

Lucretius on the Cycle of Life and the Fear of Death

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Abstract: In *De Rerum Natura* III 963-971, Lucretius argues that death should not be feared because it is a necessary part of the natural cycle of life and death. This argument has received little philosophical attention, except by Martha Nussbaum, who asserts it is quite strong. However, Nussbaum's view is unsustainable, and I offer my own reading. I agree with Nussbaum that, as she construes it, the cycle of life argument is quite distinct from the better-known Epicurean arguments: not only does it start from different premises, but it is a completely different *type* of argument. However, thus construed, it is deeply problematic. It relies on premises that are much more at home in Stoic than in Epicurean ethics, and Lucretius' appeal to nature in this argument contradicts what he says elsewhere in *De Rerum Natura*. I consider why Lucretius offers what appears to be such a flawed argument, and I propose a reading on which the cycle of life argument could be offered consistently by an Epicurean. The cycle of life argument, unlike the better-known arguments, does not attempt directly to show that death is not a bad thing. Instead, it targets certain destructive attitudes towards one's life that result in one fearing death. By helping relieve the interlocutor of these attitudes, the argument aims at reducing his fear of death.

1. Introduction

Lucretius strives mightily in Book III of *De Rerum Natura* to convince the reader that death is annihilation, and hence that death should not be feared. Two of his arguments against the fear of death have received extensive philosophical analysis. In the *symmetry argument*, Lucretius says that the infinite stretch of post-mortem non-existence is just like the infinite stretch of pre-natal non-existence, and since we do not regard the pre-natal stretch of non-existence as having been anything horrible, by parity of reasoning we should not dread our post-mortem non-existence.¹ In the *no subject of harm argument*, he argues that death cannot be something harmful for the person who has died because after death he is no longer there.² However, between these two arguments, Lucretius gives a third argument against the fear of death, which I will call the *cycle of life argument*, in which he argues that death should not be feared because it is a necessary part of the

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

natural cycle of life and death. This argument has received little philosophical attention, except by Martha Nussbaum, who asserts that it is quite strong.³ However, I think that Nussbaum's view is unsustainable, and I offer my own reading of the argument.

I agree with Nussbaum that, as she construes it, the cycle of life argument is quite distinct from the better-known Epicurean arguments: not only does it start from different premises, but it is a completely different *type* of argument. However, thus construed, it is deeply problematic. It relies on premises that are much more at home in Stoic than in Epicurean ethics, and Lucretius' appeal to nature in this argument contradicts what he says elsewhere in *De Rerum Natura*. I consider why Lucretius offers what appears to be such a flawed argument, and I propose two readings on which the cycle of life argument could be offered consistently by an Epicurean. The first reading is that it is a transitional *ad hominem* or dialectical argument aimed at people who still hold non-Epicurean attitudes towards nature. According to the second reading, the cycle of life argument, unlike the better-known arguments, does not attempt directly to show that death is not a bad thing. Instead, it targets certain destructive attitudes towards one's life that result in one fearing death. By helping relieve the interlocutor of these attitudes, the argument aims at reducing his fear of death.

2. The Cycle of Life Argument: Exposition, and Nussbaum's Reading

Immediately after the 'no subject of harm' argument, Lucretius has the voice of nature scold us for still fearing death. The main point of nature's speech is that the wise person can attain the good life, and adding extra years to one's life would add nothing to

² *DRN* III 862-930, echoing *Ep. Men.* 125 and *KD* 2. For an overview of the issues raised by these arguments, an excellent collection of articles is Fischer (1993). Braddock (2000) offers a defense of the Epicurean arguments that also contains discussion of and references to much of the recent literature.

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

one's happiness.⁴ Then, after nature upbraids a wretched old man who is fearfully lamenting his impending death, Lucretius adds,

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

The first point to make is that Lucretius *is* presenting an argument here; it is not merely a piece of rhetoric, poetry, or satire, rather than philosophy,⁶ although Lucretius' presentation of the argument is highly rhetorical. The speech of nature introduces the conclusion: that one should not fear death. Lucretius says that this assertion by Nature is correct, and then, using the corroborative conjunction *enim* ('for'),⁷ he introduces his reason in support of it: one's death is a necessary part of an ongoing natural cycle in which new life emerges from the death of those who have come before. He further supports his assertion that one's own death is a necessary part of this cycle: the matter which composes present creatures is needed in order to make future ones.⁸

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

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

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

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

⁸ I will not quibble with the empirical part of Lucretius' argument—that, in some sense, death is necessary for the continuance of life. Even if we take quite literally (as we ought not to) Lucretius' talk about our matter being needed for future generations, this could be cashed out as follows: with an infinite amount of time, if nobody ever died, and with continued reproduction, all of the matter that could be taken up by

Nussbaum states that '[t]his argument is strong.'⁹ As Nussbaum understands this argument, it differs from the better-known Epicurean arguments against the fear of death in at least three respects:

(1) Unlike those arguments, or the previous speech in which Nature says that additional time would not make a person any happier, this argument does not consider the status and interests of the individual agent and then assert that death is not something bad *for that agent*. Instead, it invites the agent to depart from a narrow consideration of death from his own point of view and instead to look upon it from a different perspective. As Nussbaum puts it, this argument asks us that we 'look at our personal situation from a wider viewpoint, the viewpoint of the lives and interests of all living things, both present and future.'¹⁰ So, the conclusion of this argument is not that my death is not bad *for me*, and thus should not be feared. Instead, it is that death is not a bad thing, when considered from this wider perspective, and thus should not be feared.

