

AFFIRMATIVE NATURALISM: DELEUZE AND EPICUREANISM

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A naturalistic conception of things is a great work of imagination – greater, I think, than any dramatic or moral mythology: it is a conception fit to inspire great poetry, and in the end, perhaps, it will prove the only conception able to inspire it. (Santayana)

ABSTRACT: In this essay I explore the nature of Deleuze's commitment to an affirmative naturalism that is based on certain Epicurean principles and insights. The essay is divided into two main parts. In the first part I bring to light some of the key features of Lucretius's great poem on the nature of things, and I do so with the aid of Bergson and his reading of the teaching as fundamentally melancholic. In the second part I switch my attention to Deleuze and show how he links together physics and ethics as a way of providing an emancipatory and affirmative philosophy of life and one that aims to defeat sadness. In the conclusion I return to the question of melancholy and indicate how the problem might be best negotiated.

KEYWORDS; Naturalism; Epicureanism; Lucretius; Bergson; Deleuze; Melancholy; Sadness; Joy; Ethics; Affirmation

In his lifetime Deleuze described himself as many things: an empiricist, a pluralist, a pure metaphysician, and, the one that especially interests me, a naturalist. We shall soon see what this commitment to naturalism entails. As a naturalist Deleuze marries the philosophical endeavour to a novel re-working of ethics centred on the tasks of the art of life. I say novel but Deleuze's naturalistic-informed ethics has its anchor in the likes of great naturalists such as the Epicurean Lucretius and Spinoza. His naturalism fuses together the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of life where, he tells us,

'life' is not simply an idea or a matter of theory but concerns a way of being, a style of life, and a manner of living. For Deleuze, if philosophy has a use it is to be found in the doctrine of the Epicureans, as well as in later thinkers such as Spinoza and Nietzsche, namely, the creation of the free human being and an empirical education in the art of living well. The object of naturalism – centred on both speculative and practical aspects – is to distinguish in the case of human beings what belongs to nature and what belongs to myth. This is why for Deleuze the first philosopher is a naturalist, simply because he speaks of nature rather than the gods. This is what we might call an Epicurean first principle.

Philosophy for Deleuze, then, is first and foremost practical philosophy and it exists in its naturalist form or rendition to defeat sadness: it is an affirmative naturalism. We shall see just what this entails and what it amounts to shortly. First, let me provide a brief introduction to Lucretius and his remarkable poem *De Rerum Natura*.

I.

Let me begin with citing some lines from the work itself. I cite from the opening of book two:

What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourselves are free is joy indeed. What joy, again, to watch opposing hosts marshalled on the field of battle when you yourself have no part in their peril! But this is the greatest joy of all: to possess a quiet sanctuary, stoutly fortified in the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in search of a way of life, pitting their wits one against another, disputing for precedence, struggling night and day with unstinted effort to scale the pinnacles of wealth and power. O joyless hearts of men! O minds without vision! How dark and dangerous the life in which this tiny span is lived away! Do you not see that nature is barking for two things only, a body free from pain, a mind released from worry and fear for the enjoyment of pleasurable sensations? (II: 1-19).

In these lines Lucretius is being faithful to the core tenets of Epicurean teaching. Philosophy for Lucretius is about attaining an elevated perspective on existence and providing human beings with a special kind of joy. The immediate object is pleasurable sensations of a stable and modest kind and the ultimate object is ataraxia or tranquillity and imperturbability. Later in the book Lucretius will define philosophy as a 'rule of life' (V: 10), the aim of which is to rescue life from existence lived in 'a stormy sea', 'so black a night', and hence to learn how to live well (ibid.).

Lucretius makes it clear that the superior mode of existence attained is a modest existence, one enjoyed with a tranquil mind (V: 1119). This is not an aspect of the teaching explicitly brought out by Deleuze in his reading of Lucretius, but it is nonetheless presupposed by it. It is an aspect dwelled upon by Nietzsche when he is at his most Epicurean, as in his middle period writings (1878-82). For Nietzsche, Epicurus displays a voluptuous appreciation of existence that is supremely modest (Nietzsche 1974: section 45), and the way of life that is lived is modest both in terms of the kinds of pleasure to be pursued and satisfied and the expectations one has of one's brief sojourn on the planet. As Nietzsche writes in one especially succinct aphorism in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, 'a tiny garden, figs, a bit of cheese, and three or four friends besides: this was luxuriance for Epicurus' (Nietzsche 2013: section 192). More than this, Nietzsche notes that as an Epicurean one dies as if one has never lived, exiting from life as if one had never entered it. And yet, Nietzsche also notes that as the inventor of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing' Epicurus is a figure who enduringly felt that he existed in the world and the world existed in him (Nietzsche 2013: section 292).

