

## Lucretius on Nature and the Epicurean Self

1. The Epicurean self, ideally speaking, is a consistently trouble-free consciousness.<sup>1</sup> It does not suffer from anxiety about the gods or the causes of natural phenomena, and it is free from the pain of frustrated or immoderate desires. Because absence of pain *is* pleasure, these states of mind are pleasurable. The Epicurean self is not immune to all bodily pain, for some such pains are unavoidable experiences of being human. But the Epicurean consciousness is so pleasurable or trouble-free that bodily pains, when they do occur, are more than counterbalanced by the uninterrupted continuity of a mind at peace with itself and with its tranquil recollections and anticipations, including the anticipation of its own death.

Subjectivity, selfhood, moment-by-moment consciousness, being at peace in the world, what it feels like to be securely happy — these are the fundamental concerns and starting-points of Epicureanism. But what give the Epicurean self its trouble-free subjectivity are a like-minded community of mutually supportive friends, rationality and science. The Epicurean self is both a unique individual with a unique set of experiences, and the objective understanding of nature shared by fellow philosophers. The Epicurean is or has an objective self. The Epicurean's objectivity is the foundation of his trouble-free subjectivity.

This paper is about some of the ways in which Lucretius integrates, as I think he consistently seeks to do, the subjective and objective aspects of the Epicurean self. I say 'integrates' because there has long been a tendency, which I find questionable, to regard Lucretius' objective voice as a register seriously at odds with his violent metaphors and alleged endorsement of a highly subjective view of nature.<sup>2</sup> The issue that interests me is not

<sup>1</sup> Epicurus had a little to say about the anatomy of the soul, but not much by comparison with other leading philosophers. He was less interested in the causal workings and cognitive structure of the mind than in its subjective states — the pleasures and pains, the joys and anxieties that human beings, depending upon their beliefs and values and lifestyles are subject to. The basic property of the self — of 'us' — according to Epicurus, is consciousness; cf. his focus on *aisthesis* (*Ep. Hdt.* 64-65). Continuity of consciousness via memory is the foundation of our personal identity (*DRN* III.847-869). Death is 'nothing to us' because it disrupts that continuity, and so brings 'us', the self that we are now, to an end.

<sup>2</sup> The 'tension' between objective view and emotional involvement is a major theme in Segal (1990). I applaud his sensitive analysis, but find it insufficiently grounded in the structure of Lucretius' arguments; see my review in Long (1992b). See also Nussbaum (1994) 194, in which the author finds 'a profound tension' between Lucretius' 'aim to make the reader equal to the gods and, at the same time, to make him heed nature's voice.' All I can say here, in response to her excellent discussion, is that I do not think that Lucretius presents Epicurus as 'transcending' natural limits, with the implication that 'the pursuit of [the Epicurean goal] requires us to transgress boundaries or limits set up in Nature herself' (*ibid.* 215).

Lucretius' literary integrity or brilliance, which goes without saying, but his effectiveness as an Epicurean expositor and missionary. More generally, I should like to show that in seeking to come to terms with nature, Epicurus and Lucretius have a conception of the normative self which is thoroughly in line with the general tradition of Greek philosophy.

2. To set the scene, I begin by considering two interpretations of the Epicureans' psychology which seem to me to misrepresent the causal relationship between their science and their ethics. The first interpretation, which I will call immediate subjectivism, was developed by Phillip De Lacy in an influential article from 1957 called 'Process and Value: an Epicurean dilemma'.

According to De Lacy, the Epicurean cannot ground a meaningful life in natural events because the processes of the physical world are totally valueless. Thus he writes ((1957) 115):

The sphere in which values do exist is limited by the fact that experience of pleasure and pain ... is ... immediate ... a *pathos* which requires simultaneous presence of the sentient being and that which affects him ... In order to have meaning, events must happen at a time when the perceiving subject is capable of experiencing them; all else is valueless.

Because the processes of nature are meaningless, De Lacy argues, 'the [Epicurean] ethical agent sets himself apart from the atomic processes with which he must contend' (*ibid.* 116). He detaches himself from the natural world by becoming a 'spectator', seeing things not 'subjectively' as values, but 'objectively' as processes, and so finds tranquillity:

He discovers the nature of himself and of the universe, and their relation to each other. Yet the understanding he thus acquires of all reality is accompanied by a detachment from that limited sphere of immediate experience within which values exist (*ibid.* 117).

There is in Epicureanism, then, De Lacy argues, an essential 'cleavage between the sentient being, or evaluator, and the valueless processes of the physical world' (*ibid.* 114).

It is necessary that we view the world as process if we are to achieve peace of mind; yet it is necessary that we enter into the world of immediate experience if we are to find any values at all. The former course tends to make life empty; the latter imperils its tranquillity (*ibid.* 118).

For Lucretius, according to De Lacy, this cleavage 'posed an inescapable dilemma' (*ibid.* 114).

The exhortation to assume the role of spectator is a dominant theme of the *De rerum natura*; but along with it is a persistent tendency to portray the subjective side of experience, the pleasures and pains — especially the pains — that various kinds of event might produce in a sentient being. It is appropriate that Lucretius should do this, in order to point out the advantages of philosophical detachment; yet he does so at the risk of losing his own tranquillity (*ibid.* 121) ... Lucretius tends to attach to the role of spectator a positive value which it does not properly have. To Epicurus knowledge is only a means ... but to Lucretius knowledge is illumination (*ibid.* 123) ... Lucretius is tempted to conceive of nature as aiding or opposing man [though he] knows better, of course.

