

The Birthing of Things: Bergson as a Reader of Lucretius

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I would like to examine, in this short paper, the work of Henri Bergson on Lucretius, first published in 1884 under the title *Extraits de Lucrèce*, and argue for its significance in understanding the development of his philosophical thinking.¹ This publication was intended to serve as an introduction to extracts from Lucretius for Bergson's students at Clermont-Ferrand, and included a commentary and notes on the poetry, philosophy, physics and language of Lucretius's poem *De Rerum Natura*.² In the published volume, most of Bergson's overview of Lucretius is given in the long preface, and this is followed by extracts in Latin without translation into French, but with comments on lines and individual words covering all the books of the original poem. By 1899 it was in its third edition, and was still in print until the 1960s. Copies today are difficult to obtain, and only recently has a full electronic version become available on the Internet Archive, to which readers here are directly referred.³

In the new edition of Henri Bergson's *Écrits philosophiques*, edited by Worms, the *Extraits* have been omitted. The editorial decision may indicate that it is seen as work in 'classics' or a literary work, or that it is not 'philosophical', and is therefore not to be included in a new full critical edition of Bergson. Worms takes *Time and Free Will* as Bergson's first philosophical work, and allows the inclusion of the French translation of the minor thesis *Quid Aristoteles de loco senserit*, as well as some essays. Yet in almost a thousand pages of this first 'critical' edition, he has made no reference whatsoever to

the *Extraits* of Lucretius, nor is it listed as a separate publication in the bibliography.⁴

Bergson's work on Lucretius has not completely disappeared from view; for example, it has been noted in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*,⁵ but no extensive analysis exists. It is effectively seen as an exercise in pedagogic assistance for young students in Bergson's care, and a kind of preparatory work for what is taken to be a later, more significant development. Bergson's actual starting point is not seen by many contemporary scholars as his true beginning. My intention in this paper is simply to draw attention to this rich and neglected source in understanding Bergson's philosophical matters of concern.

A double turn has occurred in recent work which has brought philosophers back to Bergson, and by routes that could not have been anticipated. The increased attention paid to the work on ancient philosophy in Foucault and Deleuze, the engagement with Lucretius, for example in the work of Serres, and the new thinking in the philosophy of science in Prigogine and Stengers, has reopened for consideration the very theoretical problems Bergson faced in his reading of Lucretius. This has led to a new awareness that Bergson's relation to reading the philosophical past is not an historicist exercise but the very means by which he becomes, to use a later turn of phrase, the event of his own thinking.⁶

Reflection on creation and the world leads him to philosophical problems and questions which, it can be argued, preoccupy him throughout his published work; in other words, it can be shown that the reading of Lucretius, the extracts made, and his notes and commentary, make it possible to read *Creative Evolution*, written almost fifty years later, as the return of earlier thinking, as the future of his own philosophy, which can then be seen as a philosophy of creation *simpliciter*. By a double turn, the later work helped make the earlier relevant again in a different and more urgent way, so that the reading of Lucretius is now seen as crucial for Bergson. It brings him to a cosmological understanding of a world which is free of *stasis* or of predicative geometry – Euclidean – and allows him to think in terms of cosmogenesis and existence as a constant process of creation. Bergson's engagement with classical atomism and atomistic theory moves him away from the dualisms of mind/matter, spirit/body and consciousness/unconsciousness, and towards thinking in terms of aspects and states of eternally shifting cosmic matter as 'becoming'. It is also both a direct engagement with a materialist philosophy and a commitment to the philosophy of science and the study of ancient physics in the Atomists, and, later, Aristotle.

The *Extraits* were intended to be an introduction to the work of Lucretius, a Latin poet whose teachings were also the poetic rendering of someone who considered himself a disciple of Epicurus, a faithful disciple and author of the most significant philosophical poem in the Latin language, yet one who remains less known than any of those who drew on his work. Bergson remains a scrupulous reader, approaching his task, however, with a very specific aim, namely to talk about the philosophical import of the poem, and thus he deals with philological matters only and in so far as his primary reading is affected. The book is laid out with a preface and introduction in which Bergson signals his procedure and hermeneutic position.