For Lucretius, the object of philosophy is the cultivation of health and he speaks of philosophy as a form of treatment that can be administered (IV: 22); it is a therapeutics, one that has specific illnesses and afflictions to cure, notably the fear of the active gods and the fear of death as well as the whole realm of superstition. Lucretius thinks that his Roman brethren suffer from what he calls the 'dead weight' of superstition and are haunted by the fear of eternal punishments after death. A thoroughgoing and clear-sighted program of naturalism is needed in order to emancipate the mind from subjection to fear and superstition. Several occasions in the book Lucretius provides the following lines as a refrain of learning:

The dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward forms and inner workings of nature (II: 59-62; see also III: 91-94).

We are not to ask of the universe 'what does it mean?', since it means nothing, there is only the dance of the eternal return of atoms and the void; rather, we are to ask, 'how does it work?' Lucretius writes in book five of his text:

So many atoms, clashing together in so many ways as they are swept along through infinite time by their own weight, have come together in every possible way and realized everything that could be formed by their combinations (V: 186-190).

True piety for Lucretius, as an Epicurean, consists in the serene contemplation of such a universe (V: 1203).

Lucretius offers a naturalist program of philosophy that amounts for Deleuze to a project of demystification and hence liberation. His is a philosophy of immanence: nature is a self-producing positive power, eternally self-creating and self-destroying; the elements postulated at the base of nature work bottom up, in which the diverse products of nature are generated rather than assumed as already given (Johnson 2014: 73). The immanence at work is a radical one for it means that no ‘divine power’ has created the universe (II: 181); that there is no ‘divine plan’ (V: 81); and that, I quote:

...our world has been made by nature through the spontaneous and casual collision and the multifarious, accidental, random, and purposeless congregation and coalescence of atoms whose suddenly formed combinations could serve on each occasion as the starting point of substantial fabrics – earth and sea and sky and the race of living creatures. On every ground, therefore, you must admit that there exist elsewhere other clusters of matter similar to this one which the ether clasps in ardent embrace (II: 1058-66).

We can note the influence of Epicurus on Lucretius: virtue is related to pleasure and this pleasure consists in peace of mind, being the privilege of the sage. Epicurus has understood that human beings have materially everything they need to live and more, and yet humankind brings suffering upon itself, enslaving itself to superstition, fear, and desire or the ‘deplorable lust for life’, as Lucretius calls it. We could reflect here on the various paeans to Epicurus that structure the text, in which Epicurus is presented as a noble saviour-like figure freeing human beings from the inauthentic life – excessive pride, lust, aggression, self-indulgence, and indolence – and inspiring them to a new way of life, including an ethics of refined egoism, as Nietzsche calls it, and the cultivation of the self (see especially the opening of book six, the final book of the text).

However, in preparation for my turn to Deleuze, let me stress once again the naturalism informing the ethical doctrine: it rids philosophy of supernatural explanations with its scientific principles of nothing springing from nothing and nothing ever being destroyed. The emphasis all the time is explaining phenomena through natural causes, so lightning is to be explained in such terms and not as a divine warning. Nothing springs from nothing since for anything to be created there is required specific germs, a set of conditions, and time. As noted, the teaching has radical aspects: for example, the soul is nothing more than matter and is subject to death since it is made of subtle atoms scattered throughout the body, and is therefore as material as the body and without which it cannot exist. Death is radical in its finality and Lucretius is uncompromising in his account of this: it denotes the end of our existence and yet is not to be feared for the reasons that Epicurus has provided and that Lucretius rehearses in dramatic fashion in the denouement to book three of the text.

