A Joyful Science?
Bergson and Deleuze on Epicurean Naturalism

(Draft only)

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Introduction

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.1 In this essay I seek to make a contribution to an appreciation of Deleuze’s interest in Epicureanism, but I differ from Holmes and other commentators in pursuing an inquiry into this by examining his essay in the context of an appreciation of Bergson’s reading of Lucretius’s teaching as a sad and melancholic one. Deleuze nowhere mentions in either versions of the essay Bergson’s reception of Lucretius. Deleuze privileges Lucretius as an original, indeed foundational, moment in the history of naturalism, construing the poet as an enemy of myth and an advocate of philosophical demystification. This is what we might call, inspired by Deleuze’s reading, naturalism as a joyful science since it aims to make of thought and of
sensation the objects of an affirmation and an affirmative philosophy of life. Deleuze’s essay on Lucretius makes an important contribution to what, following Christopher Gill, we can call ‘rich naturalism’ and that centres on how physics and ethics intersect. In what follows I shall endeavour to bring the two readings developed by Bergson and Deleuze into rapport with one another. My view is that both readings contain valuable insights into particular aspects of Lucretius’s teaching. In spite of their contrasting emphases the two readings developed by Bergson and Deleuze yield a set of instructive insights into the text. I shall show that Deleuze’s reading is able to show that Epicurean teaching is an affirmative one and does not get stuck in melancholia: the melancholy is there but can be conquered. Put pithily, we might say: for Bergson, although Lucretius provides a joyful wisdom his science is a melancholy one, whereas for Deleuze both the science and the wisdom are joyful. Bergson is right, I think, to detect in Lucretius’ poem both determinism and a degree of freedom, and for him it is the determinism that is ultimately the source of Lucretius’ melancholy. Deleuze does not address the determinism issue as far as I can ascertain and instead locates in Lucretius a novel conception of nature as multiplicity and diversity, and contained in the image of the Harlequin’s cloak. This means that nature is a positive power and in its diversity a source of joy. It is this set of issues I shall now explore in the essay.

Bergson on Lucretius: A Joyful Wisdom and a Melancholy Science

Some significant receptions of Epicurean philosophy take place in nineteenth century European thought. For Marx, writing in the 1840s, and in defiance of Hegel’s negative assessment, Epicurus is the ‘greatest representative of the Greek enlightenment’, whilst for Jean-Marie Guyau, writing in the 1870s, Epicurus is the original free spirit, ‘Still today it is the spirit of old Epicurus who, combined with new doctrines, works away at and undermines
Christianity.’ For the middle period Nietzsche, Epicurus is one of the greatest human beings to have graced the earth and the inventor of ‘heroic-idyllic philosophizing’. Another significant reading of Epicurean teaching is to be found in Bergson’s commentary of 1884 on Lucretius’s remarkable poem, De Rerum Natura. For Bergson the task Lucretius sets himself is a pioneering one that will serve humanity, in particular making the Romans aware of previously unknown or misunderstood truths. In order to demonstrate these truths with precision it was necessary for Lucretius to be acquainted with Greek philosophy, and especially the teaching of Epicurus.

In this section of the essay I want to highlight some of the central features of Bergson’s commentary of Lucretius’s text. Bergson’s commentary is interesting to us for a number of reasons. First, it’s interesting that Bergson, typically represented as part of a French spiritualist tradition, should embark on this encounter with Epicurean materialism and atomism at the beginning of his philosophical career. Second, he encounters Lucretius in a way that I think resonates with any reader coming to Lucretius’s text for the first time: there is the clear recognition of the brilliance of the text as well as of the tremendous challenges it presents to us as mortal subjects. Third, Bergson has an abiding interest in the relation between philosophy and the art of life, and already in this early appreciation of Lucretius he is showing that for the ancients philosophy was a way of life. Bergson makes us aware of the offensive character of the text, noting that Christians and pagans agreed in leaving his teaching aside: the pagans could not cite him as an authority since, as a poet, he had spoken out violently against their gods, whilst in excluding the supernatural from the universe and denying any divine intervention in human affairs he caused offence to Christians. It’s largely with advances in modern science, and on account of a growth in our enlightenment sensibilities, that we moderns can come to a renewed appreciation of the text and its main ideas. Nevertheless Lucretius’s continues to pose a challenge to us: we have to accept that
the universe not only is not the work of the gods but it is also not in any way made for us; that it has been shaped haphazardly by the coming together of atoms, and that all things, including earth, are destined to disappear. For Bergson, the science of Lucretius is fundamentally a melancholic one, and in what follows I want to show why he holds to this view in his reading of, and encounter with, the text. 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. p. 44).