(2) Nussbaum says this wider perspective is the 'perspective of nature.'¹¹ When viewed from this point of view, the interlocutor is supposed to see the necessity of death

living beings would eventually be taken up, which would halt the cycle of life. (However, if this is what Lucretius is relying on, the empirical part of the argument would be flawed, because an indefinitely extended process of generation need not take up the infinite matter in the universe.) But we need not understand the argument this way. Lucretius' turn of phrase is best understood, I think, as a metaphor for the ecological need that creatures die in order to free up resources (including their own bodies as food) for future generations. If there were no death, overpopulation and resource depletion would soon rear their heads. That elements need to cycle within an ecosystem for the life of that ecosystem to continue is a commonplace within ecology. For an introduction to these issues, see Ricklefs (2001) pp. 2-11; see the diagram on p. 145 for an illustration of the cycling of materials. For an imaginative depiction, in the spirit of Lucretius, of a single atom cycling through various life-forms in a prairie ecosystem, see the section 'Odyssey' of Aldo Leopold's essay 'Wisconsin' (Leopold (1987) 104-108). (Jim Hankinson points out that while it might be a biological commonplace that animals must die in order to make room for others and thus continue the species *as things stand*, on the supposition that we were immortal, and had reliable contraception, this would not be a problem.)

⁹ Nussbaum (1994) 223

¹⁰ Nussbaum (1994) 222

¹¹ Nussbaum (1994) 224

for the natural cycle of life as such—as Nussbaum puts it, our death is ‘necessary for the continued life and health of the whole’¹²—and also for the interests of ‘unborn others.’¹³

(3) Because this argument does not try to establish that death is not something bad *for the agent*, it does not depend on the supposition that, in order for something to be either good or bad for an agent, that agent must exist. Thus, it could be put forward by somebody who disagrees with the Epicurean thesis that death does not deprive the person who has died of anything valuable. In fact, says Nussbaum, it could be accepted by somebody who regards his impending untimely death as a tragedy and a loss, but whose fear of death would nonetheless be ameliorated by his realization that this loss is somebody else’s good—as noted above, the good of unborn others and of the whole.¹⁴

3. The Cycle of Life Argument: Analysis of Nussbaum’s Reading

I disagree with Nussbaum that this argument, as she understands it, is strong. At least from within an Epicurean perspective, it is quite weak. Each of the three points about this argument enumerated above fits in badly with orthodox Epicureanism, and indeed with Lucretius’ own writings elsewhere.¹⁵

¹² Nussbaum (1994) 222

¹³ Nussbaum (1994) 223

¹⁴ Nussbaum (1994) 223

¹⁵ In fairness to Nussbaum, I should note that she is using Lucretius’ argument for her own purposes, and she also admits that there are internal tensions in Lucretius’ position. Thus, her endorsement of the ‘cycle of life’ argument should not be taken as evidence that she thinks that it can be squared with all of the tenets of orthodox Epicureanism. She admits that it can’t. She says that this argument seems to conflict with the ‘godlike detachment’ that Lucretius elsewhere preaches, i.e., that one limit one’s desires to the natural and necessary ones whose fulfillment cannot be frustrated by death. She thinks that to try to attain such a ‘godlike detachment’ would be stunting. Although the tensions with orthodox Epicureanism that she identifies are quite different from the ones that I discuss, I strongly suspect that the elements of orthodox Epicureanism that I here identify as inconsistent with the cycle of life argument would be ones that Nussbaum also disapproves of.

(1) Epicurean ethics takes as its starting-point the drives and desires of individual animals to discover what is intrinsically good *for that animal*. The mere fact that every person desires pleasure for its own sake is enough to prove that pleasure is intrinsically good for oneself.¹⁶ Thus, the appeal that Lucretius makes in the ‘cycle of life’ argument, to adopt a wider perspective and see that death is not a bad thing from the viewpoint of nature as a whole, is profoundly alien to Epicurean ethics, since the perspective in Epicurean ethics is always a *first-person* perspective: what is valuable *for me*.

For Epicureans, nothing can be good *per se*, it is always good *for some individual agent*. To think otherwise is not only false, but engenders moral skepticism. Polystratus, the third scholarch of the Garden, writes that value predicates must be thought of as relational (but nonetheless as real), in order to avoid skeptical *ou mallon* arguments. These are arguments that start from considerations that the same thing might be good under one set of circumstances, and bad under another, or good for one animal and bad for another, and then conclude that the thing is no more (*ou mallon*) good than bad. He says that ‘fair,’ ‘foul,’ and the like, should be thought of like ‘bigger,’ or ‘healthy.’ Nothing can be bigger *per se* (things can only be bigger *than something else*), or healthy *per se* (things can only be healthy *for some organism or organisms*), but such relational predicates are nonetheless real, and we should think of value predicates in the same sort of way.¹⁷

¹⁶ See *DF* I 30-31 and Sextus Empiricus *PH* 3.194 (398U).

¹⁷ Polystratus, *On Irrational Contempt*, 23.26-26.23. This passage is discussed in more detail in O’Keefe (1997) 126-129. It is true that, in the case of justice, Epicurus appeals to the wider social usefulness of certain practices when justifying those practices. However, when discussing the overall usefulness of these practices, this always reduces to the usefulness of the practice for each of the members of the community, and when discussing why one should obey the dictates of justice, the appeal is always back to the interests of the individual agent. See Armstrong (1997) and O’Keefe (2001), esp. pp. 136-140, for more description of the reasons given by Epicureans to obey the dictates of the ‘justice contract.’

