CHAPTER 7

"Love It or Leave It": Nature's Ultimatum in *Lucretius'* On the Nature of Things *(3.931–962)*

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Near the end of Book 3 of his poem *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius personifies Nature and has her issue an ultimatum (3.931–962). Responding to the complaint of humans that they must die, she rebukes her plaintiffs, as though defending herself in a court of law: Either you have experienced pleasure in the life you have lived so far, in which case "why don't you withdraw like a satisfied banqueter?"; or you have taken no pleasure, in which case "why don't you rather put an end to life and toil?"

This ultimatum has traditionally offended readers by its harshness.[1] Why does Lucretius take this turn? He started his poem with a seductive picture of Venus as sole governor of nature (1.21), bringing joy through the renewal of life in the springtime. Subsequently, he addressed the first great fear identified by Epicurus, fear of the gods, by showing that the gods have nothing to do with the governance of the universe: The nature of things does it all, consisting of nothing but atoms and void. Then, in Book 3, Lucretius takes on the second great fear of Epicureanism: the fear of death. Epicurus called death "the most frightening of evils."[2] Following him, Lucretius argues in detail that "death is nothing to us," for there is nothing of us left to experience anything.

Like Epicurus, however, Lucretius well recognizes that there is more to the fear of death than simply the fear of an afterlife. There is also the fear of being deprived of pleasures that one might still have had. To put it another

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[1] The tradition may be traced to Martha: 1896, who quotes the entire ultimatum as primary evidence for his view that true Epicureanism is "triste et sévère" (143). He assigns to the ultimatum a "dureté méprisante" (149). More recently, Warren: 2004 calls the second part of the ultimatum "incredibly harsh" (136).

[2] *Men.* 125: τὸ φρικωδέστατον . . . τῶν κακῶν ὁ θάνατος.

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way, death seems like an evil because it takes away goods that we look forward to having. In recent decades, scholars have given much attention to this so-called problem of deprivation, and the Epicureans have been widely accused of not having a satisfactory answer.[3] Still, they did address it, and Lucretius elaborated the Epicurean position in new ways. Nature's ultimatum is part of his answer, and this is where Nature stops being nice.

This chapter seeks to show that Nature's ultimatum serves as a way of reinforcing a message that Lucretius has been developing from the beginning of his poem: This is the necessity of accepting the natural conditions of our existence as a prerequisite for the attainment of happiness. Through the ultimatum, Lucretius now formulates this message as a threat: If you do not accept my conditions, Nature warns, you might as well be dead. At the same time, Nature mitigates her threat by showing that the conditions themselves are not harsh. In fact, she has provided us with everything we need to attain happiness within a lifetime. There is nothing to complain about; instead, we ruin our lives of our own will by complaining about what we lack. In sum, Nature does not deprive us, for she has made it possible to flourish fully within the limits she has placed on us.

I shall begin by giving a brief sketch of the ultimatum and raising a number of questions. Next, these questions will be addressed by considering, first, Nature's audience and, second, Nature as speaker. As speaker, Nature reveals the truth about herself. I divide this truth into two parts: Nature's bounty and the sameness of the natural order of things. Nature's case hinges on both the opportunities she has provided and their everlasting sameness. Instead of ever yearning for something new, therefore, we must focus at every time on renewing our pleasure in the present. After returning to the other questions raised initially, I conclude that, through Nature's ultimatum, Lucretius displaces the problem of deprivation from Nature to us: Instead of being deprived, we deprive ourselves by failing to accept the natural order of things.

[3] Nagel: 1970 (reprinted in 1979) initiated a vigorous discussion of the problem of deprivation, that is, the "natural view that death is an evil because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains" (1979, 1–2; cf. 1986, 224–225). Luper-Foy: 1987 attacked the Epicureans vehemently for being as indifferent to life as to death. Against Luper-Foy, Rosenbaum: 1989a pointed out that the Epicureans had a positive attitude toward life; he also emphasized the need to appreciate the "revisionistic" character of Epicurus' philosophy (1986, 220). Others who have discussed the Epicurean position on deprivation are: Silverstein: 1980; Mitsis: 1989; Striker: 1989; Annas: 1993, 344–350; Sanders: 2011; and Warren: 2004, esp. 199–212. Lucretius' so-called symmetry argument has been especially prominent in these discussions; see further Warren: 2014.

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An Overview and Some Questions

Nature zeroes in on the issue immediately by addressing her plaintiff as a "mortal" (*mortalis*, 3.933). At issue is the traditional complaint of humans: They are doomed to unhappiness because they are mortal instead of immortal. Nature responds by going on the offensive. Directing her attack at "one of us" (*alicui nostrum*, 3.932), she gives her opponent just two choices (3.935–945): Either go to your death satisfied with what you have enjoyed; or, if you have not enjoyed anything, you might as well put an end to your life. In the remainder of the ultimatum (3.946–962), Nature develops her attack by distinguishing between two ages among her detractors: There is the person who is still at the height of his powers and wants more life (3.946–951); and there is the old person, who has become frail and bewails his impending death. Nature heaps abuse on the latter for having missed out on all the pleasures of life (3.952–962). The final words "it is necessary" (*necessest*, 3.962) hammer in the necessity of accepting death.