Such is the stark realism of his words on death that Nietzsche called the poet ‘sombre Lucretius’. Life is mortal, and death is immortal, says Lucretius. To none is life given on freehold, but to all on lease. But we have nothing to fear from death there is nothing sensory to experience: ‘One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by death the immortal’ (III: 868-871). And yet human beings do live in bondage to the fear of death and on account of this fear, ‘the life of misguided mortals becomes a Hell on earth’ (III: 1023-4). Bergson is one thinker who holds that Lucretius was not able to completely destroy belief in the immortality of the soul since this belief is stronger than philosophical arguments. What he does develop though is insight into one of the causes of the belief, namely, ‘the instinctive tendency which every living being has to perpetuate itself indefinitely in time’ (Bergson 1959: 19). Indeed, as I have noted, Lucretius speaks at the very close of book three of the text of the lust for life as ‘deplorable’ since it ‘holds us trembling in bondages to uncertainties and dangers’, with the ‘unquenchable thirst for life keeping us always on the gasp’ (III: 1084-5) (*Denique tanto opere in dubiis trepidare periculis quae mala nos subigit vitae tanta cupido?*).

For Lucretius, then, a fundamental reformation of the human mind and its attachment to life is required, and this is the task he reserves for philosophy. Knowledge serves to show us that we count for practically nothing in the universe since we are but a fortuitous combination of elements that decays just like everything else alive. Having stated this, though, we know that for Lucretius there is a deep joy to be had from this naturalism: this is the elevated joy of the sage who imbued with great truth calmly awaits a death that will reduce him to nothingness: he possesses supreme knowledge and yet at the same time savours the sweetest joys that a human being is privileged to experience.

As far as the ethical task is concerned, the aim is to raise ourselves to serene regions for whoever complains of the nature of the universe and their existence in it, gritting their teeth, is ignorant of the true nature of things. We need, therefore, to resign ourselves to certain facts:

That the body of necessity must waste away.

That old age is forced to succeed youth by an eternal law.

That beings necessarily reproduce at the expense of other beings.

That the movement of atoms is eternal and the formation of new worlds continues eternally.

We do not need to marvel at the creation of life since the laws of matter are all that is needed to explain everything.

Finally, that humankind is not separate from nature and is not in any way a special case or exception to the laws of material existence. It is destined to perish since, as a result of the movement of atoms, everything will one day disintegrate. The atoms, converted into dust, will be drawn together again, and new combinations of atoms will produce new worlds, and on it will go throughout eternity.

Nietzsche, as I have noted, refers to the poet as the ‘sombre Lucretius’, and Bergson holds that he produces a melancholic philosophy of nature and of life; indeed, for Bergson this is where Lucretius departs from his great master, Epicurus. For Bergson, the science of Lucretius is fundamentally a melancholic one. Indeed, it’s only the French text that makes it clear that Bergson conceives the poem as ‘profoundly melancholic’ (*mélancolie profonde*) since the English translation from 1959 alters the order of the original text, and it’s the point about melancholy that the text begins with and indicates that this is Bergson’s main concern in his commentary. This opening of Bergson’s commentary does not appear in the expurgated English edition until well into the translation (Introduction 1. *La Poésie de Lucrèce*, p. II; trans. 1959: 44). For Bergson the teaching is ‘sad and disheartening’ since it raises the fundamental question, ‘why persist in living?’ if life is nothing more than a treadmill that leads nowhere and desire never finds a fulfilment. Moreover, pleasures are deceptive and no joy is untainted, and all striving is in vain. Now this sounds a lot like Schopenhauer, but his doctrine is nowhere mentioned in the text:¹ ‘we spend the best part of our lives in pursuing vain honours or in cultivating land that is barren and indifferent to our toil. Then comes senescence and with it the childish fear of death’ (Bergson 1959: 45).² We are tortured by our visions of death, in which all hope and joy disappear. Although death is the end of everything and deprives us of the comforts of life, it at the same time delivers us from our need of them and the sufferings that always accompany them. Thus, why should we not gain consolation from the thought that all this will end for us when our lives end? This, says, Bergson, ‘is the conviction of the sage and the conclusion of the philosopher’ (1959: 46).

¹ See also Gillespie and Mackenzie (2007: 309), who write: ‘Overall, one might say that Bergson presents a Lucretius with an imaginative vision akin to that of Thomas Hardy – but a Hardy braced by something of the analytic sweep and rigour of Pascal’.

² For Schopenhauer on Epicurus and the teaching on death see 1966, volume two, 468ff. Schopenhauer astutely writes: ‘From the standpoint of knowledge, there appears to be absolutely no ground for fearing death; but consciousness consists in knowing, and thus for consciousness death is no evil. Moreover, it is not really this *knowing* part of our *ego* that fears death, but *fuga mortis* comes simply and solely from the blind *will*, with which every living thing is filled. But...this *fuga mortis* is essential to it, just because it is the will-to-live, whose whole inner nature consists in a craving for life and existence’ (468).