(2) In particular, to argue that death is not something bad by appealing to the ‘naturalness’ of death—in the sense of its being an inevitable part of natural processes—would be quite out of place within an Epicurean world-view. The Stoics can easily make such an appeal, since they believe that every event in the world is part of a providentially organized series of events, set up by a wise and all-good God. As Epictetus puts it: ‘Just as a target is not set up to be missed, in the same way nothing bad by nature happens in the world.’¹⁸

Epicureans vigorously oppose any such teleological thesis. Lucretius argues at length that the world is not created by the gods, and one of his main arguments is that the world is too flawed to be devised by the gods for our sake. He cites bad weather, predatory beasts, and diseases as examples of the flaws in the world. He concludes this section by emphasizing that newly-born infants rightly cry out, considering all of the sorrows that await them in an inhospitable world.¹⁹

Thus, Lucretius believes that natural processes, although they can be given causal explanations, occur for absolutely no purpose or reason. Sometimes the results of these processes are beneficial to us, and sometimes they are harmful, but in and of themselves

¹⁸ *Enchiridion* 27. Translations of Epictetus here and elsewhere are from White (1983).

¹⁹ See *DRN* V 156-234 for his general attack on the world being a creation of the gods, *DRN* V 195 ff. for his enumeration of the evils of the world, and *DRN* V 222-227 for his description of the new-born infant. It might be for this reason that Bailey (1947) p. 1150 labels the argument ‘rather strange,’ but unfortunately he does not give his reasons for this judgement. Kenney (1971) p. 220 tries to defend the argument from Bailey’s charge by noting that it is a ‘biological commonplace’ that the deaths of individuals are needed for the survival of the species; he goes on to say that the sentiment that life is just a loan to man is also commonplace. However, Kenney does not note that whether such biological facts and sentiments are commonplace is not the primary issue; rather, it is whether an Epicurean can cogently appeal to such facts and sentiments in order to undermine the fear of death. After all, Epicureans not only think that the world is not under the providential care of a deity or deities, they oppose teleology in nature of any sort. Lucretius argues that the apparently purposive adaptation of organs to serve a function is not the result of any divine design or intrinsic Aristotelian teleology. Instead, function follows form, and the apparent design is the result of ill-suited organisms that were thrown up from the earth dying out in a process of natural selection. (*DRN* IV 823-857 and V 837 ff.)

they are neither good nor bad. Thus, showing that death is an inevitable part of a natural process should do nothing to establish that death is not bad.

Nussbaum writes that one result of looking at things from the perspective that Lucretius recommends is that ‘our own anxieties look small,’ and that ‘contemplating and caring for the whole, we are ashamed to be wrapped up in ourselves.’ She approvingly quotes Santayana: ‘One who lives the life of the universe cannot be much concerned with his own.’²⁰ However noble such sentiments might sound, though, they would be anathema to an Epicurean. One’s own interests should *not* be justified in terms of how they fit into some overarching scheme of value. As Thomas Nagel notes, ‘Those seeking to supply their lives with meaning usually envision a role or function in something larger than themselves.’²¹ However, as he also notes, viewing one’s life *sub specie aeternitatis* can also lead to a feeling of absurdity, when one is unable to find an ‘ultimate justification’ for one’s concerns *sub specie aeternitatis*.²² But, whereas Nagel thinks that needing to find some such ultimate justification for one’s concerns is ‘inherent in our capacity for self-consciousness and self-transcendence,’²³ Epicurus would regard the demand that pleasure must be shown to be good *sub specie aeternitatis*, apart from our natural pursuit and approval of it, as perverse and misguided. Just as the longing for immortality needs to be rejected in order to make one content with the mortality of life,²⁴ so too the desire for some ‘larger’ justification for one’s activities and desires needs to be rejected.

²⁰ Nussbaum (1994) 222

²¹ Nagel (1971) 16

²² Nagel (1971) 15, 21-22

²³ Nagel (1971) 21-22

²⁴ *Ep. Men.* 124

In addition, an appeal to the interests of ‘unborn others’ could not be made consistently by Lucretius, even if we leave aside questions of whether such an appeal to others’ interests would fit within an egoistic ethical system. An Epicurean would certainly think that nothing can be good or bad for ‘unborn others.’ Because they do not yet exist, one cannot appeal to their interests. After all, imagine that one were able to stop the cycle of life by *fiat* so that one could live forever, and thereby prevent unborn others from coming into existence. Since the ‘unborn others’ would then never exist, one cannot sensibly say that one has harmed *them*, since potential people have no interests. Lucretius himself makes precisely this point: ‘How would we be hurt if we were never born?...if a man has never had a taste of life...how could nonbeing do him any harm?’²⁵

(3) Lucretius describes the inevitable results of many other natural processes, for which a similar argument could be given regarding their ecological necessity. However, the way that Lucretius describes these results makes it clear that he regards them as bad, whereas the argument, on Nussbaum’s reading, depends on the supposition of equating ‘natural’ (in this sense) with good. Examples include the horrific descriptions of a person watching himself being devoured by a wild beast, of another person slowly dying as he presses his hands over sores dripping pus after being mauled, and of the effects of the plague on Athens that closes the poem.²⁶ The paralyzed caterpillar may need to be eaten alive by the wasp larvae as part of the natural cycle of predator and prey that preserves an ecological balance, but it still hurts.²⁷

²⁵ *DRN* V 174 ff. See Adams (1979) for an interesting application of considerations of this sort to the Problem of Evil.