Nature's speech is likely to strike the reader as not only abusive but also logically defective. In the first place, how sound is her initial disjunction between two kinds of plaintiffs at 3.935–945? The first type is described as one who has enjoyed his previous life (3.935) and has not wasted "all advantages" (3.936–937). This results in a very wide range, from those who have enjoyed life as a whole to those who enjoyed just a little of it. Everyone in this range is said to be "stupid" for not departing like a "full banqueter" (3.938). This entire group is then opposed to those who have not enjoyed anything about their life and hate it (3.940–941). Why does Nature not distinguish an intermediate category (those who have partially enjoyed life and partially disliked it) between two extremes (those who enjoyed life and those who hated it)?

Further, Nature gives no consideration whatsoever to circumstances outside a person's control. Apart from one's vulnerability to disease and violence, there are serious obstacles to acquiring the right kind of education. Lucretius has been stressing all along that we are deeply imbued with false beliefs that make life miserable for us. Epicurus said that it is never too late to engage in philosophy; everyone should engage in it whether young or old (*Men.* 122). Clearly, however, not everyone has the opportunity to attain philosophical enlightenment, and a longer life may provide it. Young persons deserve special consideration on this score, besides missing out on many other opportunities. Lucretius' personified Nature omits any mention of young people. This is made all the more conspicuous by her division of her opponents into those who are still at the height of their

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powers and those who are already frail with old age. If she exempts the young from her attacks, why does she not do so explicitly? In general, it seems entirely reasonable for any person, young or old, to want to enjoy some pleasure if she has had none, and to want to enjoy more if she has had some. Why does Nature insist on the need to give up these aims, even to the point of giving up life altogether?

By contrast, Philodemus takes a much more complex approach in his treatise *On Death*. He mentions young people a number of times. We "think" of them, he says, as "unfortunate" (δυστυ[χ]εῖς, 14.1) in dying early; and he regards it as reasonable to desire extra time "to be filled (πληρωθῆ[ναι], 14.6–7) with goods."[4] He also credits Pythocles, a student of Epicurus, for already having achieved a huge amount by the age of eighteen; and he recognizes that a "youth" (μειράκιον, 13.9) can get himself "unstinting" (ἄφθ[ον]α, 13.9–10) goods, so as to have lived "more" than those who have lived ever so many years without enjoyment.[5] Further, Philodemus states that it is "natural" for someone who is capable of making philosophical progress to "feel a stab/prick" (νύττεσθαι) at being snatched away by death.[6] Likewise, he says, people feel a "most natural sting" (φυσικώτατον δηγμόν) about leaving family members without their protection.[7] Lucretius' Nature says nothing whatsoever about "stings." What accounts for this difference?

Nature's Audience

Nature's ultimatum has rightly been linked to a Cynic tradition of diatribe.[8] But what is the philosophical point? As I shall argue, Nature has two main reasons for being so harsh. The first concerns her audience. Although Nature says she is addressing "one of us," she is not addressing just anyone. She has a particular target: the type of person who laments "too much." "You," she says, "indulge too much in lamentations that are diseased" (*nimis aegris | luctibus indulges*, 3.933–934). Likewise, the old person "laments more than is right" (*lamentetur … amplius aequo*,

[4] All references to *On Death* are taken from Henry: 2009. [5] *Ibid.*, cols. 12.34–13.13.
[6] *Ibid.*, col. 17.32–36.
[7] *Ibid.*, col. 25.2–10. See D. Armstrong: 2004 on the variety of pangs or "stings" mentioned by Philodemus in *On Death*. Another example is the "sting" of anger, as discussed by Philodemus in his treatise *On Anger*. Anger is inevitable for all humans, and we feel it as a pain; but we must keep it within bounds, so as to suffer only a sting (D. Armstrong: 2008 and Asmis: 2011). I agree with D. Armstrong: 2008 that "stings" are fully realized emotions.
[8] Wallach: 1976 discusses the Cynic influence in detail.

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3.953).[9] Nature directs her remarks at those who transgress the boundary of what is healthy or right. They are in the grip of a disease that Lucretius himself diagnoses a little later as "so great a bad desire for life" (*mala ... vitai tanta cupido*, 3.1077). Underlying their complaints, therefore, is an excess desire for life.

As so often in Lucretius' poem, we need to bring into consideration a background of theory that Lucretius does not mention explicitly. Epicurus divided desires into natural and unnatural; and he further subdivided natural desires into necessary and natural only.[10] This results in three kinds of desire: natural and necessary; natural and unnecessary; unnatural and unnecessary. The third kind is said to be "empty," for although it aims for pleasure it results in an excess of pain over pleasure. Lucretius' "bad" desire for life belongs to the last, "empty" group. By contrast, Philodemus' "stings" are natural, as he says, for they remain within the boundary of a natural desire for life. We naturally feel a pang, under certain circumstances, when confronted by death. Lucretius' Nature does not reject such pangs; she does not mention them because she directs her attack against excess lamentation.

Epicurus made two further kinds of distinction, which help to explain what is so "bad" about an excessive desire for life. Finally, he subdivided natural and necessary desires in turn into three kinds: necessary for happiness, necessary for bodily comfort and necessary for life itself.[11] Examples of the last category are the desire for food and drink. Importantly, this does not make the desire for life itself a necessary desire. A desire for life is indeed hypothetically necessary (to use Aristotelian terminology), for it is necessary for happiness and bodily comfort, but it is not necessary in itself. The desire for life must come to a stop when confronted by the necessity of death. This makes it a natural desire, bounded by the necessity to yield to death. If it exceeds this boundary, it becomes both unnecessary and unnatural.