So, where does Lucretius depart from Epicurus? The doctrine of Epicurus, Bergson argues, excludes melancholy and sadness as these would only continue to trouble the mind when the whole point of practising philosophy as a way of life is to attain a state of undisturbed serenity or what Bergson describes as a placid state of joyfulness that may not be intense but is nevertheless permanent. Lucretius draws different conclusions from the theory of the atom according to Bergson. We are subject to rigid natural laws so why work or take pains to accomplish anything? Why struggle or complain?: 'We are victims of a common law, and nature shows little concern over us' (1959: 82). As Bergson notes, the poem ends with a frightful description of the plague of Athens during the Peloponnesian War (and borrowed from Thucydides), and that stands in marked contrast to the poem's opening celebration of life. For Bergson, Lucretius succeeds in painting an 'awesome picture' of the nature of the universe and one that fills our mind with dread.

In spite of his reliance on Epicurus's teaching, including the science and the ethics, Bergson sees Lucretius as singularly original (1959: 77). He is original in his conception of the nature of things and in his conception of human nature. For Bergson, Lucretius differs from Epicurus in being an enthusiastic observer of nature, showing a gift for its 'picturesque' aspect (its 'fleeting, transitional variations'). Moreover, he appreciates simultaneously both the pattern of nature that appeals to the geometrician and that of the artist: he admires the beauty of nature and understands it, but this does not stop him from analysing it and breaking it apart anatomically into fibres and cells. This ability on the part of Lucretius to grasp the two-sided character of things is for Bergson the source of the originality of his poetry and his philosophy. For Bergson, Lucretius is not like Democritus: he does not depict collections of atoms in their stark nakedness but decks them out in natural or in fancied colours. Moreover, his descriptions of the universe are not cold but 'imbued with an oratorical fervour that stimulates and sways' (1959: 80). Indeed, Bergson speculates that Lucretius would not have written his text if he had seen in Epicureanism little more than a dry and self-centred doctrine, 'contrived for the purpose of bringing to man the calm placidity of the beast and ridding him of his most noble anxieties' (1959: 80-1). In addition, Bergson does not think that Lucretius reduces philosophy to being little more than a means of consolation. Knowledge is not simply a refuge or a consolation in times of civil strife; rather, it is 'the object of life itself'; wars and disasters are ills because they divert the attention of humans from the only noble preoccupations worthy of the mind. Philosophy is noble because it frees us from social ambition and competition. As a philosopher Lucretius liberates himself from indignation and anger; he feels only pity

for those who fail to see where genuine happiness lies and thus unknowingly afflict great harm on themselves.

II

According to Alain Badiou, it is Bergson who is Deleuze's real master, and not Spinoza or Nietzsche (Badiou 2000: 39). However, one area of philosophical inquiry where Deleuze appears to show an intellectual independence from Bergson is in his interpretation of Lucretius. For Deleuze naturalism exists to defeat sadness, and where sadness amounts to a diminution of our powers of action. He writes: 'From Lucretius to Nietzsche, the same end is pursued and attained. Naturalism makes of thought and sensibility an affirmation' (Deleuze 1969: 323; 1990: 279). For Deleuze, the aim of Lucretius's text is not to fill the human mind with dread but to liberate it from the reign of fear, guilt, and superstition. Indeed he considers the depiction of the plague that allegedly ends the poem as a Christian invention. He writes of his fantasy:

I fantasize about writing a memorandum to the Academy of the Moral Sciences to show that Lucretius' book cannot end with the description of the plague, and that it is an invention, a falsification of the Christians who wanted to show that a maleficent thinker *must* end in terror and anguish (Deleuze 2002: 15).

Although known today as an appendix to *The Logic of Sense* from 1969, the essay 'Lucretius and the Simulacrum' was first published in 1961 in *Les études Philosophiques* as 'Lucrèce et le naturalisme'. As Brooke Holmes has suggested, the significance of Deleuze's essay has been overshadowed by Deleuze's reading of Plato and his effort to overcome Platonism, and so valued as part of the larger philosophical perspective advanced in *Difference and Repetition*. Following the lead of Holmes, I propose to read the essay as a contribution to an understanding of Epicureanism. As Holmes further suggests, Deleuze's essay raises the question of what it means to make Epicureanism catalytic in the present and she even suggests that Epicurean teaching remains a constant presence in Deleuze's corpus (Holmes 2012: 317-18). In this essay my attention is focused strictly on Deleuze's attempt to develop an ethics on the basis of his appreciation of Epicurean naturalism.