Bergson begins by referring to the lack of knowledge that surrounds such a famous name, as little is actually known about the life of Lucretius. He notes Jerome's anecdote that Lucretius was probably born around 99-98 BCE, and in his early forties took, or was given, some kind of love potion and went mad and died, or committed suicide around 55 BCE. This legend of the suicide of Lucretius may have been taken from the lost *De Poetis* by Suetonius, or it may have been invented to underline the connection between personal despair and lack of belief in God. In his *Le Miel et l'Absinthe*, Comte-Sponville, the only contemporary French author to comment in any detail or engage directly with Bergson's interpretation of Lucretius, spends some time on this anecdote from Jerome, and, in turn, notes the way in which Bergson has identified in his reading of the poem a curious paradox, namely that the most loyal disciple of Epicurus produced a work in which living is seen as a sad and discouraging burden; in short, a view of Lucretius as someone who lived a hidden life, following the Epicurean injunction, but as a resolute melancholic, and that a temperament of melancholy pervades the whole work.⁷

A second suggestion from Bergson, also taken up by Comte-Sponville, is that Lucretius is largely unknown to us because he was a 'dangerous friend'. It is for the most part idle to speculate, given the dearth of biographical sources, why this is mentioned by almost all ancient authors who cite and respond to Lucretius in significant detail, a good example being – as Hardie has shown – Virgil's echo and retort to Lucretius in his *Eclogues*; and further, the presence of Lucretius in Horace and Ovid. It is Bergson's view that these writers are loathe to invoke Lucretius personally due to the fashion for religious cults and public rituals which returned under Augustus, thus making Lucretius a 'dangerous friend' given his known rejection of religion.⁸

Bergson begins his consideration by also

pointing to the greater likelihood that Lucretius was living as a philosopher, and it is the theme of the philosophical life that is an important emphasis in Book II. But for Bergson, and this is very specific to his interpretation, the first and dominant impression of *De Rerum Natura* is that it is profoundly melancholic. The poem is sad and discouraging; it raises the question: why life? Life is monotonous and always exhibits unsatisfied desire, its pleasures are deceiving, it lacks animal joy, and every source of delight is mixed with bitterness. A baby cries on entering the world, and Bergson remarks that this is the correct response. The passage from Lucretius at V, 222-227, suggests a sense of life that is given without choice: the individual comes in a world into which he or she has been literally thrown or regurgitated.

The tone of melancholy is further strengthened by additional observations in which no false comfort is afforded to anyone, including the belief that living in the countryside would somewhat ameliorate the condition of dwelling in the city. This is an illusion, even the rusticated life is full of hardship and toil, and the earth resists the cultivation of vain happiness. Then, of course, there is also old age and the omnipresent, childish fear of death. Thus everything is *misère* here below, and our greatest consolation is that everything finishes with us when our life is over (*Extracts*, p. III). This is the most explicit teaching Bergson finds in Lucretius, and the conclusion of all philosophy, which literally demands of us a ridding of illusions and an acceptance of the fatal destiny of being born and dying.

For Lucretius, the absence of any illusion is the way of enlightenment, but again it has a power and rapture which goes beyond the calmness and tranquillity of soul that Epicurus speaks of. The most powerful lines in which mankind's existential situation is described can be found at the end of Bk. III, 1046-1094:

Men seem to feel some burden on their soul,
Some heavy weariness. Could they but know
Its origin, its cause, they'd never live
The way we see most of them do, each one
Ignorant of what he wants, except a change.

In Lucretius's bleak summary, each man flees himself, but as might be expected, the self whom he cannot escape clings to him, even more so and against his will, and he hates himself because he is sick and does not know the cause of his complaint. Or in the beautiful, compressed and pungent Latin of the poet:

hoc se quisque modo fugit (at quem scilicet, ut fit,
effugere haut potis est, ingratus haeret) et odit
propterea, morbi quia causam non tenet aeger;
(Bk. III, 1068-1070)

(Each man flees from himself or tries, but the pest clings to him, even more ungraciously, He hates himself because he does not know the reason for his sickness.)