The other additional distinction concerns the nature of pleasure. We desire life with a view to attaining its goal, which is happiness, and this consists in pleasure. Epicurean pleasure, however, differs from what we usually think of as pleasure. Epicurus divided it into two kinds: katastematic and kinetic.[12] Very briefly, the former consists of an absence of pain and belongs to the stable condition of a sensory organ or the mind; the

[9] So Heinze: 1897, 176: "Hier wird nur das Übermass der λύπη verworfen" ("This is the rejection only of excessive grief").

[10] *Men.* 127–128, KD 29 and U 456. [11] *Men.* 127.

[12] See DL 10.136 and Cicero *Fin.* 1.37–39 and 2.6–18. Wolfsdorf: 2013, 147–163, provides a useful introduction to the controversies. I agree with Wolfsdorf, as argued previously by Diano: 1940, that kinetic pleasure always supervenes on katastematic pleasure.

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latter consists of a movement, or stimulation, of a sensory organ or the mind. To this division, Epicurus added the unique view that the absence of pain is the height of pleasure; kinetic pleasure merely varies the pleasure without increasing it.[13] It follows that, whereas the desire for katastematic pleasure is necessary, the desire for kinetic pleasure is unnecessary. As such, the desire for kinetic pleasure is either natural or unnatural. If natural, it merely varies the pleasure, without adding anything or taking anything away from it; if unnatural, it must be avoided because it results in an excess of pain over pleasure.

The first main reason, then, that Nature is so harsh is that she is addressing people who lament "too much." All transgress the natural boundary of desire. In particular, those who have enjoyed some pleasure fail to be grateful for what they have already attained. As for those who have enjoyed no pleasure, they might as well not go on, for, as will become clearer, they have willingly shut themselves off from having any pleasure in the past.

Nature as Speaker

This brings us to the second main reason for Nature's harshness. It lies in her own role as speaker of the truth about the nature of things. In short, Nature speaks the truth about herself. This is an objective truth, applying to the nature of the universe and everything in it. By nature, Nature tells us, all things are always the same, bounded forever by the same limits. Nature herself cannot change these limits. Within these limits, however, she has provided an abundance of things that we can enjoy. The harshness of Nature's words emphasizes the fixity of these limits, together with her generosity.

Nature's Abundance

I shall first discuss Nature's abundance before turning to the sameness of the order she has established. This benefit needs to be put in context. Lucretius already devoted most of Book 3 to showing another benefit, which is of the utmost importance: the dissolution of the human being at the time of death. By removing a life after death, nature removes the source of a terror that, as Lucretius puts it, leaves no pleasure pure, but "suffuses everything with the blackness of death" (3.38–40). Nature alludes to this

[13] KD 3; cf. 2.16–22.

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benefit in her ultimatum when she tells her plaintiff to "take with a serene mind a sleep without care, you fool" (3.939, cf. 962).[14]

To this after-death benefit, Nature adds the power to live a life "worthy of the gods" (*dignam dis*, 3.322). Along with inner faculties, as crowned by reason, this requires some external resources. In her ultimatum, Nature refers to these resources as "advantages" or "benefits" (*commoda*) that have been "heaped up" (*congesta*), as it were, into a sieve in the case of those who fail to enjoy them (3.936–937).[15] She also refers to them as "prizes of life" (*vitai praemia*, 3.956). They are not in themselves pleasures; rather they are sources of pleasure, which it is up to us to enjoy.

Lucretius shows us the abundance of these advantages throughout his poem. Family life is a major benefit: Replete with kisses from wife and children and protected by prosperity (*factis florentibus*), it bestows "so many prizes of life" (*tot praemia vitae*, 3.894–899). The products of the crafts are another large fund of prizes of life: They consist in part of things that are useful, such as ships and agriculture, and in part of "delights" such as paintings and poems (5.1448–1456). Greatest of all, Epicurus' discoveries are "prizes" (*praemia*, 5.5) that illuminate the "advantages of life" (*commoda vitae*, 3.2). In addition, Lucretius' poem overflows with depictions of sensory sources of pleasure. Among them, Lucretius singles out acts of sexual intercourse as "advantages" (*commoda*, 4.1074) conferred on us by our sense of touch. In all of these cases, the advantage becomes void if it is contaminated by false opinions.

Overall, this abundance may be divided into two kinds: natural occurrences and craft products or arrangements, as devised by humans. Nature is directly responsible for the former. In an extended sense, she may also be regarded as responsible for both, for she has equipped humans with the inner powers and external resources to develop the crafts and arrange our lives for the best. In either case, Nature presents herself as a kind of cosmic craftsman when she declares that she cannot "devise or invent" any source of pleasure beyond what she has already devised (3.944). This self-portrait is indebted to a long philosophical tradition. Strictly speaking, Epicurean

[14] See also 3.904–911 for a contrast between the sleep of death and the unreasonable mourning of those left behind.