For Deleuze, Lucretius follows Epicurus by effecting a double determination in which 'naturalism' – the scare quotes are Deleuze's when he first deploys the term in his essay (1969: 307; 1990: 266) – is made the speculative and the practical object of philosophy. The products of nature are inseparable from an ontological diversity, and the chief theoretical task of philosophy is to think this diverse as diverse. For Deleuze nature is characterized by an irreducible pluralism and so he resists all attempts to think nature in terms of notions of the One or the collective Whole. The

characteristics of the diversity of nature are individuality and heterogeneity, in which species differ, members of the same species differ, and there is a diversity of parts that make up an individual. So, we encounter in nature a diversity of matter and a heterogeneity of elements in which we can declare that there are no two shellfish or grains of sand that are absolutely indiscernible; in addition we can posit distinct animal and living worlds. The argument is not circular: the claim is not that the production of the diverse has itself to rest on a principle of diversity. Rather, we need to think the production of the diverse in terms of an infinite sum (endless combinations and recombinations); as Deleuze memorably puts it, 'there is no combination capable of encompassing all the elements of Nature at once' (308; 267). In a declaration that seems indicative of Deleuze's lifelong commitment to pluralism and multiplicity, he argues that nature is not collective but distributive, not attributive but conjunctive: it proceeds not through being (the 'is') but through becoming (the 'and'). In the worlds of nature we observe 'alternations and entwinings, resemblances and differences, attractions and distractions, nuance and abruptness' (ibid.). Nature, then, whilst not a whole can be conceived as a sum, and we can think this in terms of the image of the Harlequin's cloak (*manteau d'Arlequin*), 'made entirely', Deleuze says, 'of solid patches and empty spaces, she is made of plenitude and void, beings and nonbeings' (ibid.).

It is, then, the simplicity of Lucretius's cosmology and ontology that appeal to Deleuze and that challenge anti-naturalist philosophies: there are simple beings and the void, with the simple being in the void and the void in compound beings. For anti-naturalist philosophies – here Deleuze does not provide any examples from the history of thought – Being (the One or the Whole) is always thought in terms of porosity and in corruptible terms of the fleeting and the brittle. Following the cosmology he had adumbrated in his 1956 essay on Bergson's conception of difference, in the essay on Lucretius Deleuze argues that the nature of things is not identity and contradiction but differences and resemblances or repetitions, so for him there is 'co-ordination and disjunction' (309; 268; see also Deleuze 2004).

How is naturalism, in its essence, to be conceived? For Deleuze, it requires a highly structured principle of causality to account for the production of the diverse since there are only different and non-totalizable composition and combinations of the elements of nature. It is the nature of the atom that needs to be clarified first, and this is what Deleuze focuses his attention on. It is the atom that challenges our sense perception and our consciousness or awareness of temporal existence. Deleuze begins with a surprisingly simple proposition: the atom is that which can only be thought and it is to thought what a sensible object is to the senses. Moreover, the atom is what gives food for thought: as we cannot perceive the atom we have to think its nature or

character, and to do so rigorously precisely, and, as far as possible, non-anthropomorphically. The atom is imperceptible not because of some deficiency in our senses but on account of its own character. Deleuze identifies an ‘Epicurean method’ of epistemology by which we may come to know something of the atom, and this method proceeds by analogy and by passage or transition. First, we draw the analogy between the sensible object, which we endow with (sensible) parts, and the noetic object that is also endowed with parts, and we posit in this act a minimum thought that represents the smallest part of the object just as in the instance of sensibility there is a minimum sensible that represents the smallest part of the object. Second, guided or steered by this analogy between the sensible object and the noetic object, we move from the sensible to thought and in reverse by means of a series of transitions.