In sum: 'Lucretius is not the unimpassioned spectator of nature' (*ibid.* 124). Developing 'conflicting tendencies in Epicurus' own thought,' Lucretius veers

between 'two opposing extremes ... that all process has value ... and that the good is to be found in an escape from process' (*ibid.* 126).

Lucretius' tone and emphases do indeed differ, at times considerably, from those of Epicurus. Whether these differences make him a better or a worse Epicurean is a question I leave for later. But the general dilemma De Lacy imputes to the Epicureans rests on a misunderstanding he has created by the way he sets up his dichotomy between process and value. It is not true, as he claims, that: 'to have meaning events must happen' for an Epicurean 'at a time when the perceiving subject is capable of experiencing them.' This immediate subjectivism was the position of the Cyrenaic hedonists but it was rejected by Epicurus.<sup>3</sup> In his ethics by contrast with theirs, pleasurable or untroubled memory and anticipation are crucial determinants of happiness. Human consciousness, according to Epicurus, does not require 'immediate experience' in order to be troubled or tranquil. Indeed, what troubles non-Epicureans and what tranquillizes members of the sect are beliefs of which the content is not directly perceptible or temporally determinate — beliefs about the gods' complete isolation from the world, etc.

De Lacy's mistake about immediate subjectivism is compounded in his claim that the Epicurean, as spectator of natural events, is detached from 'that limited sphere of immediate experience within which all values exist.' If this were correct, an Epicurean could derive no pleasure or meaningfulness from science. But what Epicurus writes to Herodotus is that 'happiness rests upon the understanding of astral physics' (D.L. X.78); and at the beginning of the same letter he tells his correspondent that 'continuous engagement with science is the main source of my life's tranquillity' (D.L. X.37). 'Without science', he writes (*KD* 12), 'it is not possible to get pleasures that are uncontaminated.'

Pleasure as such does not depend upon science, but happiness does so depend. In acquiring an objective understanding of natural processes — what De Lacy calls being a spectator — the Epicurean satisfies his subjective or personal desire for a rational explanation of the world around him, thus removing the pains of uncertainty and troubling beliefs. Why, then, does De Lacy insist that a cleavage between 'the sentient being' and 'the valueless processes of the physical world' presents Epicureanism with a dilemma?

The answer he gives is that 'unlike the Platonist or Stoic, the Epicurean does not find in nature any purposes or ends comparable to his own ... The ethical agent, therefore, cannot identify himself with the natural world ... He must stand apart ... accepting little and rejecting much' (*ibid.* 114-115). I do not think that either Platonic or Stoic teleology implied human identification with the natural world in quite the ways De Lacy seems to have in mind. But even if he were right about that, it is

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D.L. II.89 for the Cyrenaics, and for Epicurus' disagreement with them, D.L. X.127; see also Cic. *Tusc.* V.95 (fr. 439 Us.) for pleasures of recollection and anticipation. De Lacy ((1957) 117) is, of course, aware of this doctrine, so I am puzzled about his claim that for Epicurus 'the sphere in which values do exist ... is an immediate experience.' According to Lucretius too (III.145-146) *idque* [*sc. animus*] *sibi solum per se sapit, id sibi gaudet, / cum neque res animam neque corpus commovet una*, which is hardly consistent with De Lacy's statement (*ibid.* 115) that experience of pleasure and pain 'requires simultaneous presence of the sentient being and that which affects him.'

unwarranted to infer that the Epicurean's non-teleological, non-anthropomorphic view of physical processes makes him stand apart from the natural world, accepting little and rejecting much. Lucretius is at great pains to show that human beings *are a part of the natural world*, and also that our well-being depends upon accepting nature as it is revealed by science. The fact that Epicurean nature taken abstractly is without value and purpose does not imply that natural processes have no value *relative to human understanding and to human goals*. Nor does the value-free status of nature, taken in the abstract, imply that human beings who take pleasure in a beautiful sunset or who hope to escape the disturbance of an earthquake are irrational by Epicurean criteria. De Lacy seems to think that the mindlessness of atoms situates human beings in a world they cannot accept in ways that are subjectively satisfying. But a moment's reflection will suffice to show that we spend much of our lives deriving pleasure from things that are mindless and with which we do not identify.<sup>4</sup>

Epicurus was not an immediate subjectivist; nor was he, either, a primitivist. In her fine book, *The Therapy of Desire* ((1994) 105-107), Martha Nussbaum makes much of passages in Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius and Cicero which report Epicurus' reliance upon what Jacques Brunschwig has christened 'the cradle argument' — the appeal to innate and uncorrupted behaviour as proof that pleasure/avoidance of pain is the ethical end. According to Nussbaum (*ibid.* 109), this procedure implies 'that anything that cannot be seen and desired as good by the uncorrupted creature, using its untutored equipment, is not a part of the human end.' She allows (*ibid.*) that:

A certain sort of reasoning, too, is included as a part of the end: for a complete paralysis of mental functioning would surely be a grave impediment or disturbance for a human creature. But what apparently would not be a part of the end would be any specialized or socially tutored use of reason, anything beyond its healthy functioning as a faculty of the human animal. This ordinary use ... is closely tied to bodily functions and usually would consist of awareness of and planning for bodily states.