[15] The image of the sieve recurs in Lucretius' list of torments, traditionally imputed to the underworld, which Lucretius takes to represent the torments of the life we live. In that passage (3.1003–1010), Lucretius compares the abundance of advantages to the delights that the seasons bring to us throughout the year; cf. 6.20–21. The use of *commoda* (also used by Lucretius at 3.2, 4.1074 and 6.19) suggests the Stoic notion of "advantages" (εὐχρηστήματα, translated as *commoda* by Cicero at *On Ends* 3.69).

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nature does not devise anything, for she lacks purposes. Still, by personifying Nature as a craftsman, Lucretius is able to emphasize not only that nature operates in ways that are useful to us, but also that we should be grateful for these benefits. Nature's repeated warning not to let things pass by *ingratum/ingrata* (3.937, 942 and 958), a term that signifies both "unenjoyed" and "without gratitude," implicitly demands such gratitude. This is the correct attitude to Nature's governance, instead of wailing.

There is a precedent for this portrayal of Nature in Epicurus' own extant writings:

> χάρις τῇ μακαρίᾳ φύσει, ὅτι τὰ ἀναγκαῖα ἐποίησεν εὐπόριστα, τὰ δὲ δυσπόριστα οὐκ ἀναγκαῖα.
>
> Thanks be to blessed Nature, because she made what is necessary easy to obtain (εὐπόριστα) and what is hard to obtain not necessary.[16]

We do not expect the device of personification from Epicurus, nor the divinization that clings to "blessed." It seems he let go, in this case, of his more prosaic self. What prompts his exhortation is the basic ethical tenet that it is naturally easy to satisfy one's necessary desires. Elsewhere, Epicurus says that it is easy to obtain (εὐπόριστα) what is "natural," thereby enfolding the entire range of natural desires.[17] It turns out that we should be grateful to nature for making it easy not only to obtain the height of pleasure, namely, the absence of pain, but also to vary our pleasures with an abundance of kinetic pleasures.

Lucretius rounds out Epicurus' conception of what is "easy to acquire" by the notion of an "abundance" (εὐπορία) of sources of pleasure. Philodemus touches on this abundance when he says that even a young person can enjoy "unstinting" goods (*On Death*, col. 13.9–10). There is, however, a limit to this abundance. As Lucretius argues explicitly in Book 5 in opposition to the notion of divine providence, there is much about the natural arrangement of things that is harmful to humans. Citing numerous examples of hardships, including premature death (*mors immatura*, 5.221), he declares that the nature of things "is endowed with such great fault" (*tanta stat praedita culpa*, 5.199). To confirm the charge, he offers the memorable image of a baby, lying naked on the ground,

[16] fr. 469 U. At KD 21, Epicurus claims that the person who "has learned the limits of life knows that what removes pain that is due to deficiency is easy to obtain," as is "that which makes one's whole life complete (παντελῆ)." On the complete life, see below, n. 30.

[17] *Men.* 130: τὸ μὲν φυσικὸν πᾶν εὐπόριστόν ἐστι, τὸ δὲ κενὸν δυσπόριστον. At KD 15, "natural wealth" is said to be "easy to obtain."

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"filling the place with funereal wailing, as is right (*aequum*) for someone who must pass through such great evils in life" (5.225–226).

In her ultimatum, by contrast, Nature admits of no blame. How can these two views be reconciled? Behind the Epicurean view, there lurks, I think, a traditional myth: Homer's story of Zeus' two jars, one full of good things, the other filled with bad things, from which Zeus either bestows a mixture of good and bad, or else bestows only bad things (*Il.* 24.527–533). Challenging this myth, Lucretius' Nature insists there are good things, and plenty of them. There is no reason to wail, for humans are naturally endowed with the ability to take their fill of them. What justifies Nature's focus in her ultimatum is that she wants to pull her plaintiffs away from their absorption in what is wrong and to guide them toward a recognition of what is right.

The Natural Sameness of Things

I turn now from Nature's abundance to the sameness of her arrangements. Lucretius introduces this theme in his attack on the sort of person who has wasted all sources of enjoyment so far: Why don't you, she says, just put an end to your life (3.943)? There is a precedent for this piece of advice, too, in Epicurus' extant writings (*Men.* 126–127). Epicurus first attacks one piece of common wisdom – that a young person should live well and an old person die well – by saying that life is not only "welcome" (ἀσπαστόν) but demands the same care in both cases. Then he turns to a saying of Theognis, which he calls "much worse." This is that it is good not to be born, "but if born, to pass as quickly as possible through the gates of Hades." Epicurus responds: If the speaker really means it, why doesn't he leave life? There is a hint that since he has not done so already, he is attracted by life, just like everyone else.

Lucretius takes over the sentiment, but adds an explanation (3.944–995):

> Nam tibi praeterea quod machiner inveniamque,
> quod placeat, nihil est; eadem sunt omnia semper.

> For there is nothing else I can devise and invent that will please you; all things are always the same.

Nature first presents herself, as already mentioned, as the author of all our pleasures. But what does she mean by adding "all things are always the same"? One interpretation, which comes to mind immediately, is: *For you*, given your attitude, things will always be the same, for *you* will always

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continue to waste whatever source of pleasure comes your way. The upshot is: There is nothing more I can do for you, so why don't you just end your life? On this interpretation, Nature is speaking a truth about the subjective experience of her plaintiff: *For him*, things will always be the same.