Deleuze now advances several key theses on the nature of what is, the nature of the atoms. In the first one he states some key aspects of the atoms and the void, such as that the sum of atoms is infinite and precisely because they do not combine or synthesize to form a totality. This is followed up in points 5-7 on the shapes, sizes, and possible configurations of atoms. However, it is the third point that is clearly the decisive insight for Deleuze, and this concerns the clinamen or swerve. When atoms collide, they do so not account of their different weights but due to the clinamen and it is this ‘differential of matter’ that relates atoms to one another.³ This is Deleuze’s main claim and insight, and it removes him from prevailing readings of Lucretius, including Bergson’s: ‘The clinamen or swerve (*déclinaison*) has nothing to do with an oblique movement which would come accidentally to modify a vertical fall’ (311; 269). On Deleuze’s reading it is an error to construe the clinamen as something haphazard and capricious. On the contrary, for Deleuze it is not at all accidental but always there, and he likens it to the conatus, speaking of it as a differential of matter.⁴ Thus, for Deleuze, we go astray when we conceive the clinamen as a secondary movement since there is only an originary movement and this movement is characteristic of what matter ‘is’. The causality of the clinamen is, therefore, more ‘unassignable’ (*incertus*, or uncertain) than it is indeterminate, and this is because it takes place at such a velocity that we have to think it in terms of a time smaller than what can be thought in a minimum of continuous time. It is this set of insights that leads to Deleuze to an

³ Michael Serres also construes the clinamen in terms of a differential, and a flow, in his *The Birth of Physics* (2000: 174). For insight see also Walter G. Englert (1987). Serres refers to Bergson’s reception of Lucretius on more than one occasion in his book (see 37 & 174).

⁴ For further insight see Warren Montag, ‘From Clinamen to Conatus: Deleuze, Lucretius, Spinoza’ (unpublished essay).

important conclusion regarding the lex atomi, chiefly, that there is an irreducible plurality of causes and in any causal series a whole is not brought together and so nature cannot be totalized: it is on account of this that causes are said to be ‘unassignable’. The structured principle of causality Deleuze is after works, as Holmes helpfully puts it, ‘*inside* the various compositions and combinations that populate the cosmos. As a result, diversity emerges within a world that is also characterized by pattern and resemblance’ (Holmes 2012: 323). In point 7 Deleuze arrives at the conclusion that difference is primary, which means that in the philosophy of nature we find ‘the heterogeneity of the diverse with itself, *and also* the resemblance of the diverse with itself’ (Deleuze 1969: 313; 1990: 271). Worlds and bodies have their similarities in time and space. Deleuze insists, however, that resemblance proceeds from the diverse and is implicated in diversity. Of course, for Deleuze there is determination: a body is born from determined elements but there is also a ‘vitalism of seeds’.

The next move Deleuze makes in his essay is of crucial importance for it centres on how we make the move from physics to ethics, including the motivation for doing so. As every student of Epicurean teaching knows such a move is its most fundamental aspect. The task of physics – to be thought in terms of naturalism – is to determine what is really infinite from what isn’t and to demarcate the difference between the true infinite from its false form or appearance. The true infinite, according to Deleuze, consists in the sum of atoms, the void, the number of atoms of the same shape and size, and the number of combination of atoms and of worlds similar, or different, to ours. What is not infinite are the parts of the atom and the body, the sizes and shapes of atoms, and every worldly or intra-worldly combination. This determination of the nature of the infinite is said to be ‘apodeictic’; and yet the real task is to show why this determination is the necessary means of ethics and practice. Let me now follow how Deleuze seeks to demonstrate the subordination of physics to ethics in Epicurean teaching.

Epicurean ethical practice suggests to us ways of suppressing or conquering pain. However, as Deleuze correctly notes, our attainment of real pleasure, including a sense of being in the world in a joyful manner, has much more powerful obstacles to confront, such as phantoms, superstitions, terrors of existence, and the fear of death. The humanity that Lucretius depicts it in the book is indeed a melancholy one. As Deleuze notes, the plague not only inflicts pain and suffering but equally disturbs the soul. The disturbance of the soul has two main elements: first, the illusion that arises from our spurious idea that the body has an infinite capacity for pleasure; and, second, the illusion that the soul endures forever and that gives rise, once it has taken root in the mind, to the notion of an infinity of possible sufferings and torments after death.

We can even see a link between the two illusions since the fear of an infinite suffering and punishment is but the natural price to be paid for having desires without limit. Here the life of the fool becomes a hell on earth, as the poem so instructively depicts. For Lucretius, as for Spinoza after him, the religious person displays a curious complex of avidity and anguish, and of covetousness and culpability. We live in fear of dying when we are not dead and the fear of not actually being dead once in fact we are.

