

Epicureanism: naturalism, pantheism, or henotheism?

De Polignac, in his *Anti-Lucrèce*, mocks the Epicurean gods as being so different to orthodoxy as to render those who believed in them impious, blasphemous and indeed atheistic. Patin, in his *L'Anti-Lucrèce chez Lucrèce*, thinks that Lucretius contradicts himself, by personally believing in gods which contradict the aims of his *De rerum natura*, of explaining everything without resort to gods. However, both De Polignac and Patin suggest that, although Lucretius distanced himself from *religio* and asserted a materialistic creed, he did in fact believe in gods. Indeed, Patin quotes de Polignac's message to Lucretius: ¹“you flee the traces of God, but you cannot erase them; everywhere, they chase you.”¹ This reading of Lucretius has become unpopular and unfashionable of late, with Nichols (1976, 154), for instance, concluding that “we accordingly accept the traditional view...that Lucretius was an atheist.” But I believe that de Polignac and Patin deserve reconsideration and resuscitation.

De Polignac begins his poem in the following way:

“A mighty work, O Quintius, I essay!
God the high subject of my darling lay!
For what so great in nature's ample whole,
As nature's cause, her quick'ning ruling foul?²

Patin follows de Polignac, as he considers Lucretius' language: “*rationes, foedera, leges*;³ these laws, he [Lucretius] summarises them in an abstract legislator which he calls Nature, creative Nature, governing Nature, *Natura creatrix*,⁴ *Natura gubernans*⁵...bringing back under a different name, within the world from which we had wanted to ban it, the deity.”⁶ Patin indeed attributes providence to *natura*,⁷ and elevates her to an intelligent power⁸ and supreme organiser.⁹ So, beyond the gods who inhabit, as Cicero puts it, the *intermundia*,¹⁰ both Patin and de Polignac suggest that *natura* herself possesses divinity.

Lucretius' proem¹¹ has attracted much discussion, thanks to his invocation to Venus, going beyond, even, the custom in epic poetry of invoking a muse. Sedley (1998, 21-2) argues that her appearance represents a debt to Empedocles rather than a belief in her, and beyond the proem, Venus gradually slips away, becoming a metaphor for attraction, love, sex and reproduction on the rare occasions that she does then appear,¹² rather than a goddess in her own right. Lucretius' methodology seems to be one of opening with an accepted stance, enticing his audience with what they know, so as to have something erected which thereafter can be systematically criticised, attacked and denounced, so as to facilitate the introduction of another stance, in much the same way as Plato arranges his *Symposium*. But this Venus Flytrap, as Godwin (2004, 53) puts it, of the alluring goddess, entices the reader into

¹ “dei vestigia passim effugis, at delere nequis; te, te illa sequuntur” (*Antilucret.*, IX, 330).

² De Polignac, 1748, 1-4.

³ Drn II.719; V.58.

⁴ Drn I.630; II.1117; V.1361.

⁵ V.78.

⁶ “*rationes, foedera, leges*; ces lois, il les résume dans un législateur abstrait qu'il appelle la Nature, la Nature créatrice, la Nature gouvernante, *Natura creatrix, Natura gubernans*...ramenant sous un autre nom, au sein du monde dont on avait cru la bannir, la divinité” (Patin, 1859-60, p120).

⁷ “Qui transportent à la Nature les plus aimables attributs de la Providence” (Patin, 1859-60, p123).

⁸ “La Nature, une puissance intelligente qui prépare” (Patin, 1859-60, p121).

⁹ “De la nature sensible, au delà des lois plus ou moins clairement aperçues qu'il résume par ce mot abstrait de Nature, jusqu'au suprême ordonnateur” (Patin, 1859-60, p135).

¹⁰ Dnd I.17-20.

¹¹ Drn I.1-49.

¹² Drn I.228; II.173; 437; III.776; IV.1037-1287; 1223-4; V.737; 848; 897; 962; 1017; 1075.

a false sense of security. The subsequent *reductio ad absurdum* of Venus, her fall from grace, renders the proem, as Masson (1907, 262) cites Buchanan as writing, at best a parody.¹³

It is *natura* who arrives to replace the displaced Venus after the proem, for in the 7,415 lines of hexameter verse, *natura* appears on 150 occasions beyond the proem, but Venus only on 33. In etymology and gender, *natura* retains the creative aspect of Venus, and also assumes governing, providential, intelligent, powerful and organising qualities, as de Polignac and Patin point out, attributes which the Olympians, like Venus, and even the Epicurean gods of the *intermundia*, are stripped of.