There is, however, another possibility. Instead of describing a subjective attitude, Nature is declaring an objective truth about the natural order of things. "All things," she says, "are always the same," for this is how I have arranged all things. This is a universal arrangement, encompassing the universe as a whole and including pleasure as part of the whole. It follows that, unless her plaintiff changes his attitude, he will indeed always be dissatisfied. This is a consequence, however, of what Nature is saying. What she is stating directly is an objective reason for changing one's attitude: Since the arrangement of pleasures (along with everything else in the nature of things) is always the same, it is up to the plaintiff to accept this sameness, instead of always expecting things to be different.

Lucretius emphasizes the fixity of the natural order from the very beginning of his poem, where he first credited Epicurus with discovering the following (1.75–77):

> . . . quid possit oriri,
> quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique
> qua nam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.

> . . . what can arise, and what cannot, and for what reason there is, in short, a limited power for each thing and a deep-set boundary stone.

Repeated three more times in the rest of the work, these lines serve as a kind of physical leitmotif for Lucretius' poem.[18] By nature, the development of things is always confined within the same boundaries. As Lucretius makes clear in the second occurrence of the lines, this sameness applies to kinds of things: Each created thing is generically always the same, having the same boundaries of what it can and cannot do, together with a fixed life-time. Lucretius illustrates this truth rather whimsically by the sameness of spots that differentiate the various kinds of birds (1.584–590):

> Denique iam quoniam generatim reddita finis
> crescendi rebus constat vitamque tenendi,
> et quid quaeque queant per foedera naturai,

[18] The lines are repeated verbatim at 1.594–596 and at 5.88–90, as well as 6.64–66 with a substitution of *quid queat esse* for *quid possit oriri*. Lucretius also refers to the boundary stone at 2.1087 (*depactus terminus alte*), together with the explanation that it distinguishes kinds of things from one another.

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quid porro nequeant, sancitum quando quidem extat,
nec commutatur quicquam, quin omnia constant
usque adeo, variae volucres ut in ordine cunctae
ostendant maculas generalis corpore inesse...

Further, since there is a limit of growth and the preservation of life for things according to their kind and it is ordained by the pacts of nature what each kind can do and cannot do nor does anything change but that all things are so constant to the point that all the various birds in order show that there are generic marks in their body ...

Lucretius here refers to the arrangements of nature as "pacts" (*foedera*). Like the political pacts that humans make with one another, these natural pacts distribute powers to each kind of thing within fixed limits.[19] Unlike political pacts, however, these natural pacts cannot be broken; and, while they can be ignored, they will nevertheless always endure.

To return to the ultimatum, Nature is so insistent that "all things are always the same" that she repeats the message, with elaboration, in what she says next (3.946–949):

si tibi non annis corpus iam marcet et artus
confecti languent, eadem tamen omnia restant,
omnia si perges vivendo vincere saecla,
atque etiam potius, si numquam sis moriturus.

If your body is not already withering with years and your limbs do not yet languish from being used up, yet all things remain the same, if you should live on to outdo all generations or even more, if you should never die.

Nature now singles out the sort of plaintiff who is still at the height of his powers and still has some time left to live. Suppose now that he could live longer – much longer, and even forever. All things would still remain the same (especially if he were to live forever). At this point, it seems to me the subjective interpretation recedes into implausibility. The repetition of "all things," together with the extension of their sameness to infinity, suggests ontological concreteness rather than a personal attitude. We now see the plaintiff as an observer, confronted by the objective sameness of all things for all time, rather than merely as a sufferer wrapped up in his own subjective misery. The sameness of things does indeed condemn to unending misery those who do not recognize it as a source of pleasure. For those

[19] The "pacts (*foedera*) of nature" are mentioned also at 2.302 and 5.310; cf. 5.57. Specific examples of natural "pacts" are the relationship between the irrational soul and the mind (3.416) and the power of the magnet to attract iron (6.906–907). See further Asmis: 2008, 141–149.

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who do, however, it offers a path to happiness. There is nothing inherently distressing about the natural sameness of things, nor is it inevitably boring (as commentators tend to suggest), but it provides an opportunity to enjoy life to the fullest.[20] Just as the gods enjoy to the fullest the infinitely extended sameness of their lives, so it is possible for humans to enjoy fully the finite sameness of their lives.

Nature rises to a height of invective in the final section of her ultimatum. She now returns to the theme of a full life by adding the example of an old person, who has become feeble. He has "gone through all the prizes of life" by letting them slip past him (3.956–960):

> omnia perfunctus vitai praemia marces;
> sed quia semper aves quod abest, praesentia temnis,
> inperfecta tibi elapsast ingrataque vita,
> et nec opinanti mors ad caput adstitit ante
> quam satur ac plenus possis discedere rerum.

> You are withered, having gone through all the prizes of life. But because you always yearn for what is absent, you have contempt for what is present and your life, incomplete, has slipped away from you without enjoyment and death has come to stand unexpectedly at your head before you can depart sated and full of things.