Deleuze will then explain these operations of the mind in terms of how bodies or atomic compounds emit subtle and fluid elements, and they emanate either from the depths of bodies (such as sounds, smells, and tastes) or as detachments from the surface of things, including the simulacra (such as forms and colours). I will not follow Deleuze's treatment of this, which is instructive on a highly complex topic. What is key is Deleuze's account of a third species of simulacra, which emanates neither from the depths of bodies nor the surface of things, and that he calls 'phantasms'. These are images that enjoy a high degree of independence and assume a life of their own, and they can be theological, oneiric, and erotic. We develop images that take the place of actual objects, from giants to ghosts. This happens for instance when the mind becomes isolated from the external world and when the body lies dormant, as in sleep. In the case of the erotic, although there is an actual love object, it can be neither possessed nor absorbed, and so the mind contemplating such an object is prone to all kinds of fantasies, including ones motivated by jealousy.

The ethical task, then, is, with the aid of naturalism, to dispel the illusions of the mind and that generate fears, torments, and superstitions. It is in this sense for Deleuze, and this sense only, that physics is made subordinate to ethics: the task is not only to limit knowledge or prevent its development, as is often said of Epicurean teaching, but rather to demonstrate the range of its practical application. Deleuze writes, then:

The speculative object and the practical object of philosophy as Naturalism, science and pleasure, coincide on this point: it is always a matter of denouncing the illusion, the false infinite, the infinity of religion and all the theological-erotic-oneiric myths in which it is expressed. (322; 278)

If philosophy has a use it is to be found in the doctrine of the Epicureans, as well as in later thinkers such as Spinoza and Nietzsche, namely, the creation of the free human being. This freedom consists, at least as an initial task, in freeing oneself from the realm of illusions produced by the image of the false infinite. Other, more complicated tasks will then come into view and motivate the free mind or free spirit to undergo various metamorphoses. It is not a question, for Deleuze at least, of opposing nature to custom, to convention, or to invention: there can be natural customs, conventions and nature are not opposed and the fact that the law does depends on

convention does not preclude the existence of natural laws (here the ‘law’ would measure the illegitimacy of desires against the disturbance of the soul that accompanies them), and inventions are discoveries of nature itself. For Deleuze, then, what nature actually opposes is the whole domain of myth. When we examine the history of humanity we discover that human unhappiness stems not from customs, conventions, or inventions and industry but from the aspect of myth that gets mixed with them, including the false promises of happiness offered by wealth, power, and luxury. Deleuze writes:

To the origins of language, the discovery of fire, and the first metals royalty, wealth, and property are added...; to the conventions of law and justice, the belief in gods; to the use of bronze and iron, the development of war; to the inventions of art and industry, luxury ad frenzy (322; 278).

The object of naturalism, and in terms of both its speculative and practical aspects, now comes clearly into view: it is to distinguish in the case of human beings what belongs to nature and what belongs to myth. This is why for Deleuze the first philosopher is a naturalist, simply because he speaks of nature rather than the gods. Humanity has suffered from three main forms of myth in its history: the myth of religion (the active gods); the myth of a false physics (that humankind is destined to a particular fate); and the myths of false philosophy under the influence of theology (Being, the One, and the Whole). The critical task here is not to introduce new myths since these would only serve to deprive nature of its positivity. Lucretius carries the ‘enterprise of “demystification”’ to its limit.⁵ In addition, Deleuze thinks there is a ‘constant’ of naturalism and evident in its history from Lucretius to Spinoza and Nietzsche: this constant consists in the denunciation of sadness, in particular denouncing everything that has sadness as the basis of its power. Moreover, the philosophy of nature we find in this naturalism is also accompanied by a philosophy of affirmation. If the One or the Whole is a false image of nature, then we are free to think nature in accordance with its actual positivity, that is, as an infinite sum,

⁵ The classic study of myth in Lucretius is by Monica R. Gale, *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (1994). She understands myth to be a body of traditional stories distinct from other fictions, and maintains that Lucretius makes use of myth in support of Epicurean demythologization: ‘The mythological passage sin the DRN thus act a powerful polemical and didactic tool: at one and the same time, Lucretius is able to dispose of rival theories of myth satisfactorily by substituting his own account of its origins and nature; and to use myth didactically to illustrate his own argumentation’ (230). From this we can say that Deleuze’s appreciation is misleading if the suggestion is that Lucretius dispenses with myth altogether. As Gale ably shows the poet rejects myth but, at the same time, he appropriates mythological imagery so as to invest his argument, including his presentation of the god-like figure of Epicurus, with attractive and impressive qualities.

including multiple elements that are not composed all at once or ever brought together in terms of a final synthesis: 'The multiple as multiple is the object of affirmation, just as the diverse as diverse is the object of joy' (323; 279).