Lucretius uses the word *natura* in a variety of ways, but there are 28 instances¹⁴ where Lucretius seems to mean something different than on those other occasions.¹⁵ For Lucretius refers to her as *natura creatrix*,¹⁶ which in itself demonstrates her displacement of the creative Venus who begot Aeneas, *Aeneadam genetrix*.¹⁷ Lucretius tells us that this **2***natura* made everything,¹⁸ including **3**the atoms,¹⁹ **4**the world²⁰ and **5**the animate,²¹ and indeed **6**designed the model for creation;²² as *natura gubernans*, she **7**issues fixed laws;²³ she **8**is powerful;²⁴ and she **9**is supreme.²⁵ And *natura* does not only displace Venus, but Mars too, in being not only creative but also **10**destructive.²⁶

However, Lucretius is known for his propensity for wordplay and puns,²⁷ as well as his use of metaphor, allegory and personification.²⁸ But the language of Lucretius does suggest more than mere playfulness. And this has attracted support. Santayana (1935, 57) writes of *natura* as the principle of birth or genesis; the universal mother; and the great cause, or system of causes, that brings phenomena to light; and Clay (1983, 94), that the goddess Venus is supplanted by the goddess *natura*.

Sikes (1936, 18-19) writes that the place of those departmental gods²⁹ was filled by a quasi-personification of *natura*, that is, a nonsentient collection of atoms that form the material of the universe. The parts of this whole act and interact by the operation of the *foedera naturae*, inherent in the constitution of matter. This represents a modern understanding of *laws of nature*. Sikes does not think that the existence of such laws

¹³ Perhaps the breadth of the *De rerum natura* also depicts the cycle of birth to death, with the first book opening with the creative and divine Venus, representing spring and birth, and then book six ending with the destructive Plague of Athens, when even the pious felt abandoned by the gods, representing winter and death.

¹⁴ I.56; 57; 216; 263; 551; 614; II.23; 224; 242; 378; 706; 879; 1058; 1090-2; 1117; 1049; IV.322; 405; 762; 785; 846; 1088; V.186; 206; 218; 225; 831; VI.226.

¹⁵ Here she represents: a characteristic; a quality; a faculty; an existent; everything; an arrangement or disposition; an appearance; a substance; a being; an aspect; a unification; the soul; an essence; a structure; or a reason or cause.

¹⁶ Dn. I.629: 'nature the creator' (also II.1117; V.1362).

¹⁷ "Mother of Venus" (Dn I.1). The very idea that a mortal has divine parentage perhaps reduces Venus' divine stock, by connecting the immortal with the mortal. A similar thing is done euhemeristically, with Epicurus, for instance, a mortal, who seems to attain divinity; and with Hercules; and even the inanimate, like *mater terra*.

¹⁸ "rerum primum natura creatrix" (Dn V. 1361-1378).

¹⁹ "natura quoniam constant" (Dn II. 378).

²⁰ "hic sit natura factus" (Dn II.1058) (see Dnd I.53-4, in Masson (1907, 170)).

²¹ "ergo omnes natura cibos in corpora viva vertit" (Dn II.879-80).

²² "si non ipsa dedit specimen natura creandi" (Dn V.186).

²³ "foedere naturae certo" (Dn V. 924).

²⁴ "tamen id natura sua vi sentibus obducat" (Dn V.206-7).

²⁵ "natura videtur

libera continuo, dominis private superbis,

ipsa sua per se sponte omnia dis agere expers" (Dn II. 1090-2).

²⁶ "quidque in sua corpora rursum

dissoluat natura neque ad nilum interemat res" (Dn I.215-16).

²⁷ Volk, 202, 101.

²⁸ Gale, 2003, 38.

²⁹ The Epicurean gods who inhabit the *intermundia*.

implies the existence of a lawgiver, but that, whereas Lucretius does deny ¹¹that the atoms are sentient and purposeful, he does seem to endow ¹²*natura* with the will and power of a personal creator.³⁰

Indeed, it might be that Lucretius simply needs such a *natura* in his system, for, try as he might to explain everything, such as natural phenomena, without recourse to gods, he finds that he is not able to explain everything: where the atoms come from; what the first principle or cause was; and what was the prime mover was. Leonard & Smith (1942, 220) write that Lucretius “makes no attempt to disprove the Stoic view that, while all things come from seeds, back of the seeds the ultimate cause is divinity.” As Segal (1990, 35) puts it, *natura* is Lucretius’ *deus ex machina*.³¹

Therefore *natura* fills a void, as it were, which the denounced Olympians and the ousted Epicurean gods have vacated. But is this enough to render *natura* herself divine? In Epicureanism, the atoms are eternal, but not divine, and the atomic Epicurean gods of the *intermundia*, though divine, are stripped of the traditional facets of divinity. Both atoms and atomic gods are under the sway of *natura*, and therefore if such gods deserve divinity, surely anything superior to them does too? And I am reminded of Hinduism, where the gods of the Vedas represent for the most part natural forces.³²

None of this is a departure from Epicurus, as some have suggested.³³ For Sedley (1998, 102) has referred to Lucretius as a fundamentalist- that, whereas other Epicurean philosophers have developed Epicurus’ philosophy in the two hundred years since his death, Lucretius remains true to Epicurus.