Nussbaum's Epicurus (at least in this part of her book) has strong traces of primitivism:<sup>5</sup> he looks to 'the uncorrupted creature [that], at some level [is] what we *are*' because he is primarily interested in our bodily well-being (*ibid.* 108). Indeed, she helps Epicurus to achieve this focus by omitting 'the soul' from her translation of *Letter to Menoeceus* 128, where Epicurus writes about the absence of anything lacking to fulfilment of the good of *the soul and the body*. 'Epicurus finds truth in the body,' she writes (*ibid.* 110), and she limits 'the pleasures of the mind that have more than instrumental value ... to forms of awareness of bodily functioning' (*ibid.* 109 n. 11)

Insisting, as she does, 'that what all argument *is*, in this community, is therapy' (*ibid.* 127), Nussbaum leaves no room for the Epicurean self to derive any intrinsic

<sup>4</sup> At Cic. *Tusc.* III.41 (fr. 67 Us.) Epicurus is said to include listening to music and observing beautiful sights as sources of pleasurable motions.

<sup>5</sup> In her chapter 7, where she discusses Lucretius book V, she rightly resists a progressivist or a primitivist reading of the Epicurean history of civilization.

pleasure from aesthetics or science, or to have any intellectual curiosity that is not medicinal in motivation. On her interpretation of Epicureanism (*ibid.* 124):

It would be a serious mistake to think that the school was especially scientific or given to the dispassionate study of nature for its own sake ... There seems to have been no attempt to test [its physical theory] against observed nature with an open mind in the Aristotelian way ... Epicurean philosophy is ... value-relative through and through. All its truths must support its view of happiness.

Nussbaum, then, avoids De Lacy's dilemma which pins the Epicurean between the horns of subjective evaluator and objective spectator. But she avoids it at the cost of claiming, against such evidence as I have already cited, that: 'It is probable that Epicurus would not have taken the katastematic pleasure of the soul to include elaborate philosophizing, or indeed, much more than happy memory and awareness of bodily health' (*ibid.* 111 n. 13). Contrast the Epicurean account of philosophical pleasure at *Gnom. Vat.* 27:

In other pursuits the reward comes at the end and is hard won. But in philosophy enjoyment keeps pace with knowledge. It is not learning followed by entertainment, but learning and entertainment at the same time.

At stake in these divergent interpretations by Nussbaum and De Lacy are the texture of the Epicurean self and the measure of its interest in rationality and objectivity. De Lacy's Epicurean seeks to be a dispassionate spectator of nature, but what that spectator sees cannot satisfy his subjective desires and quest for meaning. For Nussbaum, science is therapeutically useful to the Epicurean but the objectivity of this science is questionable because the truths it delivers are ones that fit Epicurean ethics so neatly. In arriving at this assessment, Nussbaum, I think, has made too much of those Epicurean slogans that are deliberately and polemically anti-intellectualist. Ancient critics of the Garden also took these entirely at face value, and by doing so neglected the tough reasoning that Epicurus actually engaged in. Similarly, I am not satisfied by Nussbaum's purely therapeutic justification of Epicurean science. The pleasures of philosophy, as I have already said, appear to be intrinsic for Epicurus as well as instrumental, and Epicurean science is far more carefully grounded than she allows when she contrasts it with Aristotle's methodology. It is true, as she says (*ibid.* 124), that: 'a science of nature that delivered disturbing rather than calming stories of how things are would not have fulfilled the purpose for which we need a science of nature.' But it does not follow from this that Epicurus decided, in advance of reflection, that the relevant science had to be atomistic. He may have begun his scientific investigations with an open mind concerning the ultimate truths but with a strong commitment to the thesis that *rational* explanation of natural processes and the human condition, whatever its details and wherever it leads, will suffice to assuage anxiety about the arbitrariness of phenomena and divine intervention in the world.

That proposal admittedly is speculative, but the speculation is not idle. First, notwithstanding its distinctively urgent message, Epicureanism assumes as strongly as any ancient philosophy that false and troubling beliefs can be subverted by compelling argument and evidence. Epicurus is an optimistic rationalist. Second, he is entirely in line with the mainstream tradition of ancient philosophy in presuming that

an objective understanding of the world is crucial to happiness. I also think, however, that his therapeutic mission sometimes led him to give pithy formulations of his philosophy which give superficial substance to Nussbaum's interpretation. Lucretius, I shall now argue, can help us to set the record straighter in this regard.

3. According to Cicero, 'Epicurus believed that the mind can obey reason and follow its lead' (*Tusc.* III.33). Actually *logos* and its derivative words are not particularly common in Epicurus' extant remains, but there are over 200 occurrences of *ratio* in Lucretius. In his diagnosis of the human condition, it is *ignorantia causarum* that 'forces' people to attribute celestial motions to the gods' *imperium* and *regnum* (VI.54-55). Lucretius' earliest humans were not interested in causality (V.972-981), but later people have wanted to know the *ratio* of natural phenomena (cf. V.1183-1185). Superstition, as Lucretius regards it, is not complete absence of reason, but is rather 'poverty of reasoning' (*rationis egestas*, V.1211); it shows human beings seeking explanations for things that puzzle and trouble them, but getting the explanation hopelessly wrong. The Epicurean self, he assumes, or indeed any self, wants to know why things are thus and so.