Paradoxically, the old man's life is incomplete, even though he is on the brink of death. This is an appeal to Epicurus' conception of a "complete" life. In opposition to the conventional view of a biologically complete life, Epicurus identified a complete life as one for which "the mind has reasoned out the limits of corporeal pleasure and removed the fears concerning eternity."[21] Such a life, Epicurus adds, does not require an infinite time; nor does this sort of person go to his death, whenever it is ready for him, in such a way as to either "flee" pleasure or consider anything "lacking from the best life." A finite period contains "equal pleasure" as an infinite time.[22] It follows that the prolongation of pleasure, after one has achieved a complete life, adds nothing to one's pleasure.[23] The reason, as mentioned earlier, is that all we need in order to obtain the

[20] Bernard Williams: 1973 offers an interesting perspective on boredom in an influential article called "The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality." Here he takes the story of a woman singer who took an elixir of life and lived to the age of 342, with the consequence of becoming utterly bored: "In the end," says the woman, "it is the same, singing and silence" (82); and she puts an end to her life. Williams argues that, given the woman's personal characteristics, things would end up being always the same so as to become unbearably boring. On the Epicurean view, as I try to show, boredom afflicts those who do not know how to enjoy pleasure.

[21] KD 20. [22] KD 19. [23] Cicero *Fin.* 2.87–88; cf. *Men.* 126.

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maximum of pleasure is the absence of pain, or katastematic pleasure, for both body and mind.

Lucretius avoids going into these details. Instead, he supplies the basic reason why a person has not achieved a complete life: He has let slip by his opportunities. Here, again, he is following Epicurus, who warned against always deferring one's enjoyment.[24] Lucretius, however, goes further: He underpins Epicurus' ethical injunction with an argument derived from his physics. He shows what is wrong about letting go of one's opportunities by having Nature argue that things are always the same. Just as the man in his prime is forever looking for what is new, so the old man is forever seeking what is absent. Both ignore the natural sameness of things by fleeing forever toward what is different.

In short, Nature berates humans for refusing to take their place in the order she has established. Lucretius later sums up this message in his own words in his conclusion to Book 3. Straining to make his meaning clear, he declares (3.1080–1084):

> praeterea versamur ibidem atque insumus usque
> nec nova vivendo proceditur ulla voluptas;
> sed dum abest quod avemus, id exsuperare videtur
> cetera; post aliud, cum contigit illud, avemus
> et sitis aequa tenet vitai semper hiantis.

> We are situated in the same place and are forever within it, nor is any new pleasure hammered out by a continuation of life. But while we yearn for what is absent, this seems to surpass all the rest; afterward, when it happens, we yearn for another, and an equal thirst for life holds us with our mouths forever agape.

The first verse is noteworthy for the density of meaning. *versamur* has a wide range of meanings, including "dwell," "live," and "are situated." In addition to suggesting placement, it has the connotation of being active. *ibidem*, "in the same place," picks up the spatial sense, as does *insumus*, which reinforces the idea of being contained in a place. The second verse reiterates Nature's claim that she cannot devise any new pleasures; the verb *procuditur*, "hammered out," suggests her role as a craftsman. By nature, all pleasures have already been hammered out as a condition for our having a place within the world.

[24] VS 14: σὺ δὲ οὐκ ὢν τῆς αὔριον ⟨κύριος⟩ ἀναβάλλῃ τὸ χαῖρον· ὁ δὲ βίος μελλησμῷ παραπόλλυται καὶ εἷς ἕκαστος ἡμῶν ἀσχολούμενος ἀποθνῄσκει ("You, who are not <master> of tomorrow, put off enjoyment. Life is destroyed by deferment, and each of us dies by not providing himself with leisure").

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The entire summary confirms, in my view, the objective reading of Nature's insistence that all things are always the same. Objectively, we are always situated in the same place in the natural order of things, so as to have always the same powers to enjoy the same pleasures. Humans ignore this truth by yearning forever to step beyond these boundaries, with the result that we are forever dissatisfied. This is to run away, as it were, from our present, unalterable situation to an empty realm of fancy.

Lucretius offers a visual image of this very situation at 3.1053–1075, prior to the cited summary. He imagines a person who is so burdened by the fear of death that he keeps wanting to "change his place" (*commutare locum*, 3.1059).[25] Bored with life in his urban mansion, he rushes off to his country villa; and once he gets there, he immediately yawns and either falls into a deep sleep or rushes back to the city. Behind the literal change of place lies a deeper yearning. As Lucretius explains, what this person really wants is to escape his own diseased self. Not realizing, however, what ails him, he is forever caught in a futile frenzy to put his own self behind him. The right way to live, Lucretius implies, is to be grounded in one's natural condition, taking advantage of the pleasures that are available within these boundaries. The sameness of nature is a kind of haven, or home, where one must stay put in order to live a full life.

If this is right, what makes Nature so harsh is that she is dealing with run-aways, as it were, who fail to recognize that she has provided for them a place, which is always the same, where they may attain full happiness. Their life has fixed boundaries, but these boundaries enclose a space that is full of opportunities for happiness. Although the conditions are always the same, the place is not boring; rather, it flourishes with opportunity. What is devastating, on the other hand, is the frustration that comes from trying to escape it.

[25] See 3.1057–1059 and 1068–1070:

> ut nunc plerumque videmus
> quid sibi quisque velit nescire et quaerere semper
> commutare locum, quasi onus deponere possit.
> . . .
> hoc se quisque modo fugit, at quem scilicet, ut fit,
> effugere haut potis est, ingratis haeret et odit
> propterea morbi quia causam non tenet aeger.