Bergson’s encounter with the text is of a specific kind. For example, at the start of his commentary he makes it clear that he does not propose to refute a philosophical system, such as we find in Epicurean teaching, but to comprehend the system: what are its main claims? How does it argue for them? What are its achievements? And what philosophical challenge does it present to us? He proposes to read the poem as a whole and not just focus on the descriptive passages since, he argues, the most gripping passages of the poem, such as the depiction of the life of primitive humans, the effects of lightning, and plague of Athens, are there to try and make us comprehend a significant philosophical principle. Bergson notes the fundamental dimension of Epicurean teaching (and that also had such an effect on other nineteenth century readers such as Nietzsche), namely, to liberate the human mind that is plagued by fear and superstition: ‘religion, guilty of many crimes, has kept mankind in constant dread of death’ (p. 14). In short, Epicurean teaching has an essentially practical function, its chief aim being that of restoring calm to the human mind. Bergson stresses here the inspiration of Epicurus on Lucretius, in which virtue is related to pleasure and in which
pleasure consists of peace of mind and is the privilege of the sage. Epicurus has understood that the human has materially everything it needs to live and more and yet it brings suffering upon itself, being enslaved by desire, superstition, and fear. Epicurus teaches that our happiness depends not on external things but on our state of mind. Second, Bergson notes the naturalistic character of the teaching: it rids philosophy of supernatural explanations with its fundamental scientific principles of nothing springing from nothing and nothing ever being destroyed (principles first bright to light, Bergson notes, by Democritus). In Lucretius the emphasis is to explain things in terms of natural causes, so lightning is to be explained in such terms and not as a divine warning. So, the Epicurean achievement, so amply displayed in DRN, is to attempt a scientific explanation of the workings of universe: ‘What proves that nothing springs from nothing is that anything, to be created, requires a specific germ, set of conditions, and time’ (pp. 14-15). Bergson describes Lucretius’s theory of atoms as ‘one of the most beautiful creations of antiquity’ (p. 15). Later in the commentary he will describe atomism as a ‘profound philosophical system’ in which the best explanation of the universe is the simplest one (p. 65). Moreover, the system of Democritus, who invents atomism, is ‘perhaps the most perfect expression of materialism’ (p. 69). Epicurus adopts and modifies the atomic theory, and here Bergson notes both Epicurus’s ‘abysmal ignorance of scientific things’ and ‘the originality of his approach’. In the hands of Epicurus the aim of philosophy is not, strictly speaking to instruct human beings but to soothe them (p. 72). Bergson also notes that for Lucretius, Epicurus was not just a sage but the ‘matchless sage and great benefactor of mankind’ (p. 76). More than this Epicurus is a god for Lucretius with his ‘sublime discoveries’ (p. 77).

Bergson notes that each of the six books that make up the poem feature a remark or observation about philosophy in general or about Lucretius’s particular aim. Book two, in particular, he notes, commences with a magnificent eulogy of philosophy. Book I, he notes,
contains the essence of Epicurean materialism and of atomism, and Bergson discusses the main claims Lucretius makes about atoms, such as that they move at infinite speed, and that their movement is eternal, and so on. What especially interests Bergson is the attribution by Lucretius of an occasional slight variation in the movement of atoms, or the ‘imperceptible and unpredictable trait he called *clinamen*’ (p. 17). This deviation is to be regarded as a capricious trait of atoms. Bergson highlights the fact that this grants a degree of freedom to human existence, so, in short, our existence is not completely mechanically governed and determined; we are not, Bergson adds, completely passive (p. 76). Bergson ends his initial treatment of the poem by nothing the tremendous challenge of the ideas presented in it: the gods, though they exist, do not interfere in any with the things in this world and therefore it is childish to live in fear of them; and, second, all living things are subject to growth and eventual disappearance, and here Bergson notes the poignancy of Lucretius’s insights – the same is true of our planet earth (which is a ‘living being’ for Lucretius, notes Bergson), as this too will one day fall to dust.