And so, returning to my introduction, and Nichols, does Epicureanism deserve to be called atheistic, considering their gods of the *intermundia* and this interpretation of *natura*? Applying a narrow definition of atheism,³⁴ a rejection of belief in spiritual beings and religion, does not then seem appropriate. But Obbink (1989, 188-9) suggests that it is not so simple, as “atheism in the ancient world was never a well-defined or ideologically fixed position. But deviation from a proper attitude towards

³⁰ Freeman (1952, 35) writes that, for the atomists, their physical system did not require gods to begin or direct it, for universes sprang up spontaneously, with the power of initial motion seemingly inherent in the atoms themselves. However, the atoms do need something to apply motion, as Lucretius informs us that they do not have got this ability in herent in themselves: “they [atoms did not] place themselves by design each in its own order with keen intelligence, nor assuredly did they make agreement what motions each should produce”:

“consilio...

ordine se quo quaeque sagaci mente locarunt
nec quos quaeque darent motus pepigere profecto” (Dn I.1021-3).

The thing needed is an external force : “the same exists in the seeds also, that motions have some cause other than blows and weights, from which this power is born in us, since we see that nothing can be produced from nothing. For it is weight that prevents all things from being caused through blows by a sort of external force.”

“quare in seminibus quoque idem fateare necessest,
esse aliam praeter plagas et pondera causam
motibus, unde haec est nobis innata potestas,
de nilo quoniam fieri nil posse videmus.

pondus enim prohibet ne plagis omnia fiant
externa quasi vi” (Dn II.284-289).

³¹ This interpretation, of a preeminent *natura*, given that she creates and thus predates everything, does not come without issues though: firstly, if she creates the atomic, the material, then she, predating this material, must herself be immaterial, for Lucretius informs us that there is no third nature (Dn I.430ff); therefore, if she is not *nothing*, void, what is she? And how can something exist before, or thus even create, the eternal? And given that soul is also atomic, this would mean that she was soulless, but she seems to be rational and sentient. Perhaps it is that she pre-existed everything as potential, and after creating things, she then harmonises herself with them and partakes in what she has created. Secondly, through her *foedera naturae*, she exerts determinacy, but through the swerving of the atom, there is indeterminacy in the Epicurean universe. Perhaps it is that she determines the indeterminate.

³² The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1985, 569-616.

³³ Sharrock (in Zajko & Leonard, 2006, 260) writes that some readers would see nature’s creative, nurturing role, so strongly and emotively characterised, as causing something of a deviation from Epicurean orthodoxy, since it returns divine agency by the backdoor.

³⁴ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1985, 569-616.

gods...could result in charges of impiety or in the suspicion of atheism.” He concludes that “the charge of atheism could be incurred for something less than an outright denial of the existence of the gods.” Indeed, in the *Apology*, Socrates argues that he cannot be charged an atheist, as he does believe in gods, but that he just cannot believe in supernatural beings that are bastard children of the gods by nymphs or other monsters.³⁵ And so, as his prosecutors put it, he believes in deities of his own invention instead of the gods recognised by the state.³⁶ However, in *Laws*, Plato considers the impious person as not only he who does not believe in gods,³⁷ but also he who believes that gods have no care for mankind, or that gods can be easily won over and bribed by offerings and prayers.³⁸ One can understand the charges of atheism towards Epicureans in this way, as their theism was so far-removed from conventional belief.

However, perhaps there is more appropriate terminology. As *naturalism*, Epicureanism abandoned mythology and questioned the nature of things,³⁹ relating the scientific method to philosophy, and demonstrating the regularity, unity and wholeness of nature that implies objective laws.⁴⁰ As *pantheism*, *natura* is the force of the nature.⁴¹ And as *henotheism*, perhaps given an Epicurean hankering for simplicity over a convoluted pantheon of Olympians, *natura* is the one, central and dominating god, though the existence of the gods of the *intermundia* was also granted.⁴² Although there are gods of the *intermundia*, *natura* is the only one of importance.

In conclusion then, I have reconsidered de Polignac and Patin and believe that their views ought to not necessarily be discarded, but that, rather, they do have virtue and value and they do deserve consideration. In view of this, one needs to be careful with terminology and charges of atheism especially.

³⁵ 24b-27a.

³⁶ 22e-24a.

³⁷ The *naturalists* are dismissed for denying the divinity of things (10.886bff).

³⁸ 10.885bff. Plato writes that these beliefs come from poets, orators, seers and priests (10.885dff).

³⁹ Irwin (1989, 20) introduces the *Naturalists* in the following way, that “between the age of Homer (mid-eighth century) and the age of Socrates (late fifth century), the Greeks began systematic rational study of the natural order...Aristotle distinguishes those who talk about gods and offer poetic or mythological accounts from those who offer rational accounts...he calls the second group ‘students of nature’ or ‘Naturalists’, as opposed to Hesiod and his followers, because they abandon mythology to ask a new question, about the nature of things...he has good reason to believe that a new movement began with Thales.”

⁴⁰ *Encyclopædia Britannica; Encyclopædia Britannica Online Library Edition; Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.; <http://library.eb.co.uk/eb/article-9055048>.*

⁴¹ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1985, 569-616.

⁴² *Encyclopædia Britannica; Encyclopædia Britannica Online Library Edition; Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.; <http://library.eb.co.uk/eb/article-38213>.*