Lucretius offers a remedy, and it remains one of the most pointed declarations of his poem, in which, as will be argued later, the dualism of nature/reason is rejected. There is no disjunction but, instead, a thoroughgoing naturalism which is also a thoroughgoing rationalism, and thus in Bk. II, 54-61:

omnis cum in tenebris praesertim via laboret.
nam veluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis
in tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus
interdum, nilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam
quae pueri in tenebris pavitant finguntque futura.
hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessest
non radii solis neque lucida tela diei
discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.

(Life is one long struggle in the dark,
Even as children shiver and fear things
in the blind darkness, trembling, so

we, in the light, shudder at things not less
awful than what babies fear, and the horror
they imagine that is on its way.
Our terrors and gloom of mind
must be dispelled not by the sun's rays or shafts of light,
but by the aspect and law of nature.)

The last line may also be paraphrased as 'insight into nature and systematic reflection'. Furthermore, the role of knowledge is to remind us that we hardly count in the order of the universe, we are just an accidental combination of elements with whom the 'gods' are not in the least concerned, and we die and decompose like other living matter.

Bergson raises the question, having identified the overwhelming mood, as to where this melancholy comes from. He points to the civil strife of the late Republic, the rivalry of Marius and Sulla, which is indicated in the opening verse, and their prayer for peace. The civil war left sombre images in the mind of Lucretius, but that is nevertheless neither the real source of the melancholy, nor the main subject of the poem. If he did write in the light of such events, Lucretius would have considered knowledge a *pis-aller*, or a simple means of consolation (*Extraits*, IV). Rather, it was for Lucretius the object of human life, and public disasters are real ills because they tear intelligence away from the only noble pursuit and occupation worthy of it.

It is at this point in his reflections that Bergson identifies the first great 'double' of his analysis: the variety and diversity of nature, its contingency, and yet its obedience to fixed laws. Lucretius has made the same double in the relationship between nature and reason. It is clear from Bk. V that Lucretius loved nature passionately, exemplified by his minute observations, and that he saw a range of infinitely diverse and changing phenomena yet believed that a fixed law worked uniformly and invariably, producing determined effects. It is to this dual phenomenon of variety and fixity that the melancholy of Lucretius

attaches, as well as to the predictability of the fatal consequences of such causality – that the laws of nature can be mathematically predicted – and this for Bergson is the *idée maîtresse* of the poem. This 'fatality' is what Bergson identifies as the *certus* of which Lucretius speaks in Bk. V, 920.

The whole poem exhibits for Bergson a preoccupation with this same idea, 'celle de la fixité des lois de la nature' (*Extraits*, p. VIII). Nothing explains the suffusion of melancholic insight more than brooding on such a double reality, and nothing requires more *pitié* – genuine compassion – than the realisation that humanity is just a plaything of forces: it comes into existence through the accident of a poor combination of atoms that fatal laws join for a time and one day disperse. Rather than the idea of birth and dying, there is the actual fact of appearing and disappearing again, from and into the material of atoms. This passage is not epiphenomenal, since Bergson does not posit any doctrine of two worlds, but rather posits a double which is in unity, the unity of what is held, retained, maintained, as physically existent. The flux and the fixity are both held together in the tension of a mobile image which is in constant motion. This can be seen as a dynamic monism, in that the holding together is the co-equivalence, or the active mutual interpretation and exchange that is taken as the reflexive and recursive power, or the dynamism of the existent.

We are deluded if we think that matter is made for us, and from Lucretius's advice to labourers in Bk. II, 1142, one sees that the consolation is simply to know that we are subject to fatal laws and that the world is on the way to ruin. Hence there is really no particular praise or blame in an act of suicide. These are the truths that Lucretius will bring to the Romans, whose eminent practical nature was taken up with establishing long solutions to satisfy conservative aims through aggressive means. Jerome's anecdote recounting that Lucretius was a member of the equestrian order rings true and may explain the

subtle linguistic echoes of Ennius and occasional archaic preferences in the choice of vocabulary in the poem. In his own life as a poet and philosopher, Lucretius enacts the tensions held as one, even if they are mutually seen as opposites, contradictory, or polar. He makes no claim to be a sage, and thus his struggles and moods are presented equally with his intense observation and analysis of previous thinkers whom he admires.