A topic Bergson treats extensively throughout the commentary is Lucretius on death. He notes the salient features of the teaching: that the soul is nothing more than matter and therefore this soul is subject to death since it is made up of subtle atoms scattered throughout the body and is, therefore, as material as the body. Death is radical and Lucretius is uncompromising in his account of this: it denotes the end of everything, and yet, it is not to be feared and for all the reasons Epicurus has given us and that Lucretius rehearses in dramatic fashion towards the close of book three of the text. In the letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus seeks to identify what the study of philosophy can do for the health of the soul and on the premise that, ‘pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly.’ As we shall see later in the essay, by ‘pleasure’ Epicurus has a specific enjoyment of life in mind. Central to his counsel is the thought that we need to accustom ourselves to believing that death is
nothing to us; our longing for immortality needs to be removed: “…there is nothing fearful in life for one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life.”\textsuperscript{8} What appears to be the most frightening of bad things should be nothing to us, “since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist.”\textsuperscript{9} The wise human being “neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad.”\textsuperscript{10} If, as Epicurus supposes, everything good and bad consists in sense-experience, then death is simply the privation of sense-experience. The goal of philosophical training, then, is freedom from disturbance and anxiety in which we reach a state of ataraxia or psychic tranquillity: the body is free from pain and the soul is liberated from distress.

Life is mortal and death is immortal, says Lucretius. To none is life given as freehold but to all on lease: ‘Rest assured’, he writes, that we have nothing to fear in death. 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 the death the immortal’ (Penguin, edition, p. 88, lines 866-70). And yet human beings do live in fear of death and on account of this fear, ‘the life of misguided mortals becomes a Hell on earth’ (p. 91, lines 1023-4). Indeed, Bergson goes on to note that Lucretius was not able to completely destroy belief in the immortality of the soul since this belief is stronger than his philosophical arguments. What Lucretius does develop though, Bergson says, is an insight into one of the sources of the belief in the immortality of the soul, namely, ‘the instinctive tendency which every living being has to perpetuate itself indefinitely in time’ (p. 19). As already noted, Bergson locates in Lucretius’s text a melancholy science or teaching, and he rightly draws our attention to the emphatic, and seemingly downbeat, ending of book three of the text: ‘Life is nothing more than constant movement that leads nowhere, that desire to never fulfilled’, and so on (p. 20). Indeed, in the text, at the very close of book three, Lucretius speaks of the ‘lust for life’ as ‘deplorable’
since it ‘holds us trembling in bondages to uncertainties and dangers’ and the ‘unquenchable thirst for life keeps us always on the gasp’ (Penguin edition, p. 95, line 1084).

A specific feature of Bergson’s interpretation of Lucretius is the emphasis I have already alluded to on the melancholy character of DRN. Bergson thinks a profound melancholy pervades the book and is its most striking feature: 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: ‘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’ (p. 45).¹¹ 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’ (p. 46). Knowledge, then, for Lucretius serves to show us that we count for practically nothing in the universe since we are but a fortuitous combination of elements and where we decay just like all bodies do. Bergson notes that there is a certain joy to be had from the materialist philosophy: this is the joy of the sage who imbued with great truth calmly awaits a death that, he well knows, reduces him to nothingness: he possesses supreme knowledge and yet at the same time savours the sweetest joys that a human is privileged to experience.

Bergson inquires into the sources of Lucretius’s melancholy and notes that the spectacle of civil strife had an enormous impact on his thinking; from a young age Lucretius
witnessed bloody struggles, for example, those arising from the rivalry between Marius and Sylla and that can be seen as a prelude to the violent upheavals that cast a dark shadow over the Roman republic. Bergson notes that the first lines of the poem are a prayer to Venus. It is no surprise, Bergson thinks, that Lucretius should extol the virtues of philosophy (which affords peace and sanity of mind) compared to the vanities of the pursuit of power and wealth. Lucretius attacks those who are full of ambition and intrigue, and Bergson cites him: ‘Let them sweat and bleed in the narrow road where their ambition writhes....’ (p. 47).