²⁶ Lucretius describes the two animal attacks in *DRN* V 988 ff., and the Athenian plague in *DRN* VI 1138ff.

²⁷ The reproductive habits of the ichneumon wasps were a cause of great concern for natural theologians and scientists of the nineteenth century and were cited by Darwin as one cause for his own doubts about the

It appears, then, that the cycle of life argument is profoundly misguided. Although this sort of argument can be given, it should really be given by a Stoic or a Platonist, not a good Epicurean. If Nussbaum is right about the way the argument is supposed to run, it seems that Lucretius simply blundered in this passage.

However, the question arises: why ignore the principle of charity here, and attribute to Lucretius fairly glaring inconsistencies? Two replies can be given: (i) Lucretius is primarily a poet, and not a philosopher. Therefore, although he presents some fairly sophisticated arguments in *De Rerum Natura*, he cannot be credited with any great philosophical insight. If he had devised or picked up arguments that were blatantly inconsistent with what he said elsewhere, perhaps he did not notice this inconsistency. (ii) The period in which Lucretius wrote was much more eclectic and less agonistic than the period in which the various Hellenistic philosophies were first devised. It's plausible to suppose that Lucretius was exposed to some arguments and imagery, probably of Stoic provenance, regarding the place of death within the cycle of life, found them appealing, and incorporated them into *De Rerum Natura* without realizing that they did not fit within his own Epicurean viewpoint.

This latter suspicion might be reinforced by some of the seemingly Stoic imagery used in this passage. At the end of the argument Lucretius notes that 'life is a gift to no man, only a loan to him.' This is a striking echo of Epictetus' injunction that, when things happen, like one's child dying, 'Never say about anything, "I have lost it," but instead, "I have given it back,"'²⁸ and, to a lesser extent, of *Phaedo* 62a ff., in which Socrates argues against suicide by noting that each person is not owner of himself, but is rather the

existence of a beneficent and omnipotent God. For more information, see chapter two of Gould (1983), 'Nonmoral Nature;' a briefer account is in Dawkins (1995) 95-6.

property of the gods. And earlier, in the ‘voice of nature’ passage, Lucretius says that when facing death you should ‘take your leave as men go from a banquet, fed to the full on life’s good feast.’ This is reminiscent of Epictetus’ injunction that ‘you must behave as you do at a banquet. Something is passed around and comes to you: reach out your hand politely and take some. It goes by: do not hold it back.’²⁹

However, Epictetus and Plato have the metaphysics to be able to assert, more or less literally, that things should rightly be regarded as only loaned to one, since everything that occurs ultimately is the responsibility of God or the gods, whereas none of this is available to Lucretius. Lucretius’ usage of such (seemingly) unsuitable imagery that would be at home within systems like Stoicism and Platonism strengthens the plausibility of the claim that the argument has a non-Epicurean origin.

4. The Cycle of Life Argument: Rehabilitation?

Despite the considerations above, I think that the principle of charity requires that we try to find some other way of construing the argument that does not attribute glaring inconsistencies to Lucretius, and that we conclude that the cycle of life argument is the result of unwitting ineptitude only if no other plausible construal is available. I will now spell out and criticize two such ways of construing the argument, which I call the ‘Ad Hominem Therapy’ and the ‘Epicurean Awe at Nature’ interpretations.

4a. Ad Hominem Therapy Interpretation: Exposition

The simplest way to acquit Lucretius of the charge of inconsistency is to assume that Lucretius is appealing to premises about and attitudes toward nature that he himself does not share, although these are used to reach the Epicurean conclusion that death is not

²⁸ *Enchiridion* 11

²⁹ *Enchiridion* 15

something to fear. Thus, the ‘cycle of life’ argument would be a dialectical *ad hominem* argument. ‘Even if p (which I do not grant), nonetheless q’ need not be a disreputable way of convincing people that q. The Academic skeptics use this form of argumentation constantly,³⁰ and Lucretius is willing to use such arguments also. For instance, in *DRN* III 843 ff., right after giving a great array of arguments to prove that the soul cannot survive or be sentient apart from being contained in the body, Lucretius says that *even if* the soul did survive the death of the body and was sentient, death would nonetheless be nothing to *us*, since we are a union of soul and body, and death is the end of that union. Lucretius is willing to give such an argument because he thinks that showing that death is ‘nothing to us’ is so important for attaining *ataraxia* that he wishes to convey the truth of it even to those who might still believe the soul survive the body’s death. Similar motivations would give him license for trying to show that even those who hold non-Epicurean attitudes toward nature should draw the salutary conclusion that fearing death is inappropriate.