Lucretius' antidote for superstition is *vera ratio*, or the *ratio* whose truthfulness he implies by coupling it with *naturae species*. If ignorance of causes compels people to misunderstand the world, true reasoning or *natura rerum* is both 'compulsive' (I.498) and enlightening. When we are reasoning correctly about the world, Lucretius indicates that there is no gap between ourselves and nature because *natura* signifies both the way things are, in general and particular, and also the causal system which accounts to us for the way things are. The first of these uses — signifying the general and particular way things are — is ubiquitous in Epicurus, but he does not write about nature 'doing' things; he has no expression which clearly corresponds to Lucretius' *naturae species* or *foedera naturae*. He does not couple *physis* with verbs like Lucretius' *dissoluit, patitur, reficit, tribuit, cogit*.<sup>6</sup>

Some scholars regard Lucretius' distinctive uses of *natura* as concessions to his poetic muse. It would certainly be quite mistaken to treat his explicit personifications, in expressions like *natura creatrix* (I.629; II.1117; V.1362), as hypostatizing nature or treating nature as an autonomous agent. No careful reader of his poem could suppose that he regards *natura* as an entity in itself to be set alongside atoms and space. But it seems to me no less mistaken to resist a literal interpretation of his formula *foedera naturae*. In the macroscopic world things are seen to conform to definite causal laws, both in the domain of biology and in the cycle of large scale events. Lucretius insists on this and provides evidence for it throughout his poem. Having illustrated the *certa ratio*, that all living things are generated from *certa semina*, he writes: 'Do not think that only animals are held by these laws (*legibus*), for the same *ratio* bounds (*terminat*) all things' (II.718-719). In the introduction of the sixth book he continues to remind his readers that superstition stems from the ignorance of 'what can be and what cannot, in brief, by what *ratio* the power of each thing is limited (*finita*) and has its *alte terminus haerens*' (VI.64-66.)

<sup>6</sup> On the differences between Epicurus' and Lucretius' references to nature, see Clay (1983b) 87-95.

The *foedera naturae*, notwithstanding many scholarly denials, are ‘natural laws’.<sup>7</sup> They are Lucretius’ way of naming the fact that the external world, or at least *our* external world, is a causal system of things conforming to predictable patterns and not happening randomly and inexplicably. *Natura* acts *sua sponte* (II.1059, 1092), and as such needs no controlling mind; but its *foedera* are irrefragable.<sup>8</sup> In order to be liberated from the bonds of ignorance, the Epicurean self of Lucretius recognizes and accepts the ‘bonds’ of nature.

Epicurus, as I have said, does not write this way. That is one reason why many scholars have been reluctant to take the measure of Lucretius’ law-governed world literally. Another reason, of course, is the widespread belief that Epicurus, and so presumably Lucretius too, allowed for a basic contingency in natural events. Many years ago, I wrote about this issue,<sup>9</sup> focusing especially on the Epicurean explanation of natural regularities. Contrary to what has often been said, I found no good evidence that the Epicureans in general attributed ‘chance’ happenings in the observable world to the indeterminate swerve of atoms. All we can say for certain about the effects or possible effects of the swerve concerns first, the unpredictable tendency of free-falling atoms to deviate from the perpendicular, and second, the role of the swerve in freeing the mind from the *fati foedera*. Certainly, as I said in my article, Lucretius allows for the possibility of any atom anywhere swerving at no determinate time or place (II.218-219). But he gives not the slightest hint that the realization of this possibility could have any perceptible effect in altering the *foedera naturae*.

I am not suggesting that Lucretius was a physical determinist in a sense that allows no possibility of anything happening that ‘was not to be’. Rather, I take him to think that generalizations about the causality of natural processes are so obviously justifiable that *macroscopic nature*, the nature which constitutes our own environment, must be presumed to be law-like and thoroughly regular in its workings. This was almost certainly Epicurus’ position too, but he did not focus upon it with the persistence and clarity that Lucretius shows.

Why not? One reason, I am convinced, has to do with challenges the school faced, after the death of Epicurus, especially from Stoics. One of the stock charges Stoics brought against the Epicureans was their inability to account for cosmic order and for the evidence that they themselves found suggestive of super-human, intelligent design.<sup>10</sup> The formulation of nature as law-governed or law-governing was often explicitly stated in accounts of Stoic physics, and what

<sup>7</sup> For discussion and bibliography, cf. Long (1977). Bailey, in his commentary on *DRN* I.586, writes: ‘the expression ... is usually, and perhaps rightly, translated ‘the laws of nature’, but it must be remembered that the meaning is different from that of the modern expression. Lucretius is not thinking of an observed uniformity in nature.’ I do not understand how a scholar with Bailey’s knowledge of Lucretius could make this latter remark. For the combination, *leges aeternaque foedera*, cf. Verg. *G.* I.60.

<sup>8</sup> Note the association between the *foedus*, ‘by which all things are created’, and the necessity of all things to ‘persist’ therein, *nec validas valeant aevi rescindere leges*, V.56-58.

<sup>9</sup> See Long (1977).

<sup>10</sup> For Stoics’ ‘amazement’ at the Epicureans’ belief in a fortuitous and mechanistic cosmology, see Cic. *N.D.* II.93-94, and for similar comments, without naming the Epicureans, cf. Sen. *Prov.* 2-4. I have discussed this issue and its background in Long (1977) 63-64.

it primarily signified, when its mental and deist connotations were removed, was causality — the operation of the *pneuma* that makes the world an inter-connected and dynamic structure.<sup>11</sup>

What Lucretius showed — and it is his greatest scientific achievement — was that nature can be an intelligible causal system, as the Stoics proposed, without involving any mind or purpose.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis of the point I am making turns on the word ‘system’. By dwelling so constantly on the agency and law-like character of *natura*, Lucretius gestures his acknowledgement of Stoic *physis*, and turns it to his own account. Like the Stoics he puts nature in charge of the world, but Lucretius’ *natura*, though its *maiestas* is scarcely capable of being adequately sung (V.1-2), is not divine.

