Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics
Greenstine, Abraham

Published by Edinburgh University Press

Greenstine, Abraham.
Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/65988.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/65988

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2306707

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
PART III

EPICUREANS, STOICS, SKEPTICS, AND NEO-PLATONISTS
Chapter 13

Lucretius and Naturalism

[Gilles Deleuze](#)

Translated by Jared C. Bly

Following Epicurus, Lucretius discovered how to determine the speculative and practical object of philosophy as “naturalism.” Lucretius’ importance in philosophy is linked to this double determination.

The products of nature are not separable from a diversity which is essential to them. But thinking the diverse as diverse is a difficult task upon which, according to Lucretius, all preceding philosophers have shipwrecked. In our world, natural diversity appears in three intersecting aspects: the diversity of species, the diversity of individuals that are members of the same species, and the diversity of parts which compose an individual. Specificity, individuality, and heterogeneity. There is no world which does not manifest itself in the variety of its parts, of its locations, of its coastlines, and of its species that populate it. There is no individual which is absolutely identical to another individual; there is no calf which might be recognized as its mother; no two seashells or grains of wheat which are indiscernible. There is no body composed of homogenous parts; there is no grass or waterway that does not implicate a material diversity or a heterogeneity of elements out of which each species draws the nourishment that is suitable to it. We infer the diversity of worlds themselves from these three points of view: worlds are innumerable, often of different of species, sometimes similar, and always composed of heterogeneous elements.

By what right does one make this inference? Nature must be thought as the principle of the diverse and its production. But the principle of the diverse has sense only if it does not join its own elements together into a whole. This exigence should not imply a circle, as if Epicurus and Lucretius simply meant that the principle of the diverse must itself be diverse. The Epicurean thesis is totally other: Nature as the production of the diverse can only be an infinite sum, that is a sum that does not totalize its own elements. There is
no combination capable of embracing all the elements of Nature at once, no single world or total universe. *Phusis* is not a determination of the One, of Being, or of the Whole. Nature is not collective, but distributive; the laws of nature (*foedera naturae*, as opposed to the supposed *foedera fatti*) distribute non-totalizable parts. Nature is not attributive but conjunctive: it is expressed by the “and” and not by the “is.” This and that: alternations and interweavings, resemblances and differences, attractions and distractions, nuances and abruptness. Nature is a Harlequin’s cloak made entirely from colored patches and empty spaces, plenitudes and void, beings and non-being, each one positing itself as unlimited while limiting the other. An addition of indivisible elements, sometimes similar, sometimes different, Nature is indeed a sum, but not a whole. Philosophical pluralism’s truly noble deeds commence with Epicurus and Lucretius. We will not see any contradiction between the hymn to Venus-Nature and the essential pluralism of this philosophy of Nature. More precisely, Nature is power [*la puissance*], but this is a power on behalf of which things exist one by one without the possibility of being gathered together all at once, nor being unified in a combination that would be adequate to Nature or would completely express Nature at one time. Lucretius reproached the predecessors of Epicurus for having believed in Being, in the One, and in the Whole. These concepts are fixations of the mind, speculative forms of belief in *fatum*, and theological forms of a false philosophy. The philosophy of Nature is anti-spiritualism, and pluralism is free thought or the thought of freedom.

Epicurus’ predecessors identified this principle with the One or the Whole. But what is the one if not a particular perishable and corruptible object that one considers arbitrarily in isolation from all the others? What forms a whole, if not a particular finite combination, full of gaps, that we arbitrarily believe to unify all the elements of the sum? In these two cases, we fail to understand the diverse and its production. One engenders the diverse from out of the one only in presupposing that anything can be born from anything, and thus something from nothing. One engenders the diverse from out of the whole only in presupposing that the elements forming this whole are contraries capable of transforming into one another. This is another way of saying that one thing produces another by changing its nature and that something is born from nothing. Because the anti-naturalist philosophers did not want to account for the void, the void captured everything. Their Being, their One, their Whole are always artificial and not natural, always corruptible, evanescent, porous, crumbly, or brittle. They would prefer to say that “being is nothing” rather than recognize that there are beings and there is the void; there are simple beings in the void and there is void in composite beings. For the diversity of the diverse, the philosophers substituted the identical or the contradictory, often both at once. It is a question of neither identity nor contradiction, but of resemblances and of differences, of compositions and of decompositions, “of connections, of densities, of shocks, of encounters, and of movements thanks
to which everything gains form.” Of coordinations and of disjunctions, such is the Nature of things.

Naturalism needs a robustly structured principle of causality which can realize the production of the diverse, yet in terms of compositions, of diverse and non-totalizable combinations between elements of Nature.