Bergson notes that, like his great mentor, Lucretius stood apart from public affairs and public life. However, he maintains that Lucretius’s melancholy is not simply a result of his alienation from the world or the time he inhabited. In addition, he 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 terms of 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.

I have mentioned that Bergson is interested in Lucretius’s thinking on the clinamen or the ‘swerve’, since it seems to grant a degree of freedom to human existence. However, Bergson also notes the deterministic character of Lucretius’s materialism. He notes that Lucretius is a thinker with an abiding love of nature and who observes it closely. We need to be enlightened by a great truth according to Lucretian teaching: behind the smiling and picturesque face of nature and beyond the infinitely diverse phenomena that constantly change, we discover pre-established, unchangeable laws, ones that work uniformly and constantly, yielding predetermined effects. This means, of course, that nothing in the
workings of the universe is fortuitous and that there is no place for nonconformity: ‘everywhere there are collective or compensatory forces, mechanically linked causes and effects. A number of invariable elements have existed throughout eternity; the inexorable laws of nature determine how they combine and separate; these laws are rigidly prescribed and adhered to’ (p. 50). Bergson thus sees as the dominant feature of Lucretius’s poem this stress on events being mathematically predictable, ‘for they are the inevitable consequence of what has preceded’ (ibid.). For Lucretius, then, at least on Bergson’s reading, nature is bound by a contract with each phenomenon being mathematically predetermined and predictable. Ultimately for Bergson recognition of this is the main source of the melancholy of Lucretius. He argues that the concept of the rigidity of natural laws ‘obsesses and saddens the poet’. Let me quote Bergson at some length:

Unable to see anything in the universe except cumulative or compensatory forces and convinced that whatever is results naturally and inevitably from whatever has been, Lucretius takes pity on the human race. Man stands helpless in the face of blind, unchanging forces that are and will continue throughout eternity to be at work. Man is the accidental product of a wretched combination of atoms brought temporarily together by inexorable natural laws and destined eventually to be torn apart by the same forces. Does he have a purpose in the universe? We think that matter was made for us, as if we were not subjected to its self-same laws. We think that friendly or jealous gods protect or persecute us, as if unpredictable alien forces could intervene in nature, or as if we were not borne along in the all—embracing stream by inexorable laws of matter. This is the source of Lucretius’ melancholy and of his compassion for mankind (pp. 51-2).

One might say, then, that the ethical or existential task, at least as far as philosophy is concerned, is for us 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, then, to resign ourselves to certain facts: that the body must of necessity
waste away, that old age is forced by an eternal law to succeed youth, and that beings
necessarily reproduce at the expense of other beings, and so on.

What of Lucretius’s achievements as an observer of nature, and what are the
weaknesses in his approach? Bergson notes that in the poem the role of science is just as
important as the role of philosophy. He notes several shortcomings though in his approach to
nature and in his physics. The poet, he claims failed to liberate his mind completely from
mythological notions and occasionally he falls back on the pagan notion that nature is
animate and personal: ‘He would of course condemn a theory which suggests the earth is an
animate being; yet we cannot fail to note that he repeatedly compares the earth to the human
body’ (pp. 55-6). For Bergson many of the weaknesses in Lucretius’s approach to nature stem
from his reliance on Epicurus who, he says, paid little attention to the science of physics, and
he was always ready to adopt the first explanation offered so long as it did not involve the
supernatural: ‘In astronomy especially the philosopher showed his utter contempt for pure
science. According to him, the sun is approximately as large as it looks...’ (pp. 56-7). This
criticism does not prevent Bergson from appreciating that Lucretius’s poem hits upon
‘astounding truths’, one that modern science has confirmed on the basis of controlled
experiments. The problem with Lucretius’s attempt at science is that although it contains
observations and advances hypotheses there is no attempt at proper experimentation. What
Lucretius lacks is not genius but rigorous technique. Bergson writes: ‘Proof of this is his
penetrating insight into the mechanism of the universe; it was he who first appreciated fully
the principle that underlies modern science: nothing is ever created or destroyed’ (p. 63).