4. Much of Lucretius’ treatment of *natura* is explicable as an Epicurean response to Stoic challenges and terminology in the sphere of causality. But I think his formulations have a deeper purpose, to which the general tradition of Greek philosophy, and especially Stoicism, had also contributed. That purpose is repeatedly to underline the fact that human nature is so much a part of general nature, nature as causal system, that we need to *internalize* nature’s truths and integrate them with our mind-set in order to live well.<sup>13</sup> The objective view of things, according to this proposition, is essential to and partly constitutive of our subjective flourishing.

We may begin to see the force of this point by recalling how Lucretius frequently alerts his readers to their causal tie to nature. Early in book I, before any science has commenced, we are told that Lucretius’ theme includes the *rerum primordia* from which ‘nature generates all things and increases and nurtures them, and into which again the same nature unlooses them when they are destroyed’ (I.55-57). As he states in II.75-79, ‘the sum of things is always being renewed, and mortals interchange their lives, passing the torch on to one another, like runners in a race.’ There is, as he observes in the middle of the book (II.569-580), a prevailing balance between ‘destructive’ and ‘creative motions’; funerals and births are inter-related events in this process. Towards the end of the same book, before treating of our world’s eventual end, he comments again on nature’s regular cycle from earth to earth, from inanimate to animate and back again (II.991-1012). This law of nature reaches its climactic formulation just after the great personification of *Natura* near the end of

<sup>11</sup> In the draft of this paper that I read at the Lucretius conference I described the formulation as ‘axiomatic’. That may be too strong, as David Sedley remarked, and he is certainly right to point out that ‘natural law’ (either in Greek or in Latin Stoic contexts) often refers to morality rather than causality. However, there can be no doubt, in my opinion, that Stoics were strongly associated with the concept of the world as a law-like system. Cleanthes had authorised such a doctrine in his *Hymn to Zeus*, where the supreme divinity governs every thing *nomou meta*, and the cosmos in general is represented as obedient to *koinos nomos*. The concept of the world as a system ‘governed’ by nature is frequent in Cic. *N.D.* II (cf. sections 75, 81-86). As for ‘law’ explicitly, in Latin contexts of Stoic causality, cf. Sen. *Prov.* 2, on the *aeternae legis imperio* governing the heavens; Lucan II.9-10: *fixit in aeternum causas, qua cuncta coerces / se quoque lege tenens*; Manilius I.478-479: *nec quicquam in tanta magis est mirabile mole / quam ratio et certis quod legibus omnia paret*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the Academic critique of Stoic deism in Cic. *N.D.* III. 21-28; *Acad.* II. 121; *S.E. M.* IX.108.

<sup>13</sup> For an excellent treatment of ‘internalizing’ Epicurean truths, so that they become ‘second nature’, especially by memorization, cf. Clay (1983b) 176-185.



book III.931-962. There, after Nature has rebuked the person terrified of mortality, Lucretius in his own voice says (Bailey's translation):

The old ever gives place, thrust out by new things, and one thing must be restored at the expense of others ... There must needs be substance that the generations to come may grow; yet all of them too will follow thee, when they have had their fill of life ... So one thing shall never cease to rise up out of another, and life is granted to none for freehold, to all on lease.

If this is consolatory, at it is intended to be, the basis of the consolation is the universality of nature's causal laws in regard to life and death. None of us can escape those laws because we are all tied to nature, products of its *motus genitales* and *exitialis*. We are parts of nature.

Lucretius and we have heard thoughts related to these before, and in language that Lucretius echoes. The mutual interchange of elements and its biological consequences were first adumbrated by Heraclitus, and then more fully by Empedocles. Officially Lucretius praised Empedocles and disparaged Heraclitus, but he was actually indebted to both these predecessors. Much could be said about echoes of Heraclitean flux in Lucretius, but I allude to Heraclitus here in order to make a more general point. It was Heraclitus, to the best of our knowledge, who pioneered the thesis that human beings cannot live well if they simply retreat into a private world. In explaining the nature of things, as he laid claim to doing, Heraclitus saw himself as waking his audience up to facts that pertain to everyone commonly — facts about living and dying, and the relation between identity and change. Like Lucretius, Heraclitus often juxtaposes a macroscopic view of things — the way things appear from a non-anthropomorphic perspective — with ordinary human viewpoints. Heraclitus' purpose in doing so was not, I think, to cast doubt on the propriety of *all* conventional attitudes to life, but rather to show how they can be informed and clarified and improved when we also adopt a decentered and objective outlook on our position in the world. We can only live with full authenticity, he suggests, by coming to terms with nature and by integrating knowledge of nature's procedures with our subjective identity.<sup>14</sup>

The mainstream tradition of Greek philosophy, *mutatis mutandis*, endorsed this position. It is presumed by Parmenides and Empedocles, and accepted by Plato and Aristotle. Socrates was a dissenter, according to the doxographical tradition on him;<sup>15</sup> so too were the Cyrenaics (cf. D.L. II.92) and, for obvious reasons, the sceptics. But the testimony for Pyrrho actually supports my point. For according to Timon's account of Pyrrho, the first question someone who wants to be happy should ask is: 'how are things by nature?' The next question, the first having been settled, is: 'what attitude should we adopt to things?', and the third: 'what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude?'<sup>16</sup> Pyrrho's programme of questions was probably known to Epicurus (cf. D.L. IX.64) who, in any case, would have agreed with the pertinence of the questions as distinct from Pyrrho's answers to them. Most

<sup>14</sup> For a study of Heraclitus along these lines, see Long (1992a).