1 – The atom is what must be thought, what can only be thought. The atom is to thought what the sensible object is to the senses: the object which refers essentially to thought, the object which gives way to thought just as the sensible object is that which gives itself to the senses. That the atom is not sensible and cannot be sensible, that it is essentially hidden, this is the effect of its proper nature and not the imperfection of our sensibility. In the first place, the Epicurean method is one of analogy. The sensible object is endowed with sensible parts, yet there is a sensible minimum which represents the smallest part of the object; likewise, the atom is endowed with parts that are of thought; however, there is a minimum of thought that represents the smallest part of the atom. The indivisible atom is composed of thought minima, just as the divisible object is composed of sensible minima, to the extent that one can write:

\[
\text{Sensible Object} \quad = \quad \text{Atom} = \text{Thought Minimum}
\]

In the second place, the Epicurean method is one of passage or transition: guided by analogy, we pass from the sensible to thought and from the thought to the sensible through transitions, paulatim, at the same time as the sensible composes and decomposes itself. Through this we renounce the ambitions of a false philosophy which at times wishes to think the sensible and other times offers a sensible revelation of thought itself. The sensible object is the absolute object of the senses, the reality of the real as such, just as the atom is the absolute object of thought, the truth of what is thought as such.

2 – The sum of atoms is infinite precisely because they exist as elements that do not create a totality. But this sum would not be infinite if the void were not also infinite. The void and the plenum interweave and are distributed in such a way that the sum of the void and the atoms is itself in turn infinite. This third infinity expresses the fundamental correlation between the atoms and the void. The upper and the lower in the void result from the correlation of the void itself with the atoms; the weight of the atoms (the movement from top to bottom) results from the correlation of atoms with the void.

3 – Atoms encounter one another in the fall, not because of their difference in weight, but because of the \textit{clinamen}. This is because, in the void, all atoms fall at an equal speed: an atom is faster or slower with respect to its weight only in relation to other atoms that impede its fall. In the void, the speed of an atom is equal to its \textit{movement in a unique direction during a minimum of continuous time}. 
The minimum of continuous time refers to the apprehension of pure thought. The atom moves “as quick as thought.”\(^9\) When we think of the swerve of the atom, it is thus necessary to conceive it as a movement which is made in a time shorter than the minimum of continuous time. The clinamen or swerve has nothing to do with an oblique movement which would come to randomly modify a vertical fall.\(^9\) The clinamen has always been present: it is not a secondary movement, nor even a secondary determination of the atom’s movement which would be produced at any moment in any location. The clinamen is the original determination of the direction of the atom’s movement, the synthesis of movement and direction. “Incertus” does not signify indeterminate but rather unattributable. “Paulum,” “incerto tempore,” “intervallo minimo” signify: *in a time smaller than the minimum of continuous, thinkable duration.*\(^10\) This is why the clinamen does not manifest any contingency or indetermination. It manifests something completely other: the lex atomi, that is the irreducible plurality of causes and causal series and the impossibility of joining causes together into a whole. In effect, the clinamen is the determination of the encounter between causal series, each causal series being constituted by the movement of an atom and conserving its full independence in the encounter. In the famous discussions that set Epicureans against Stoics, the problem does not pertain to contingency and necessity, but to causality and destiny. The Epicureans, like the Stoics, affirm causality (no movement without cause); however, the Stoics desire additionally to affirm destiny, that is the unity of causes “between themselves.” The Epicureans object to this by asserting that one does not affirm destiny without introducing necessity, that is the absolute linkage of effects with one another. It is true that the Stoics retort that they do not introduce necessity at all, but that the Epicureans for their part are unable to refuse the unity of causes without stumbling into contingency and chance.\(^11\) The real problem: is there a unity of causes *between themselves*? Must the thought of nature join the causes together into a whole? The clinamen is chance only in one sense: it is the affirmation of the independence and multiplicity of the causal series in themselves.

4 – The atoms have diverse shapes and sizes. However, an atom cannot have just any size whatsoever, since this would attain and exceed the sensible minimum. Moreover, atoms cannot have an infinity of shapes, since all diversity in shape implies either a permutation of the minima of atoms or a multiplication of these minima which would be unable to be pursued to infinity without the atom, once again, becoming itself sensible.\(^12\) The size and shape of the atoms not being infinite in number, there is therefore an infinity of atoms of the same size and shape.