CONCLUSION

In his essay Deleuze attempts to work through Lucretius's teaching in a way that illuminates a far-reaching project of demystification and he does so with the aid of two of the philosophers he was most engaged with in the 1960s, namely, Spinoza and Nietzsche. Bergson hovers in the background – e.g. there are clear allusions to the 1956 essay on Bergson and difference where once again Deleuze presents a philosophy of nature and of life that challenges the philosophy of the negative (Hegelianism, as a philosophy of the negative, appears to be the target and the 'enemy' at which Deleuze directs his critical thinking). However, Bergson's dissertation on Lucretius is not mentioned by or referred to by Deleuze in his own reading. Deleuze signals a real departure from Bergson in his thinking about the clinamen and the fact that he locates in Lucretius a richly worked out philosophy of nature, and of which the notion of the swerve or 'declination' forms a key part. Deleuze's is keen to show that for Epicureanism nature is a positive power and can only be satisfactorily understood in terms of the production of diversity and multiplicity. Although nature is characterised by a determination of causes and effects, it is at the same time an order of positive production.

However, we need to ask: what of the melancholic aspect of the text, including the grim ending of the poem with its graphic depiction of the plague of Athens? Does the book not end of a fundamentally sad, indeed, tragic note? More recent scholarship on Lucretius acknowledges that the end of the poem is significant but lends support to Deleuze's perspective on the text: not that the ending is a conspired Christian invention as he suspected, but that it does not detract from the steadfastly serene character of the wisdom and science that guides the teaching. The noted scholar David Sedley, for example, argues that the closing description of the plague must contain some message for us as the readers of the poem. In short, have readers really learnt their Epicureanism? That is, do we know how to remain serene in the face of severe and even terminal physical suffering? According to Sedley, Lucretius has dealt with three of the four Epicurean remedies in the book before the plague description – God presents no fears, death no worries, the good is readily attainable – but not the fourth one that the terrible is endurable. This, he thinks, is what the closing description of the book is meant to do: if we have not learnt the ultimate lesson and attained philosophical serenity over the most intense physical pain and suffering, then

we cannot face the nature of the universe with truly Epicurean equanimity (Sedley 1998: 160-5).

We cannot locate sadness or melancholy in the teaching on death and the need not to be a slave to the lust for life. Freedom – joyful being and becoming active – does not reside in lust. Lucretius is extremely keen to free us from the fear of death: what is there terrifying or depressing in the thought of our death? We will be in an ‘eternal sleep’ til the end of time, and pain and sorrow will never touch us again. Death, in fact, should be regarded as having much less existence than sleep since in this condition we see an even greater dispersal of the mass of matter. Why should we not retire from life like a dinner guest who has eaten our fill of life and take a carefree rest with peace of mind? Should we not, moreover, put away all that is unbecoming to our years and with a composed mind make way for others? : ‘The old is always thrust aside to make way for the new, and one thing must be built out of the wreck of others’ (III: 964-6). There is, Lucretius says, ‘need of matter, so that later generations may arise’ (III: 968-9). The thought of death, as Nietzsche also taught, should make us think of life and what we truly desire:

Men feel plainly enough within their minds a heavy burden, whose weight depresses them. If only they perceived with equal clearness the causes of this depression, the origin of this lump of evil within their breasts, they would not lead such a life as we now see all too commonly – no one knowing what he really wants and everyone for ever trying to get away from where he is, as though travel alone could throw off the road (III: 1052-1058).

When Lucretius speaks of the ‘deplorable lust for life’ he has in mind the pursuit of spurious external goods, such as fame, ambition, wealth, luxury, and so on. If we free ourselves from this ‘unquenchable thirst for life’ we can be both free for a different mode of life and serene in the face of the inevitable fact of our death. This is the ethical transformation we need to undergo. Deleuze demonstrates what this freedom entails and just how liberating it is. I don’t think this commits us to the view that the prospect of our demise and disappearance from existence will never fill us with anxiety, only that we can re-focus the attention of our minds and, to a certain extent, free ourselves so as to focus on a life of Epicurean attachment and involving pleasure and the virtue of friendship, as well the cultivation of a deeply affirmative mode of existence.

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