. . . as we now generally see people not knowing what each wants and always seeking to change place, as though one were able to put down a burden . . . In this way, everyone flees himself; yet he clings unwillingly to himself, whom he cannot, in fact, escape, and hates himself because, in his illness, he is unable to see its cause.

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Conclusion

How does this help with the problems I noted earlier? Here, I can offer only a bare sketch. First, there is the disjunction between those who have enjoyed their previous life, whether in part or as a whole, and those who have had no enjoyment. Like Epicurus, Lucretius has no patience with those who lament a life of no enjoyment: They are simply irrational. There remain those who have enjoyed life, even if only in part, yet mourn their death. They, too, are fools, for they failed to transform the pleasure they had into a full banquet, or a complete life. At bottom, all these complainers are alike; for whatever pleasure they had leaves them dissatisfied.

Further, Nature appears to ignore the difficulty of rooting out false opinions, as well as the special problems confronting young people. One way to respond is to appeal to Epicurus' distinction among three types of causes: Some things, he says, happen by "necessity," others by "chance" and others by "our own responsibility."[26] Epicurus called chance "unstable" (ἄστατον); he also said that chance furnishes "starting-points for great goods and evils." In her ultimatum, Nature focuses on one type of necessity: the fixity of the natural order of things, with special attention to the limits of pleasure. Epicurus' description of chance as "unstable" marks a contrast with this stability. Lucretius' Nature ignores chance, not because it does not exist, but because it falls outside her realm as an everlastingly fixed arrangement of the universe. Instead, she pairs personal responsibility with the necessity of her arrangement of things in order to impress on us our responsibility for accepting our place within the natural order of things.

One may object that Nature has arranged things in such a way as to give enormous scope to chance and, furthermore, has made humans unduly weak, both physically and intellectually. Still, she might argue, she has conferred on us both the inner strength and the external resources we need in order to use chance as a starting-point for good things, instead of letting it defeat us. There

[26] *Men.* 133–134 (Hessler); cf. fr. 375 U. The text in *Men.* is unfortunately faulty: <ἀλλὰ γίγνεσθαι κατ᾽ ἀνάγκην ἃ μὲν πάντων> ἀγγέλλοντος, ἃ δὲ ἀπὸ τύχης, ἃ δὲ παρ᾽ ἡμᾶς ... τὴν δὲ τύχην ἄστατον ὁρᾶν ... ἀρχὰς μέντοι μεγάλων ἀγαθῶν ἢ κακῶν ὑπὸ ταύτης χορηγεῖσθαι ("But he reports that, of all things, some come to be by necessity, others by chance, and others by our responsibility ... chance is unstable to look upon ... yet starting-points for great goods or evils are furnished by it"). I accept the sense of Hessler's supplements in 133, although I do not see the need for inserting πάντων; see also Verde: 2013. As Hessler: 2012, 307 points out, the clause introduced by διὰ lists the reasons for rejecting the determinism of fate. At 134, I accept Lewy's emendation of βέβαιον in place of MSS ἀβέβαιον. In the same passage, Epicurus also rejects the necessity that consists in "the fate (εἱμαρμένη) of the physicists." What makes him reject this kind of necessity is its incompatibility with personal responsibility; see Morel: 2013.

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are exceptions: As Seneca attests, there is no necessity to put up with necessity; one is always free to make an end to life.[27] This is a different kind of necessity from the necessity of natural limits; and it appears to be viewed as rare.[28] As for the special problem of youth, neither Epicurus nor any other source specifies the amount of time that a person needs to achieve a complete life.[29] What is needed, in the first place, is a period of learning, then a period of living with happiness.[30] In principle, there seems to be no reason why a person might not be so gifted as to achieve a complete life while still young; but this would likely be difficult.[31] This difficulty would help to explain why, in her speech, Nature neither exempts young people nor singles them out for attack. There is no reason for anyone to bewail the prospect of death; but the middle-aged and the old are especially culpable for doing so.

This brings us to the problem of deprivation in general, as it applies to anyone at all, young or old, wise or fool. Granted that it is natural for a person to desire life, as attended by pleasure, how is it not a deprivation to have death cut off pleasure? Bernard Williams held that the desire for life is categorical, as opposed to the type of desire that is conditional on being alive.[32] On the Epicurean view, the desire for pleasure fits the latter category. In addition, however, the desire for life is itself conditional in the sense that

[27] Seneca *Ep.* 12.10 (U 487): "there is no necessity to live in necessity" (*in necessitate vivere necessitas nulla est*); see also VS 9 and 44, as well as Cic. *Fin.* 1.62.

[28] Englert: 1994 emphasizes the rarity of such exigencies. Morel: 2000 takes them as "externes de la nature et des hommes" ("external to nature and to human beings") (82), as exemplified by political or social constraints (85–88). He also lists them (2013, 173) as one of three types of necessity recognized by Epicurus.

[29] Cicero (*Fin.* 2.87–88) glosses Epicurus' "finite" time by "short" and "moderate" but the brevity may be understood simply in contrast with infinite time. Sanders: 2011, 227 takes Philodemus' remarks on Pythocles at *On Death*, cols. 12.34–13.2, as evidence that one can attain wisdom at a "relatively early age"; but Philodemus does not say so explicitly.