Such an *ad hominem* argument need not be aimed only at those who consciously believe in a type of Stoic or Platonist universal teleology. Nagel makes the point that people often find it comforting to see their concerns as fitting into some larger process with which they identify.³¹ Many people who do not believe that natural processes occur for some sort of overarching purpose still have some sort of reverence for the processes of nature, and this attitude can lead to them finding it comforting to fit their concerns within the framework of such natural processes. Lucretius could be tapping into this sort

³⁰ A prime example of this would be Arcesilaus’ *ad hominem* attack on Zeno’s epistemology, which starts from the Stoic premise that the sage will never err by assenting to anything non-evident, in order to derive the quite un-Stoic conclusion that the sage will have to withhold judgement on everything. See Cicero *Luc.* 77. Also see Couissin (1983) for more on the Academy’s use of *ad hominem* argumentation.

of sentiment in order to induce *ataraxia* and to counteract the harmful passions that are still in our souls.³²

The psychology behind Lucretius' deploying the argument in this way is plausible. Many people who are not theists, or who even consciously repudiate any sort of teleology in the world as a whole, still have an emotional identification with at least certain parts of the (non-purposive) 'natural order.' After all, in presentations of the Problem of Evil it is often protested, even by non-theists, that supposed 'evils,' such as disease and earthquakes, are evils only when viewed from the point of view of humans, yet when viewed in terms of 'nature,' are both inevitable and necessary to preserve the 'natural balance' and keep down population.³³

4b. Ad Hominem Therapy Interpretation: Objections

Although there is precedent for Lucretius' giving a dialectical *ad hominem* argument of this type, this construal of the passage is open to some serious objections. Here I raise these objections and reply to them.

Objection 1: Irrationality. The Epicureans give a purely instrumental justification for the value of arguments—arguments are good insofar as they promote *ataraxia*. Nonetheless, Lucretius repeatedly talks about how only reasoned argument can work to

³¹ As Nagel puts it, they 'identify enough with the larger enterprise to find their role in it fulfilling.' Nagel (1971) 16

³² Lucretius is aware of the effect such sentiments, which are not part of one's acknowledged philosophical positions, can have on one's fears. Lucretius says that many people who believe that death is annihilation still have irrational fears about what will happen to their bodies after they die, based upon an unacknowledged half-conviction that a part of them will still somehow survive their deaths. (*DRN* III 870-911)

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

dispel the turmoil most people feel. Having a purely instrumentalist justification of the value of arguments is quite compatible with thinking that—as a matter of fact—only rationally compelling arguments will be effective in removing people’s fear. This seems to be Lucretius’ own belief.³⁴ In this way, the Epicureans’ attitude toward cogency in argumentation would be similar to their attitude toward virtue—although both might be only instrumentally valuable, both are still necessary, and so one is not justified in giving bad arguments or in performing vicious actions. Thus, Lucretius would not be willing to take the advice of Sextus Empiricus, who says that the Pyrrhonist will sometimes deliberately put forward weak arguments when he believes that they will be causally effective for promoting the tranquility of the patient.³⁵ But on the *ad hominem* construal, Lucretius is deliberately putting forward an unsound argument because he believes that it may be therapeutically effective.

Reply. Just because the argument proceeds from considerations that a committed Epicurean would not find convincing, it does not follow that the argument is either dubious or a piece of *underhanded* therapy. There is a large difference between presenting a shoddy argument and presenting an argument from premises that one does not oneself accept. So deploying an *ad hominem* argument in this context is consistent with Lucretius’ adherence to reasoned argument. A second sort of reply would be that the Epicureans are less committed to deploying only rational methods of persuasion than they appear. I myself take Lucretius’ declarations about the place of reason at face value, so I

³⁴ See *DRN* I 146-148 *DRN* II 47-61, *DRN* III 14-17, *DRN* III 87-93, *DRN* III 1068-1075, *DRN* VI 35-41.

³⁵ Sextus Empiricus *PH* III 280-1. For much more on this topic see Nussbaum (1986).

would rather not give this reply (and do not need to, since I think that the first is sufficient), but there are grounds for being suspicious of the Epicureans on this matter.³⁶

Objection 2: Fostering Superstition. Lucretius is adamant enough about the terrible effects of superstitious attitudes that it seems unlikely he would deliberately introduce and reinforce superstition as an aid to salvation. This, however, is what he does in the cycle of life argument, according to the dialectical *ad hominem* interpretation.

Reply: Lucretius need not *encourage* such false beliefs and misguided attitudes, on the *ad hominem* interpretation, any more than he encourages the belief that the soul survives the death of the body in *DRN* III 843 ff. All Lucretius needs to maintain is that the Epicurean conclusion follows *even if* one starts from such false beliefs.

Objection 3: Superfluity of correct beliefs. If the *ad hominem* interpretation is correct, then the debilitating fear of death can be relieved even by appealing to teleological premises. This, however, is inconsistent with what Lucretius says elsewhere. The only way to acquire a lasting and stable tranquility, according to Lucretius, is by means of adopting Epicurus' distinctive views about the nature of the physical world.³⁷

Reply. The *ad hominem* construal does not show that correct beliefs about the workings of the world are unnecessary to achieve tranquility. Even if the cycle of life argument succeeds, at best it would have a supplemental function, because it does not show that death is not a bad thing *for the agent*. It may help one view one's death in a way that helps promote *ataraxia*. As such, it is protreptic and transitional: it helps those

³⁶ See Nussbaum (1986) for a discussion of practices within the Epicurean communities, such as the use of group pressure, informers, and rote memorization of canonical doctrine, that seem to undercut the proclaimed allegiance of Epicureans to only rational methods of persuasion. And in *De Fin. 2*, Cicero charges that Epicureans use a rhetorical slight of hand by equivocating on the term 'pleasure,' between boring katastematic pleasure when trying to make their view seem respectable, and exciting, active pleasure when trying to sell their view to the crowds.