Bergson then points out that Lucretius could not have advanced such thinking without his fidelity to the thoughts of Epicurus, and yet at the same time he displays originality. This is one of the enigmas of discipleship. The originality of Lucretius comes from his fidelity to Epicurus and Democritus. Bergson then posits his teaching as faithful to the real sources of Epicurus, namely the atomists, and that atomism was one of the most profound systems of philosophy in antiquity, founded by Leucippus and his disciple Democritus. Virgil's fidelity to Homer is similar in its eventuating in an original achievement.

Broadening this perspective, we still have the poet and his concerns. Bergson invites his students to consider this claim by remarking on some methodological features of the system, as found in Democritus, namely its overwhelming simplicity, and how this is the true characteristic of the best explanation: the reduction of complexity to simple elements, and, in this case, the elements which form material objects are atoms. Bergson reads the question of the doctrine of the atomists largely via Democritus, which he sees as its most perfect expression, and which he identifies as 'l'expression la plus parfaite peut-être du matérialisme'.

Atoms are indivisible, infinite in number and eternal, they have no other quality but form, and this is how they differ. Since atoms are eternal and do not change, it is form that differs. Atoms are endowed with movement and even the soul is composed of atoms, which are very round, mobile and polished. Indeed, one's

thoughts are moving atoms, and this is a remarkable event of speed. There never has been, and there never will be anything but atoms, the void, and movement (*Extraits*, p. XIII).⁹

The second source of thinking with which Lucretius engages is that of Epicurus. Bergson is again pithy in his characterisation of the aims of the philosophy of Epicurus, namely that it seeks to secure happiness by the shortest route. The aim is how to secure inner peace and inalterable security in the present. What impedes such a goal is twofold: the fear of Gods and the fear of death. What counters this double superstition and fundamental source of religion, which poisons life and profoundly corrupts us, is the claim that the gods are not bothered with us – which does not, of course, necessarily say they do not exist – and that death is not the end. Epicurus has the role of one who brings enlightenment, and he does this with the doctrine of atomism. By showing, as Democritus had, that there are only atoms in the world, and by showing the natural chain of causes, superstition is overcome and the fear of death also vanishes.¹⁰

Bergson, then, rather than dealing with the complex series of arguments advanced by Aristotle against movement in the void, or how it can be explained that atoms have directionality etcetera, points only to the important direct contention of Epicurus, suggesting that Epicurus gave weight to atoms, which therefore fell from above to below. Bergson may be drawing directly on the work of Zeller in his *History of Greek Philosophy*, which his teacher Boutroux had introduced to students at the *École Normale Supérieure*. Zeller maintained that Democritus has also argued for the weight of atoms, which goes against Aristotle at *Metaphysics*, I. 4, and the reports of Plutarch in Stobaeus, but Zeller further adds that if Democritus did ascribe weight, he didn't think of it as the cause of movement.

The Epicureans contend that one can show the

movement of atoms in a void, and respond to the question of how, if they fall at the same speed, they can meet. This is done by introducing the notion of *kinesis kata pareklision*, and what is called the *clinamen*, which is the fundamental character of deviation and cannot be predicted. It is, as Bergson says, 'un caprice d'atome'. The *clinamen* is a capricious and contingent collision (*Extraits*, p.XVI).

It is thus that one explains the formation of worlds and one can speak of cosmogenesis, which moves from upper to lower and lower to upper simultaneously, giving rise to turbulence, or more correctly, rotation. Such a scheme posited infinite worlds different from each other, and new worlds that are always being created: there is no need for an intelligent cause for our world; everything is explained by the laws of matter. All possible combinations arise from an infinity of atomic movement; we see what we take to be best for survival and then designate it as admirable order.