[30] Warren: 2004, 130–135 raises the question of whether a complete life requires a "certain finite duration" or whether it is achieved "as soon as the highest state of pleasure is reached"; and he assigns scholars to both sides. He himself thinks that the former interpretation is more likely. In my view, a complete life necessarily happens over a period of experiencing life, for the Epicurean goal of life is a process of living with pleasure, which necessarily occupies a stretch of time. As Warren notes (150–151), Philodemus provides evidence for the first option at *On Death* col. 19.1–3: νῦ̣ν [δὲ σ]οφῶι γενομένωι καὶ ποσὸν | χρόνο[ν ἐ]πιζήσαντ[ι] τὸ μέγιστον ἀγα|θὸν ἀπε[ί]ληπται ("As it is, when he has become wise and lived on for a quantity of time, he has obtained the greatest good"). Here, as elsewhere (cols. 3.34 and 13.3), Philodemus refers to the finite stretch of happiness as ποσὸς χρόνος, "a quantity of time." In my view, the perfect tense of ἀπε[ί]ληπται marks the completion of a period of happiness. Likewise, a stretch of time is presupposed at col. 38.14–16 for "having obtained what is able to bring about complete self-sufficiency for a happy life"; after this period of self-sufficiency, every day is an added bonus.

[31] So Warren: 2004, 134 and 154. If, as Annas: 1993, 349 has suggested, one needs to have a plan for one's whole life in order to achieve a complete life, the odds do seem stacked against a young person. In Striker's (1989, 327) view, "a very short life could not possibly be complete."

[32] Williams: 1973, 85–88.

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one must yield to the necessity of death. It is futile to desire life beyond its natural boundary. Lucretius' Nature shows how to live within this boundary: One must avail oneself of one's present opportunities so as to reach the goal of a complete life within a finite period.[33] The person who does so accepts death, whenever he is confronted by its necessity, with gratitude for what he has had. By contrast, the person who has wasted his opportunities rejects death, lamenting his demise as a deprivation.

Given one's natural desire for life, then, how is it possible to put a limit to it. Thomas Nagel's distinction between a subjective and an objective point of view underscores the difficulty, but also suggests an answer. Taking a subjective view, we view death as an evil because it deprives us of goods that we might still have had; taking an objective view, we see ourselves as a contingent, dispensable part of the world, needing to give up goods. This results in a clash, Nagel believes, which cannot be fully resolved.[34] The Epicureans claim that it can be resolved by the victory of reason, which takes an objective point of view, over desires that are merely subjective. Lucretius puts Nature on the scene to demand this victory: While harsh to those who refuse to yield to reason, she holds out the promise of a fully contented life to those who recognize themselves as they really are – as a part of nature. The pangs that Philodemus mentions are a sign of the clash, but they are overcome in the end by a rational recognition of the objective conditions of our existence.[35]

[33] Some scholars have objected that the Epicurean arguments on death serve to make us indifferent not only to death but also to life by depriving us of any reason to prolong life; so Williams: 1973, 83–84, Silverstein: 1980, 409–410 and Warren 2004: 202–212. As Warren puts it: "The Epicureans appear to offer no significant positive reason for wishing to continue to live, beyond mere inertia" (210). This applies, in Warren's view (211), equally to those who have achieved a complete life. As I have argued, the Epicurean is motivated by the desire for pleasure for as long as he lives, subject only to the condition that he must give it up when it is necessary to die. He loses nothing by giving up the desire; but this does not make him indifferent to life for as long as there is no necessity to die (as demonstrated by Epicurus' own death).

[34] Nagel: 1970 (reprinted in 1979); 1979, 196–213; and 1986, 208–231. Nagel writes in his 1970 article, as reprinted at 1979, 9–10: "A man's sense of his own experience . . . does not embody [the] idea of a natural limit," such as that of mortality, which is "normal to the species." He concludes at 1986, 231: "The objective standpoint 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."

[35] Metrodorus (VS 47) goes so far as to celebrate this victory as an act of "spitting upon life," worthy of a triumphal song. This attitude casts light, I think, on Philodemus' remarkable description of the person who has achieved the self-sufficiency of a happy life as someone who henceforth, for the rest of his life, "walks about laid out for burial" (ἐντεταφιασμένος περιπατεῖ, *On Death*, col. 38.17–18), taking advantage of each single day as an eternity. It was customary to dress a corpse in ceremonial outfits that were indicative of one's highest achievements, such as an honorary crown (see Cicero *Leg.* 2.60, Lucian *Luct.* 11–12 and Hope: 2009, 72–73). Thus, we are not to see this person as one of the "walking dead," but as someone flourishing at the height of happiness, while prepared for the necessity of death.

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Finally, what does Nature have to do with Venus? As Monica Gale and others have shown, Lucretius creates myths of his own to counteract the pernicious myths of the past.[36] He starts his poem by putting Venus on the scene to represent the joy of life. Death is a different matter. When he comes to the topic, Lucretius again offers an anti-myth: Unlike traditional deities, his personified Nature is immovable, both in the sameness of the conditions she has established and in the demand that we accept her conditions. This personification complements the image of Venus we saw initially; for the limits she has placed on our existence are laden with all the pleasures we need to live life to the fullest.

[36] See Gale: 1994.

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