³⁷ See the sources referred to in footnote 34.

people become better Epicureans, and perhaps more receptive to other parts of the Epicurean message, because the harmful fear of death underlies many other particular disturbances.³⁸

Objection 4: Context. Nothing in the context shows that the argument is aimed only dialectically. The way the passage is worded seems to indicate that Lucretius thinks that the appeal to natural cycles does show that the old man's fears are ridiculous, that Lucretius himself shares and endorses the appeal to the cycle of life as undercutting the old man's fear of death. So it would be preferable to construe the argument so that it not aimed only at non-Epicureans, but would be convincing both to non-Epicureans and Epicureans.³⁹

I have no reply to this objection, and I take it as easily the most serious objection to the *ad hominem* interpretation. So let me now turn to my second construal of the argument, on which Lucretius argues from premises he would accept.

4c. Epicurean Awe at Nature Interpretation

³⁸ An example of this sort of transitional *ad hominem* argument is in *Tusculan Disputations* III 76, where Chrysippus is reported to have focused on removing the belief that it is appropriate to grieve before teaching the sufferer that he has not lost anything genuinely good. See White (1995) for more on this argument. See *DRN* III 1053-1075 for Lucretius' argument that the fear of death subconsciously underlies many other pains.

³⁹ Some of these objections to the dialectical *ad hominem* interpretation would apply also, *mutatis mutandis*, to the interpretation in Reinhardt (2002) of Nature's speeches in *DRN* III 931ff. Reinhardt's view is that Nature is addressing people who fear death because they see death as a curtailment of pleasure. A proper Epicurean response to this fear, Reinhardt thinks, would have to proceed from the Epicurean view about the limits of pleasure. But Lucretius has not established this thesis, and the people Nature is addressing do not accept the Epicurean conception of pleasure, so instead of giving any sort of argument against their fear, Lucretius 'shops around' in the diatribal tradition for alternative methods to induce *ataraxia* and finds a non-argumentative method which crucially relies 'on the persuasive power of images like that of the soul as a filled vessel or of a man as a contented *conuiuia*.' (Reinhardt (2002) 303) However, I think that Nature's imagery is a vivid illustration of Epicurean views about the nature and limits of pleasure. Much of what Nature says might rely on Epicurean theses about pleasure that Lucretius has not established. If so, this would vitiate the cogency of Nature's argumentation, but it doesn't show that Nature isn't advancing an argument, but is instead merely parading around soothing images.

The dialectical interpretation of the cycle of life argument assumes that Lucretius, in order to foster tranquility in his subjects, has been appealing to emotions and beliefs about nature that would not be shared by an orthodox Epicurean. Stoic and Platonic beliefs about the providential teleological ordering of the universe would certainly be repugnant to any right-thinking Epicurean. However, the associated attitudes of reverence and awe when beholding the working of nature are not as obviously objectionable.

These attitudes are ones that Lucretius himself shares, and he skillfully evokes them at many places in *De Rerum Natura*. Evidence of Lucretius' attitude include his invocation of nature as Venus at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura* and his extended description of earth as a mother-goddess who is rightfully honored.⁴⁰ Lucretius also gives a paean to the wonders of the heavens, minus the anthropomorphic language of those earlier passages, in *DRN* II 1030-1039, and in *DRN* III 28-30 he says that having the working of nature exposed to him fills him with a sort of 'divine pleasure' (*divina voluptus*) and 'shuddering' or 'trembling awe' (*horror*).

Suppose that Lucretius does genuinely feel awe when regarding natural processes. At the same time, he openly acknowledges that these processes have no purpose or plan behind them, and thus are not 'for the best.' Nonetheless, since he does have (to this extent at least) projected feelings of identification and awe when viewing certain aspects of nature, and these feelings are ones that he finds at times useful, then appealing to them is not illegitimate. According to the position which I am sketching here, it is not the intrinsic goodness or purposes of nature that would make our place in the cycles of nature good. Instead, our emotional identification with those cycles, occasioned by the sorts of feelings of awe that Lucretius evokes in many section of the *De Rerum Natura*, can make

viewing our deaths as a part of these cycles comforting. By appealing to these emotions, Lucretius is inviting the reader to take up a view towards his own death that will help him regard it with equanimity.

But for this argument to work for an Epicurean, such feelings of identification and awe before natural processes must not be either damaging or illegitimate within Epicurean ethics and psychology. Lucretius himself, in his description of the earth as a mother-goddess, seems quite ambivalent about them. On the one hand, he gives a long description of the ways in which the earth does have many of the attributes traditionally ascribed to a mother-goddess.⁴¹ On the other hand, immediately after he says that it is acceptable to dub the earth ‘mother of the gods,’ he adds that you must be careful not to let superstition corrupt you when using this and similar metaphorical personifications of nature, since in reality the earth is entirely insensate and ‘acts’ without any purpose when it brings forth life. (*DRN* II 652-660)

So the question becomes whether the sentiments toward nature that Lucretius describes can be suitably demythologized and sanitized, so that a good Epicurean could retain them and appeal to them in order to promote *ataraxia*, or whether such sentiments are always the expression of at least a residual superstitious conviction that the natural processes have a divine purpose guiding them, so that they should be extirpated. It is difficult to see what sort of account of such emotions could be given from within orthodox Epicurean psychology, so as to avoid the imputation that they rest upon

⁴⁰ *DRN* I 1-43, II 594-660

⁴¹ For example, she provides corn and fruitful trees (*DRN* II 594-595), she is adorned by poets with a crown on her head because she sustains great cities (*DRN* II 606-607), nations in their rituals surround her with eunuchs because those who have offended her by being disrespectful toward their parents are unworthy of having offspring (*DRN* II 614-617), *etc.* See also a briefer discussion, along similar lines, in *DRN* II 991 ff., where he says that we all have the same father, the sky, who fertilized the earth our mother with ‘heavenly seed,’ i.e., rain, and *DRN* V 821 ff.