<sup>15</sup> For the evidence on this, apart from Plato, see Long (1996a) 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Aristocles, *ap. Euseb. Pr. ev.* XIV.18.17 = Long & Sedley (1987) 1F: Aristocles' report of what Timon said about Pyrrho's philosophy.

philosophers, unlike Pyrrho, thought that they could give definite and demonstrable answers to the question of how things are by nature, and that accommodating oneself to nature, as so disclosed, was the proper policy for anyone interested in a rational foundation for happiness.

The Stoics, of course, are the school of philosophers who articulated this position most explicitly by making 'life in agreement with nature' their formulation of the *telos*. Because Stoic *physis* refers *inter alia* to a divine mind immanent in everything, the implications of their *telos* may seem to be radically at odds with Epicureanism. That is certainly true with reference to the rational, providential and teleological properties of the Stoics' cosmic *physis*. These properties persuade the Stoic, unlike the Epicurean, that natural events should be accepted as being for the best and divinely mandated. But, as we have already seen, the Stoics' cosmic *physis* also signifies natural causation. A Stoic lives in agreement with cosmic nature by virtue of understanding and assenting to the way things happen in the world, by 'living in accordance with experience of natural events' in Chrysippus' formulation (D.L. VII.87).

It would be difficult to find a better expression than this to describe the *vitae ratio* Lucretius praises Epicurus for discovering. As a good Epicurean, Lucretius will not go along with the Stoics in supposing that natural events are for the best; his message is that we need to understand and live in agreement with nature not because nature does things well, but simply because nature's way of doing things is the way things are and thus constitutes the essential facts and truth. The grasp of nature's causality underpins our happiness because it teaches us the possibilities and limitations of living in the world as it really is, understanding what can be and cannot be, what it is reasonable and in our power to do and plan for, and what, on the other hand, is irrational and out of step with the way things are.

In the proem of Book V, as he prepares to discourse on cosmology, biology and anthropology, Lucretius couples eulogy of *natura* with eulogy of Epicurus;

Who is able with mighty mind to build a song worthy of the majesty of these things and these findings ... For if we should speak, in the way that the discovered majesty of these things actually requires, he was a god, noble Memmius ...

In these lines Lucretius twice refers to *rerum maiestas*. Bailey in his edition of Lucretius translates this expression by 'the majesty of truth', Smith in the Loeb edition by 'the majesty of nature'. In his commentary Bailey comes closer to Smith's rendering, because he explains the expression as 'the greatness of the world', but 'greatness' is much too flat for rendering the marked noun *maiestas*, with its divine and regal connotations. Lucretius often uses *res* as a plain alternative to *natura*, and I think Smith is right to render *rerum* here by 'nature'. Epicurus' discoveries have revealed that nature, and no god of superstition or philosophers' demiurge, is in charge of the world.

In the proem to Book IV Lucretius justifies his poetic medium by asserting that *haec ratio* often seems somewhat *tristior* to those who have not familiarised themselves with it, and that people in general recoil from it. The description of Epicureanism as *tristior*, 'too austere' or 'too stern', reminds us that 'tomorrow we die' is the

sequel to 'eat, drink and be merry'. If Diskin Clay goes too far in writing of the 'grim character' of Lucretius' philosophy,<sup>17</sup> his exaggeration has the merit of signalling Lucretius' ruthless determination to make his readers face the facts of nature as they really are. Even students of Epicureanism, Lucretius observes, fall back into the old superstitions (cf. I.102; V.82; VI.58), and although he attributes this to the machinations of priests and to the students' continuing puzzlement about celestial events we may suppose that many people found religion or Stoicism more comforting as a creed to which they could anchor themselves.

To which Lucretius will reply, as he does after the passage about honeying the medicine: 'Wait till you perceive the entire nature of things and become fully conscious of its utility' (IV.24-25). What Lucretius surely means by *persentis utilitatem* is 'your becoming fully conscious of the utility of understanding nature,' just as he tells Memmius that what he will learn will be *utile* to him (I.331; III.207); but he literally credits *natura* here with *utilitas* just as, in the next book, he credits nature or *res* with *maiestas*. I think there are two inter-related explanations for the eulogies of nature in these contexts.

*Natura* is objective reality, but, as I have already said, it is not real in the way that atoms, void and atomic compounds are real. *Natura* is scientific reality, reality reduced to causal system, reality as the object of rational understanding. As such, *natura* is scarcely distinguishable for Lucretius from science itself, as instantiated in the mind of Epicurus. As Waszink put it, 'nature itself has arisen from' that mind.<sup>18</sup> Epicurus was its *inventor* (III.9). In the proem to book V Lucretius indicates there is no gap between *natura* as the objective way of things and Epicurus' *reperta*. By discovering *natura*, by proceeding from the *moenia mundi* out into the *ultima naturae*, and returning to tell the tale, Epicurus has made it possible for those who follow his guidance to internalize nature and so allow the truths it encompasses to be useful in ordering their lives.