5 – Any atom’s encounter with another does not amount to a combination, otherwise the atoms would form an infinite combination. Truthfully, the shock repels as much as it forms combinations. Atoms combine with each other for as long as their shapes allow. Battered by other atoms which shatter their grip, the combinations are disarticulated, losing their elements that create the connection between other compounds. If atoms are said to be “specific germs” or “seeds,” it is first and foremost because any given atom does not enter into composition with just any other.
6 – All combinations being finite, there is an infinity of combinations. However, not one combination is formed from a single species of atom. Atoms are specific germs in a second sense: they constitute the heterogeneity of the diverse with itself in the same body. Nevertheless, in a body, different atoms tend in virtue of their weight to be distributed according to their size: in our world, atoms of the same size group together to form vast composites. Our world distributes its elements in such a way that earth elements occupy the center “expressing” outside of themselves the elements which will form the sea, the air, and the ether (magnae res). The philosophy of nature declares the heterogeneity of the diverse with itself and also the resemblance of the diverse with itself.

7 – Power [puissance] of the diverse and of its production, but also of the power of reproduction of the diverse. It is important to see how this second power ensues from the first. Resemblance ensues from the diverse as such and its diversity. There are neither worlds nor bodies which lose elements at each instant and do not find new ones of the same shape. There are neither worlds nor bodies which do not have for themselves their analogues [leurs semblables] in space and in time. It is the case that the production of any composite presupposes that the different elements capable of forming it are themselves infinite in number; they would have no luck encountering one another if each one, in the void, were the only member of its type or limited in number. But, since each one of the elements has an infinity of elements equivalent to it, they do not produce a composite without their equivalents having the same chance of renewing their parts and even of reproducing a similar composite. This argument from probability holds especially for worlds. All the more so, inner-worldly bodies have a principle of reproduction available to them. In effect, they are born in already composed milieus, each one of which groups together a maximum number of elements of the same shape: earth, sea, air, ether, the magnae res, the great strata which constitute our world, joining with one another through imperceptible transitions. A determined body has a place in one of these ensembles. This body ceaselessly loses various elements of its compositions, yet the ensemble in which it is immersed procures new ones for it, whether furnishing them directly or transmitting them to it from out of other ensembles with which it communicates. Moreover, a body will itself have related species in other places, in the element that produces it and nourishes it. This is why Lucretius recognizes the last aspect of the principle of causality: a body is not only born from determined elements, which are like seeds that produce it, but also takes shape in a determined milieu, which is like a mother suitable for reproducing it. The heterogeneity of the diverse forms a kind of vitalism of germs; however, the resemblance of the diverse itself forms a kind of pantheism of mothers.

Physics is Naturalism from a speculative point of view. Yet, in all the preceding theses, the fundamental object of Epicurean physics appeared: to determine what is really infinite in nature, to distinguish the true infinite from the false. The first two books of Lucretius are consecrated to this research and, at this
level, physics loses all relativity. It is true that this multiplies hypotheses and explicates, but only inasmuch as it is a question of a finite phenomenon. The determination of the infinite, on the contrary, is the object of apodictic research. Strangely, it is in this form that physics testifies to its dependence with regard to ethics or to practice. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.

The end or object of practice is pleasure. However, practice, in this sense, only suggests to us all the various means of suppressing or avoiding pain. Yet, our pleasures have more formidable obstacles than pain itself: ghosts, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death, and everything that disturbs the soul. Everything happens as if physics were a means subordinated to practice, but practice would not have found this means all on its own and is incapable [impuissante] of achieving its end without it. Practice attains its own end only by denouncing false infinity.
they must cover, and to the deformations that they undergo. For they transform following obstacles that they encounter in front of them or in accordance with explosions of which they are continually at the center: at the end of a particular trajectory, the visual envelopes no longer strike us with the same vigor, shouts lose their distinctiveness. The error is never therefore in the simulacra themselves, but in our reaction that attributes to the absolute sensible object relative properties that belong to the simulacra. In a similar fashion, the illusion is never in the simulacra themselves, but in the reaction through which we attribute to ourselves spectral desires and fears. In this regard, the simulacra's principal property is the extreme rapidity of their emission and formation. They succeed one another so quickly that one could say that they dance, that, here and there, they form powerful and active beings, infinitely capable of modifying their activity. Their emission occurs in a time smaller than the minimum of perceived time. Such is the source of false infinity; it is through this that we introduce the image of infinity into our desires and our images of fear and punishment into infinity itself. Lucretius shows that loving desire, incapable of absorbing or possessing its real object, can only enjoy simulacra and knows bitterness and torment in its pleasure that it desires to be infinite. And our belief in gods and the suffering they inflict on us rests on simulacra that before us appear to dance, to speak, to ceaselessly renew themselves, and to represent infinity: all the way down to their voices that seem to promise us eternal pains.