superstitious beliefs. Epicureans think that the set of natural and necessary desires is quite small, starting mainly from the fulfillment of bodily needs, and that other desires are outgrowths from these desires, or are based upon false and corrupting beliefs about what will bring pleasure to oneself. However, if this is an objection, it tells more against Epicurean psychology and its poverty than against Lucretius' argument per se. After all, many people, including Lucretius, who do not think that nature is teleologically organized, nonetheless find the workings of nature awe-inspiring, and such a sentiment is not the sort of thing that disturbs one's *ataraxia*.⁴²

Even if it is granted that such feelings are legitimate within Epicureanism, however, the 'argument' as it stands still seems deficient. I've been suggesting that Lucretius can appeal to such feelings. But how, exactly, are those feelings supposed to allay the fear of death? There is an extra step involved in moving from having certain sentiments of awe before nature, to thinking that one's place within nature renders one's death not such a bad thing really. This extra step, I think, would be condemned by

⁴² See Hankinson (1998) for an extended argument that the Hippocratic doctors had attitudes similar to the ones I attribute to Lucretius, i.e., that nature is 'divine' and awe-inspiring, precisely because of the 'marvelous structure and organization it evinces on investigation,' also in the absence of any teleological beliefs underpinning such attitudes. (Hankinson (1998) 34) The beginning of Aldo Leopold's essay 'Wisconsin' also displays such an attitude of non-theistic reverence toward natural cycles, evinced by meditating on the lives of cranes. (Leopold (1987) 95-7)

My main topic in this paper is the 'cycle of life' argument, but I think that Lucretius' handling of attitudes toward nature is worthy of further treatment. In the passages I've been discussing, Lucretius seems to have two goals in mind. The first is to redirect a potentially harmful attitude. Unchecked, reverence toward nature might attach itself to and reinforce positively harmful ideals like the Stoics' all-pervading *logos* or to personified forces of nature like the Olympian deities. Lucretius wants this attitude to be aimed at the purely mechanical and purposeless dance of atoms in the void, which tosses up *cosmoi* and life for no reason whatsoever. The second is to make the Epicurean worldview more aesthetically appealing. Lucretius admits that the Epicurean world-picture might seem harsh and impious to those who first run across it, which causes them to shrink back from it (*DRN* I 943-945, *DRN* IV 18ff.; in *DRN* I 80 ff. he fears that Memmius will think Epicureanism impious, and he says in *DRN* V 110 ff. many people think that the heavenly bodies are divine and eternal). Lucretius wants to show that an Epicurean can retain awe before the beauty and complexity of the natural world, minus any teleological underpinnings. Richard Dawkins is a recent example of somebody with an anti-teleological world-view explicitly trying to accomplish these sorts of goals. He states that one of his purposes in writing his book *River Out of Eden* is "to accord due recognition to the inspirational quality of our modern understanding of Darwinian life. There is more poetry in Mitochondrial Eve than in her mythological namesake." (Dawkins (1995) xi-xii)

orthodox Epicureans. After all, unless one thinks (at least subconsciously) that natural processes are intrinsically good, then what reason would one have for thinking that the fact that one's death fits into some natural process makes one's death not a bad thing?

4d. Argument aimed at acquisitive attitudes that fuel the fear of death

The key to rehabilitating the argument, in light of the above difficulty, is to change our understanding of the conclusion. The cycle of life argument is obviously aimed at combating the fear of death. In order to do this, however, it need not have as its conclusion that 'your death is not such a bad thing really.' That conclusion, or variants on it (e.g., 'Your death is good from the point of view of the universe as a whole,') has been assumed in all of the construals of the argument thus far. I think that, from within Epicureanism, there is no way to move from premises involving the place of one's death within natural cycles to conclusions about the value of death without invoking unacceptable teleological assumptions, even if attitudes of awe toward nature are appropriate.

I think we should take the argument as trying to establish that certain *attitudes toward one's life* are unjustified and destructive. These attitudes are ones that fuel the fear of death, so by undercutting these attitudes, the appeal to the cycle of life will help alleviate the fear of death.⁴³

The old man whom Nature chastises immediately prior to the cycle of life passage is guilty of being dissatisfied with what life has to offer him. Nature's analysis of why he fears death is because he always desires what isn't there (*DRN III 957*), and because he thinks that he hasn't had enough out of life. Thus, since he thinks that his life is

⁴³ I owe this suggestion, and much else in this section of the paper, to Hal Thorsrud, whose comments on an earlier version of this paper helped change my understanding of the passage.

incomplete (*DRN* III 958), he is fearful when he thinks of it being taken away from him. Near the end of the third book of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius makes much the same point: acquisitive attitudes and the fear of death are closely entwined. He says that many people are never satisfied with what they presently have, and think that what they do not have is what is best in the world. This causes them to have a ‘wanton lust for life.’ Because of this dissatisfaction, their ‘gaping thirst for life is never quenched,’ and they always have to know ‘what luck next year will bring, what accident, what end.’ (*DRN* III 1076-1086)

Viewed in this light, Lucretius’ admonition that ‘life’s a gift to no man/Only a loan to him’ makes perfect sense. The acquisitive attitude of a person like the fearful old man extends to his life, which he clings to. He regards it as a possession to which he is entitled, and he views death as his being deprived of this possession. The imagery of the loan need not imply a lender to whom one is obligated (unlike in the Stoic and Platonic uses of such imagery). Instead, it is simply a way of underlining the fact that life is ephemeral, the result of a chance concatenation of atoms which will soon disperse; this dispersal is the ‘repayment’ of the loan.