Bergson’s commentary ends with an appreciation of the main challenges presented by
Lucretius’s materialism. The movement of atoms is eternal and the formation of new worlds
will continue eternally. The earth has been formed relatively recently, engendering plants and
then animals. We do not need to marvel at the creation of life or living beings since the laws
of matter can explain everything. Humankind is not separate from nature and certainly not 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; new combinations of atoms will produce new worlds; and so it goes, throughout eternity’ (p. 75). Bergson notes the ‘eternal recurrence’ aspect of the doctrine (not that we, as humans, have any consciousness of this since, as Lucretius points out, we lack the memory of our previous existences): ‘...atoms, which are constantly moving about, uniting and disuniting, will naturally yield every possible combination during the infinite course of the centuries’ (p. 74).12

Bergson on the Achievement of Ancient Materialism

In spite of his reliance on Epicurus’s teaching, including the science and the ethics, Bergson sees Lucretius as singularly original (p. 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’ (p. 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’ (pp. 80-1).

Lucretius differs from Epicurus in as much as Epicurus did not study nature or physical phenomena simply for the purpose of increasing knowledge and instructing his followers in the nature of things. Bergson notes that Epicurus disdainfully rejects the idea that we acquire and enjoy knowledge for its own sake; rather, the whole purpose of knowledge is to banish gods from nature and defeat superstition. Bergson even goes so far as arguing that the Epicurean doctrine leads, in fact, to futility in the study of any question that is not directly linked to everyday life and the attainment of happiness or peace of mind.

For Bergson, Lucretius departs from Epicurus. The doctrine of Epicurus, he 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’ (p. 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.
Deleuze on Lucretius: Naturalism as a Joyful Science

According to Alain Badiou, it is Bergson who is Deleuze’s real master, and not Spinoza or Nietzsche. 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. He writes: ‘From Lucretius to Nietzsche, the same end is pursued and attained. Naturalism makes of thought and sensibility an affirmation’ (LS p. 323; p. 279).

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 (p. 307; p. 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 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 re-combinations; as Deleuze memorably puts it, ‘there is no combination capable of encompassing all the elements of Nature at once’ (p. 308; p. 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 thin 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’ (p. 308; p. 267).

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’ (p. 309; p. 268).\(^\text{14}\)

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 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 his 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, as they do, 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. 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’ (p. 311; p. 269). On Deleuze’s reading, it is an error on Bergson’s part 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. Conceiving the clinamen in these terms allows Deleuze to save
immanence: there are not, as in Bergson, two opposed tendencies, namely, life and matter, but rather matter with its differential and that is intrinsic to it. 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 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’.\(^\text{17}\) 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’\(^\text{18}\). 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’ (p. 313; p. 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 now seeks to demonstrate the subordination of physics to ethics in Epicurean teaching.

Epicurean ethical practice suggests to us ways of supressing 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 or 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 illusion 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. (p. 322; p. 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 (p. 322; p. 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.¹⁹ 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, 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’ (p. 323; p. 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 is clearly 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.\(^{20}\) 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.\(^{21}\)

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’ (p. 91, lines 965-7). There is, Lucretius says, ‘need of matter, so that later generations
may arise’ (lines 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, the 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 (p. 93, lines 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 virtues of piety and friendship, as well the cultivation of an affirmative mode of existence.

References

Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*.

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3 On this point see also Holmes, p. 320.


8 *The Epicurus Reader*, 29.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 For Schopenhauer on Epicurus and the teaching on death see *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Press, 1966), volume two, pp. 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’ (p. 468).

12 Lucretius himself writes: ‘We who are now are not concerned with ourselves in any previous existence: the sufferings of those selves do not touch us. When you look at the immeasurable extent of time gone by and the multiform movements of matter, you will readily credit that these same atoms that compose us now must many a time before have entered into the self-same combinations as now. But our mind cannot recall this to remembrance. For between then and now is interposed a break in life, and all the atomic motions have been wandering far astray from sentience’ (DRN, p. 88 Penguin edition, lines 852-62).

13 Badiou on Deleuze, *Clamor of Being*. 


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

Holmes p. 323.

The classic study of myth in Lucretius is by Monica R. Gale, Myth and Poetry in Lucretius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 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’ (p. 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.

Deleuze on this in Dialogues.