurean ethics and psychology. Lucretius himself, in his description of the earth as a mother-goddess, seems quite ambivalent about them. On the one hand, he gives a long description of the ways in which the earth does have many of the attributes traditionally ascribed to a mother-goddess.⁴⁰ On the other hand, immediately after he says that it is acceptable to dub the earth “mother of the gods,” he adds that the person who does so

⁴⁰ For example, she provides corn and fruitful trees (*DRN* II 594-595), she is adorned by poets with a crown on her head because she sustains great cities (*DRN* II 606-607), nations in their rituals surround her with eunuchs because those who have offended her by being disrespectful toward their parents are unworthy of having offspring (*DRN* II 614-617), etc. See also a briefer discussion, along similar lines, in

must be careful not to let superstition corrupt him in doing so, since in reality the earth is entirely insensate.

So the question becomes whether the sentiments toward nature that Lucretius describes can be suitably demythologized and sanitized, so that a good Epicurean could retain them and appeal to them in order to promote *ataraxia*, or such sentiments are always the expression of at least a residual superstitious conviction that the natural processes have a divine purpose guiding them, so that they should be extirpated. It is difficult to see what sort of account of such emotions could be given from within orthodox Epicurean psychology, in which they would not be said to rest upon superstitious beliefs. After all, Epicureans think the set of natural and necessary desires is quite small, starting mainly from the fulfillment of bodily needs, and that other desires are outgrowths from these desires, or are based upon false and corrupting beliefs about what will bring pleasure to oneself.

However, this might be more of a problem for the poverty of Epicurean psychology than it is for Lucretius' argument *per se*. After all, many people, including Lucretius, who do not think that nature is teleologically organized, nonetheless find the workings of nature awe-inspiring, and such a sentiment is not the sort of thing that disturbs one's *ataraxia*.⁴¹ Even if this is granted, though, there is an extra step involved in moving from having certain sentiments of awe before nature, to thinking that one's place within nature renders one's death not such a bad thing really. This extra step, I think,

DRN II 991 ff., in which he says that we all have the same father, the sky, who fertilized the earth our mother with "heavenly seed," i.e., rain, and *DRN* V 821 ff.

⁴¹ See Hankinson (1998) for an extended argument that the Hippocratic doctors had attitudes similar to the ones I attribute to Lucretius, i.e., that nature is 'divine' and awe-inspiring, precisely because of "marvelous structure and organization it evinces on investigation" (Hankinson (1998 p. 34), also in the absence of any teleological beliefs underpinning such attitudes. The beginning of Aldo Leopold's essay 'Wisconsin' also displays such an attitude of non-theistic reverence toward natural cycles, evinced by meditating on the lives of cranes (Leopold (1987) pp. 95- 97).

would be condemned by orthodox Epicureans. After all, unless one thinks (at least subconsciously) that natural processes are intrinsically good, then what reason would one have for thinking that the fact that one's death fits into some natural process makes one's death a good thing?

Thus, I think that the following is the most plausible understanding of Lucretius' cycle of life argument. It is a dialectical, *ad hominem* argument directed against those who take nature to be the source of value, rather than the individual, such as people with lingering Stoic or Platonist sympathies. As such, it is transitional: it helps those people become better Epicureans, because the harmful fear of death underlies many other particular disturbances.⁴² However, having this character does not render the cycle of life argument disreputable, and the feelings of awe before nature that Lucretius evokes here and elsewhere are ones that he shares.⁴³

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⁴² An example of this sort of transitional *ad hominem* argument is in *Tusculan Disputations* III 76, where Chrysippus is reported to have focused on removing the belief that it is appropriate to grieve before teaching the sufferer that he has not lost anything genuinely good. See White (1995) for more on this argument. See *DRN* III 1053-1075 for Lucretius' argument that the fear of death subconsciously underlies many other pains.

⁴³ Thanks to: Sylvia, Hal, Kirk, Jim.

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