That is one explanation for Lucretius' praise of nature in these important proemia. But it is consistent with and contributory to a further explanation, which involves Lucretius' attitude to Stoicism. As I have been suggesting for some time, Lucretius' focus on nature is strongly redolent of Stoic *physis* stripped of its mentalist and deist trappings. The *foedera naturae* echo Stoic causality. What is too *tristis* for a good many people is a *ratio vitae* which requires them to be self-conscious about living within the limits of human nature, and to drop any illusions that natural phenomena have an interest in benefiting or harming them. The intrinsic goods and evils of Lucretius' Epicureans are just as internal to their consciousness and to their minds' autonomy as are those of a Stoic. Lucretius, then, I am suggesting, gives Epicurean substance to the life that the Stoics called 'agreement with nature' or 'living according to experience of natural events.' His version of Epicureanism takes this much of Stoicism into account, and makes it consistent with the Garden's hedonistic starting-points and its demythologized conception of nature.

<sup>17</sup> Clay (1983b) 232.

<sup>18</sup> See Waszink (1949), with further discussion by Schrijvers (1970) 63-64.

5. Lucretius' relation to Stoicism is a very complex and controversial topic. I cannot pursue it in much detail here, but I sympathize with those who regard the Stoics as implied opponents at the beginning of book V.<sup>19</sup> The contrast of Epicurus' achievement with the deeds of Hercules is not necessarily a dig at the Stoics, as some believe, because those philosophers hardly took the myths about Hercules very seriously.<sup>20</sup> What persuade me that Lucretius is outdoing the Stoics here are first his treatment of Epicurus as the paragon of wisdom — as in fact the discoverer of *sapientia* (philosophy in other words) — and second, his words about the ethical consequences of a mind purged by Epicurus' medicine. The Stoics notoriously denied that any of their own philosophers had achieved true wisdom, an admission that their critics used against them, as I conjecture that Lucretius also implies here. By praising Epicurus so extravagantly, Lucretius indicates that an Epicurean self is not merely a godlike ideal, but a real possibility for anyone capable of adopting the master's *vitae ratio*. Against the Epicureans, it was regularly objected, especially by Stoics, that their hedonism was incompatible with the traditional moral virtues. Contrasting Hercules' battles in the outer world with the Epicurean's purged mind, Lucretius treats the latter as the necessary and sufficient condition not only of an untroubled consciousness, but also as the antidote to *superbia*, *spurcitia*, *petulantia*, *luxus* and *desidia*.

Allow all these words their strongly negative associations in Roman ideology, and you see that Lucretius is formulating the benefits of Epicurean science in a way that enables him to defeat the Stoics on their own ground. He is advocating Epicureanism as the basis for a gamut of the Stoic virtues that resonated well at Rome — modesty, self-control especially in sexuality, hardiness, energetic behaviour and frugality. A moment later Lucretius undermines the calumny (surely voiced by Stoics) of Epicurus' impiety: the great man, he says, was accustomed to pronounce well and at length on the immortal gods themselves. The opening of book V, then, should be regarded as including an offensive and defensive series of gestures at Stoicism.

And not just the opening of book V. As Phillip Hardie puts it well, 'Lucretius is an efficient predator, who digests those parts of his victim which are beneficial to his system and ostentatiously rejects the indigestible.'<sup>21</sup> One sign of this, which has been thoroughly explored by Gale (1994), is his manner of treating myths as 'symbolic answers to questions now answered by Epicurus.' Lucretius does not detect cosmological truth in myths, as the Stoics did, but he is at one with them in regarding these traditions as anthropological and epistemological data which cannot be dismissed out of hand. If Pigeaud and Schrijvers are right, as I think they are, Lucretius appropriates the language and content of the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiôsis* in his account of human evolution (V.1011-1027).<sup>22</sup> In doing so, he was not being significantly heterodox or eclectic; for Epicurus had already prepared the way by linking *oikeion* to

<sup>19</sup> As suggested by Schmidt (1990) 170-181 in disagreement with Furley (1966) 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> But see the balanced remarks of Gale (1994) 35-36.

<sup>21</sup> See Hardie (1986) 18.

<sup>22</sup> See Pigeaud (1983) and Schrijvers (in an as yet unpublished lecture); for a different view see Algra in this volume, 143 n. 5.

*physis* in his treatment of our natural good and interest in self-preservation (cf. *KD VII*). But Lucretius' terminology, especially his use of the verb *commendare* (used by Cicero in referring to Stoic *oikeiôsis*), reads like a Stoicizing allusion he has no interest in disguising.

Doctrinal integrity had enabled the Hellenistic schools to establish very distinct identities and to present themselves as mutually exclusive choices or *haireseis*. You could not combine Stoicism with Epicureanism, and Lucretius' doctrinal loyalty is perspicuous. Yet, as the Academic Carneades showed (Cic. *Fin.* V.16-20), it was reasonable to treat the competing theories of the *summum bonum* as similar in their appeals to the *natural* attraction of the goods that happiness requires.

The choice between Stoic virtue and Epicurean pleasure was indeed radical, and it presupposed radically different conceptions of what human and cosmic nature require us to do in order to be happy. But the technologies of the self that both philosophies profess, the tranquillity they promise, the objective understanding of life's limits and nature's processes — all of these are strikingly similar. When Seneca and Marcus Aurelius cite Epicurus approvingly, as they sometimes do, we should see this not as an instance of Roman fuzziness, but as a clear-headed acknowledgement of the points I have just made.<sup>23</sup>

Marcus Aurelius had doubtless read Lucretius. But he did not need to read Lucretius in order to pen Stoic reflections that echo the Epicurean poet very closely. Consider the following selection from the *Meditations*: 'As do changes in the elements, so changes in their compounds preserve the ordered universe' (II.3). 'How swiftly all things vanish' (II.12). 'Even if you were to live three thousand years ... remember that no one can shed another life than this which he is living ... so that the longest and the shortest life come to the same thing' (II.14). 'The universe is change; life is how we think' (IV.4). 'All that exists is in a sense the seed of what will be born from it' (IV.36). 'Birth is a joining together of the same elements into which the other is a dissolving' (IV.5). And most strikingly: 'Either all proceeds from one intelligent source ... or there are atoms and there is nothing but a medley and dispersion. Why then be troubled?' (IX.39). In this last citation Marcus juxtaposes and contrasts Stoic and Epicurean cosmologies, but he treats both alike as positioning us in a world that does not justify anxiety.