False infinity is the principle of the soul’s disturbance. The practical and speculative objects of philosophy as naturalism, science, and pleasure coincide on this point: it is always a question of denouncing the false infinity, the infinity of religion and all the myths in which it is expressed. To whomever asks “what is the purpose of philosophy?” one must respond: who else but philosophy ought to provide the image of a free human, to denounce all the forces which require myth and the soul’s disturbance to establish their power? Nature does not oppose custom because there are natural customs. Nature does not oppose convention, since law’s dependence on conventions does not exclude the existence of natural right, that is, the existence of a natural function of the law which weighs the illegitimacy of desires with the soul’s disturbance that accompanies them. Nature does not oppose invention, since inventions are nothing but the discoveries of nature itself. Yet nature opposes myth. In describing the history of humanity, Lucretius presents us with something like a law of compensation: humanity’s unhappiness does not come from its customs, its conventions, its inventions, or its industry, but from the portion of myth that intermingles there and the false infinity that myth introduces into humanity’s thoughts and works. Mythical in their principle, royalty, wealth, and property join the origin of language and the discovery of fire and metals; the belief in gods joins the conventions of law and justice; the development of wars joins the implementation of bronze and iron, luxury and frenzy join art and industry. To distinguish in humanity what belongs to myth and what belongs to nature, and in nature to distinguish what is really infinite and what
is not: such is the practical and speculative object of naturalism. First philosophy is naturalist; it speaks about nature instead of speaking about gods. Lucretius holds himself responsible for not introducing new myths into philosophy which would remove all positivity from nature. Active gods are the myth of religion just as destiny is the myth of a false physics, and Being, the One, and the Whole are the myths of a false philosophy completely permeated with theology.

Never has one pushed so far the enterprise of “demystification.” Myth is always the expression of false infinity and the disturbance of the soul. One of the most profound constants of naturalism is to denounce everything that is sad, everything that is the cause of sadness, everything that requires sadness in order to exercise its power. From Lucretius to Nietzsche, the same goal is pursued and attained. Naturalism makes thought and sensibility into an affirmation. It attacks the prestige of the negative, discharges all power from the negative, and denies the spirit of the negative the right to speak in philosophy. This spirit of the negative that made the sensible into an appearance is again what gathered the intelligible into a one or into a whole. But this whole, this one, was only the nothingness of thought, just as appearance was merely the nothingness of sensation. Naturalism, according to Lucretius, is the thought of an infinite sum the elements of which are not composed all at once, but, inversely as well, it is the sensation of finite composites which are not added up with each other as such. The multiple is affirmed in these two manners. The multiple as multiple is the object of affirmation just as the diverse is the object of joy. The infinite is the absolute intelligible determination (perfection) of a sum that does not compose its elements together into a whole and the finite itself is the absolute sensible determination (perfection) of everything that is composed. The pure positivity of the finite is the object of the senses; the positivity of true infinity, the object of thought. There is no opposition between these two points of view, but rather correlation. Lucretius established for a long time the implications of naturalism: the positivity of Nature, naturalism as the philosophy of affirmation, pluralism linked to multiple affirmations, sensualism linked to the joy of the diverse, and the practical critique of all mystifications.

NOTES

[This essay was originally published as “Lucrèce et le Naturalisme” in Les Études Philosophiques, Nouvelle Série, 16e Année, No. 1 (January–March 1961), pp. 19–29. A second version of this essay can be found in the appendix to Logique du Sens (1969). The two versions (1961/1969) have a number of minor and major differences. – eds.]

1. Throughout the critical part of Book I [of De Rerum Natura], Lucretius ceaselessly demands a rationale of the diverse.
3. See Book I for the critique of Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras.
4. Regarding the nothingness that eats away at pre-Epicurean concepts, see I.657–69, 753–62.
7. III.138–41, 826–33.
10. “Intervallo minimo” is found in Cicero, De Fato [On Fate], 10.
11. See Cicero, De Fato.
12. II.483–99
13. V.449–54
14. II.541–68
15. V.128–31
16. II.1068: “cum locus est praesto.”
17. I.168, II.708: “seminibus certis certa genetrice.”
18. In effect, while physics deals with a finite phenomenon for which it multiplies explanations, ethics gains little in waiting on it; see Epicurus, “Letter to Herodotus,” 79.
19. The beginning of Book II is constructed on this opposition. In order to avoid pain, inasmuch as it is in us, it suffices to have very little . . . but, in order to vanquish the disturbance of the soul, a more profound art is necessary.
20. These two aspects are well noted by Lucretius, who insists at times on one and at other times on the other: I.110–19, III.47–73, III.978–1023, VI.12–16. Regarding the body’s infinite capacity for pleasure, see Epicurus, Principal Doctrines, 20.
21. III.1023.
22. Epicurus, Principal Doctrines, 7, 10, 34, 35.
23. I.110–11.
24. IV.768–76, 796.
25. IV.1084–2
26. V.1169–97
27. Book V.
29. [Deleuze capitalizes these nouns earlier in the essay, but here the capitalization drops out. – trans.]