In Bergson's annotations to the lines of Bk. I and II of Lucretius, one can follow in specific and very precise detail how he makes the differential reading between Lucretius, Epicurus and Democritus possible. It is also in Bergson's comments on these selected sections that one is presented with what he takes to be the essential philosophy of Lucretius, and how he maintains his principle of interpreting the philosopher from his own words and not via the remarks of later thinkers, although this becomes an impossible task since even the surviving manuscripts of the 'copyists' are part of the received history and not free of interpretative consequences. Such a commitment does not preclude Bergson from adding corrections and critical points to the material on which he is commenting. There is no neutral commentator: that is a fiction of exegetical fanaticism. For example, Bergson corrects Lucretius in line 66 of the first book by noting that Epicurus was not the *primum homo* against the gods, and mentions the banning from Athens of Protagoras for

his view on religion. He refers to the conquest of Epicurus, who returns with the knowledge of what can come into being and what cannot, or, in sum, how each thing has its powers defined and its deep-set boundary marked:

Thus his force
His vital force of mind...
With wit and wisdom came back to us
Bringing news of what can be
And what cannot, limits and boundaries,
The borderline, the benchmark, set forever.

For Bergson, this indicates that a determinate cause can only produce a determinate effect. That is the principle of every version of materialism.

Bergson also keeps repeating and underlining the attack by Lucretius on religion that includes superstition,¹¹ where again, false beliefs about the origin of the soul and its destiny are seen as the main sources. He draws freely on contemporary scholarship to advance his view, thus the sources of Lucretius are listed in Siemerin's *Quaestionum Lucretianarum* (Koenigsberg, 1867). He draws attention to Lucretius's complex vocabulary and inventive punning, referring to Schubert's *De Lucretiana verborum formatione* (Halle, 1805). In his reading of line 150, Bergson focuses on what he takes to be the general principle of the system – that nothing comes from nothing, that nothing is annihilated – 'nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam', which may be rendered as: 'no thing is ever produced through divine power from nothing'. He sees this as a translation of the phrase attributed to Epicurus: 'ouden gignetai ex tou me ontos pan ek pantos', where he is probably drawing on Diogenes Laertius at Bk. X, 38.

De Rerum Natura is pre-eminently a poem on physics. Physics is naturalism because nature is all that there is, and this distinction between science and the whole of things resonates most clearly in

Greek. *Phusis*, from which physics is derived, like the word *natura* in Latin, is related to what is coming into existence, birthing – *natura* from *nascor*, and *phusis* meaning ‘what grows’. Lucretius emphasises that his study is of the ‘things’ of nature. The desire of the poet, who is also writing a kind of tragic version of his own teacher’s doctrine, is to write on everything that is: ‘omne quod est’ (Bk. I, 958). Lucretius had set out his programme, to write on the scheme of things and to set out an account of the powers above and the origin of things: ‘the seeds from which nature creates all things’, how they increase and multiply, and how they are resolved into their elements after they have run their course. These ‘things’ are called matter, the life-motes, or the seeds of things; or, since a name is needed for them, they could be called ‘firstlings’, since everything follows from these beginnings:

Nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque
 disserere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam
 unde omnis natura creet res auctet alatque
 quove eadem rursum natura perempta resolvat,
 quae nos materiem et genitalia corpora rebus
 reddunda in ratione vocare et semina rerum
 appellare suemus et haec eadem usurpare
 corpora prima, quod ex illis sunt omnia primis.
 (Bk. I, 55-61)

In Rolfe Humphries’ version:

... I shall begin
 With a discussion of the scheme of things
 As it regards the heaven and powers above,
 Then I shall state the origin of things,
 The seeds from which nature creates all things,
 Bids them increase and multiply; in turn,
 How she resolves them to their elements
 After their course is run. These things we call
 Matter, the life-motes, or seeds of things,
 (If we must find, in schools, a name for them),
 Firstlings, we well might say, since every thing
 Follows from these beginnings.

The principle of principles, if one can so put it, is clearly that nothing can come from nothing. The implication of this principle is that nothing can begin. In an absolute sense, something always derives from something else. The task of the first two books is to talk about the ‘everything’, and that everything is nature, *to pan or summarum summa*. By talking about the nature of things one is only talking about nature, as there is nothing other than particular material existents and what happens to them, things and events ‘are’ nature. The poem’s overriding aim is to establish that there is nothing but nature; there is no transcendental or supernatural realm. The *naturae species ratioque* can also be rendered as the ‘sufficient reason of things’ as Leibniz does, but it refers to the rational unity of the whole as that which exists literally in a bulk or tenuous physical sense.