The congruence between Marcus' reflections and Lucretius underlines my central point. If, as I have put it, Lucretius gestures in the direction of Stoicism, the result of his doing so is not a concession or a weakening of the Epicurean message but an indication that the divine founder's discoveries fortify the self with the kind of objective understanding also promised by Stoicism but without that philosophy's falsehoods about nature. This, to repeat, is not eclecticism or syncretism, but a highly intelligent presentation of Epicurean philosophy to a Roman audience rather familiar, as we may assume, with both the doctrines and the tone of contemporary Stoicism.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. especially Seneca's approval of Epicurus for making 'enslavement' to philosophy the basis for freedom, *Ep.* VIII.7. For Marcus Aurelius, see VII.64; IX.41.

6. In his splendid book, *The View from Nowhere*, Tom Nagel coined the expression, ‘the objective self’, which I borrowed in the opening remarks of my paper. The expression has a deliberately paradoxical ring because selfhood, it may seem, is synonymous with subjectivity — an essentially individual consciousness which is personal, private and detachable from objective reality. Nagel admits the essential subjectivity of our human identities, but he argues that subjectivity is not all that we are. We also have or are an objective self. This comes into operation when we try to think of the world from a perspective in which we treat our personal identity not as a privileged viewpoint but merely as one of the things that the world contains along with everything else. We manifest our objective selves in numerous activities involving appeals to evidence and verification. Without this capacity we would not be able to engage in science or achieve any inter-subjective understanding.

From Heraclitus onward, as I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> ancient philosophers attempted to improve people’s consciousness and capacity to live well by asking them to cultivate their objective selves — to allow the study of nature to become a perspective for understanding their place in the world and for ameliorating their values and passions and personal concerns. Epicurus gave his own slant to this because he focused so strongly on fear of divine control and fear of death, but his therapeutic strategy — the study and appropriation of nature’s truths — had been Plato’s message in the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Timaeus*. Epicurus was neither a body-centered primitivist nor an immediate subjectivist, as I showed in my opening discussion of Nussbaum and De Lacy. He was an optimistic rationalist but, to judge from our extant record, his optimism sometimes degenerated into pithy slogans, which are too superficial to register the difficulty of looking at one’s life objectively even if tranquillity is the reward for doing so.

The Stoics, whom Epicurus himself probably ignored, were also optimistic rationalists, but, in contrast with him they emphasized the extreme difficulty of achieving a consistently rational consciousness. Lucretius, I think, also took this point. There are many different ways of interpreting his tendency to vivify pain and suffering, but I am most persuaded by those who see this tendency as a test and protreptic for the Epicurean novice, especially in the treatment of the Athenian plague at the end of book VI, a test to balance the optimism of Epicurean objectivity against the irremovable predicaments of human existence, and to remain convinced that the optimism is still justified.<sup>25</sup>

In Nagel’s book, balancing subjectivity and objectivity is treated as a task fundamental to being authentically human. Nagel himself is pessimistic about how far a fully integrated attitude can be achieved. In his final chapter, on death, he writes:

Of course from the objective standpoint the existence or nonexistence of any particular objective self, including this one, is unimportant. The objective viewpoint may try to cultivate an indifference to its own annihilation, but there will be something false about it: the individual attachment to life will force its way back even at this level. Here, for once, the objective self is not in a position of safety ((1986) 231).

<sup>24</sup> Long (1992a).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Clay (1983b) 266 and Gale (1994) 228.

And at another point (*ibid.* 223): ‘It is better to be simultaneously engaged and detached, and therefore absurd, for this is the opposite of self-denial and the result is full awareness.’

In another book, *Mortal Questions*, Nagel discussed Lucretius’ attempt to prove that death is nothing to us, and found it wanting. Perhaps if he had studied Lucretius in entirety he would have recognized a kindred spirit in virtue of the Epicurean poet’s brilliance in juxtaposing pathos, joy and scientific detachment. With the help of Nagel’s *View from Nowhere*, we can see Lucretius’ alternations and negotiations between detachment and engagement in a very different light from De Lacy — not as signs of a peculiarly Epicurean dilemma but as indications of the poet’s awareness of what Hilary Putnam has called ‘the many faces of realism’ — the fact, that is to say, that thoughts and feelings are as much a part of reality as are atomic particles.<sup>26</sup> The self that the poet presents and that he invites us to replicate is scrupulously Epicurean, but its consciousness has a breadth and empathy which we tend to miss in the surviving words of the school’s founder. Lucretius’ poetic genius is a primary factor here. But, if I am right, he was also inspired by the wish to make Epicureanism an intellectual and emotional challenge for would-be Stoics, and also for anyone who had found the Garden’s philosophical orientation too limited to do justice to the complexity of human consciousness.

<sup>26</sup> See Putnam (1987).