Seeing one’s life and death in the context of endless cycles of new life arising out of the death of the old does not itself render one’s death not a bad thing, but it helps to expose how unjustified and ridiculous is an acquisitive attitude toward one’s life such as displayed by the old man.⁴⁴ The awe inspired by the cycle of life is not supposed to lead

⁴⁴ Since I think that viewing the ‘Cycle of Life’ argument in the context of the immediately preceding speech by Nature helps us greatly in understanding that argument, I should note (as *Apeiron*’s referee pointed out) that the end of that speech (*DRN* III 961-962) contains a crux: Bailey has

nunc aliena tua tamen aetete omnia mitte
aequo animoque aedum †magnis† concede: necessest.
(*O* and *Q* have *agendum*, but *L*’s *agedum* is almost universally accepted.)

to any selfless attitudes toward future generations, but to reaffirm the sense in which life is a loan for Epicureans. The rhetorical force of the argument is in confronting the futility of trying to keep what we may only momentarily enjoy.

The ‘no subject of harm’ and ‘symmetry’ arguments are designed to show that death is not an evil, but they do not render this argument superfluous. Even if one accepts the conclusion that death is ‘nothing to us,’ this would not immediately remove acquisitive attitudes that cause one (inconsistently) to continue to fear death and cling to life.

I take undermining such attitudes to be the primary task of the cycle of life passage. However, this need not totally obviate the transitional *ad hominem* reading. In a literary work like *De Rerum Natura*, the same passage can work on several different levels. If a person with Stoic or Platonist sympathies could draw another argument against the badness of death from the appeal to the cycle of life, in addition to its main

No reconstruction has been widely accepted. The three most popular are: (1) Marullus’ *aequo animoque aegedum iam aliis concede: necessest*, which is followed by Brown (1997) p. 205. On this reading, Lucretius is saying that the old man must make way for others, a natural enough thought. (2) Bernay’s substitution of *gnatis* for *magnis*, which is followed by Bailey (1947) p. 1155: the old man must make way for his sons. This requires a slightly metaphorical reading of ‘sons,’ but fits in quite well with the stress on the need to free up resources for subsequent generations. (3) Munro’s substitution of *magnus* for *magnis*. So he translates this section as ‘up and greatly go,’ and Rouse (1937), following Munro, translates ‘depart with dignity.’ I find this somewhat awkward, but it fits with Nature’s earlier admonition that the old man should act his age. (I think that other reconstructions are either strained, or do not fit the context as well, e.g., *magnis concede neccessis* ‘yield to great necessities,’ or *gnavis*, ‘give way to active people,’ See Bailey (1947) 1154-55, Brown (1997) 205 and Kenney (1971) 218-9 for more discussion of this issue.)

Whichever of the various proposals is adopted, the following points still stand: (1) Nature is scolding an old man who is bewailing his impending death, and she says that his behavior is inappropriate; (2) She says the old man is in this sorry state because he always desires what isn’t there, and this longing has rendered his life unsatisfactory for him; (3) Nature says that he should act in a way befitting his years, and that he *must* (*necessest*) make way; (4) Lucretius says emphatically that in his opinion Nature’s charges are just, and he then introduces the cycle of life and the necessity that the old die so that the new may be born, as reason in support of what Nature says. (1)-(4) are all I need to motivate the problem of this paper, and to support my solution, whether Nature says that the old man must make way *for others, for his sons, or with dignity*.

message against acquisitive attitudes towards one's life, Lucretius would not mind him doing so.⁴⁵

5. Conclusion

The Cycle of Life argument, then, is not a Stoic argument unwittingly and inconsistently offered up by Lucretius, despite its apparent reliance on teleological tenets. Instead, it is a supplement to the better-known Epicurean arguments against the fear of death. While those arguments try to show that death is not something evil, and thus should not be feared, the Cycle of Life argument targets the acquisitive attitudes that Lucretius believes fuel the fear of death. Lucretius rightly recognizes that treating something as deeply-rooted and complex as the fear of death requires a multi-pronged approach.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ Similar considerations apply to another construal of the argument, suggested by *Apeiron's* referee. If one emphasizes v. 966, that none of us will descend to Tartarus, perhaps Lucretius is using the recycling of our matter by future generations to show that we cannot survive to be punished in an afterlife, and hence need not fear it. Lucretius is certainly taking a side-swipe at the fear of an unpleasant afterlife in this passage, and he would welcome readers drawing this conclusion. However, I do not think that this is the main purpose of the passage. As Reinhardt (2002) points out, the people whom Nature addresses in her previous speeches do not seem to fear death because of worries about an unpleasant afterlife; instead, they fear death 'qua curtailment of pleasures,' so that simply pointing out that there is no afterlife would seem beside the point. (p. 298)

⁴⁶ A paper by Sara Burmeister on the fear of death in Introduction to Philosophy first got me thinking about this topic. Jessica Berry, Sylvia Berryman, Mark Chekola, Anne Farrell, Jim Hankinson, Dan Russell, Kirk Sanders, Hal Thorsrud, and the referee from *Apeiron* gave valuable feedback. Margaret Kuchenreuther pointed out the parallels of the Cycle of Life passage to recent ecological writings. I thank them all for their help.

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