The notion of materialism – which is not a term from antiquity but from the seventeenth century – thus returns to pre-Socratic philosophy, in that it cannot entrain the notion of an intelligible realm of ideas or forms that is ‘no-where’. This refuses the irrational for nature, it refuses the supernatural, and it refuses a transcendental realm. There is only nature, and this nature is not itself a thing; it is aleatory, and infinite of all things and all events.

There are further consequences that derive from the principle of nothing coming from nothing, which distinguishes the ‘corporalism’ of the Stoics from a radical version of atomism, and thus a materialism in which thought and extension are not separated, where thoughts and movement and speed of thinking are atomistic in the way of all other existent beings. What is radical is that one must not only abandon the lures of transcendence and the supernatural, of gods and of religion, but also the notion that nature is some kind of living being; in other words, the lures of vitalism, finalism or pantheism. Life, according to Lucretius and his interpretation of

Epicurus, is an 'accident' of inanimate nature.

Lucretius establishes that nothing can arise from nothing, but that everything comes from a particular something, and for a reason, and out of specific material elements. The very evidence of growth, the coming into being, the birthing of things, disproves the possibility of the contrary being true, and again throughout lines 151-158 and 188-198 of Bk. I, Lucretius makes use of paradox and logical refutation to establish his leading principle. The various invocations to Venus and Voluptas set against Mars and strife do not mask the fact that they are also joined according to mythic tales. Lucretius stresses the idea of generative and dynamic becoming – that from which things start – as an event, due to its temporal character. Only the atoms and the void retain an immutable character, and from the inanimate come the whole seed, breed and generation of things and human history. Atoms and the void are eternal, and this differs from our notion of physics. It is here that Bergson finds the most sensitive point with regard to his own release from Herbert Spenser's impact on his thinking at the *École Normale Supérieure*: how to hold within the concept of an eternal void and the eternity of atoms, a non-mechanistic explanation of what is patently visible regarding change and movement. Lucretius sets it out tersely:

ergo si solida ac sine inani corpora prima
sunt ita uti docui, sint haec aeterna necessest
(Bk I, 537-39)

(If, as I have taught, the first bodies
are solid and without void, they must be everlasting)

Part of the greatest difficulty is distinguishing how Lucretius differs and separates himself from Stoical notions of the corporeal, and, ultimately, from the divinity attributed by the Stoics to the cosmos and stars.

For Bergson, it is only by grasping what the primordial things are that one can comprehend that it is because they are atoms that sound and heat result from their simple vibrations, which can ultimately be taken as a universal vibration, like the tremor on a spider's web, where everything is dynamically interconnected and in communication. Bergson disposes of any difficulties with regard to indivisible, tasteless, odourless atoms (a kind of negative physics where one can only say what atoms are not) by indicating that it is the cause of the sensation that is material, not the sensation itself. Causality is material.

In considering the problem of the void and the weight of atoms, Bergson shows that in Lucretius, the real distinction is on what can be touched or what cannot be touched. In the final analysis, then, a body is the simple property of atoms or groups of atoms. Thus for Lucretius all reality is material. There are bodies and there is void. This gives to Lucretius a double, *per se* existent ontology.

We may ask with what and how we can characterise Bergson's emphasis and interpretations with regard to Lucretius and atomism, and also the problems it created for his own research in the following years as he worked on a minor and major thesis for his doctorate at the Sorbonne.¹²

I offer the following as a somewhat truncated and elliptical conclusion, given that almost all the detailed discussion of Bergson's work on ancient philosophy at this time, especially his work on Leibniz, needs to be fully reconsidered in the light of newly available material published since 2010. The point can be made that Bergson sees in the work on Lucretius an achievement within ancient philosophy that allows a double without dualism, and a resolution to what had been taken as the cleavage between, for example, a philosophy of becoming and a philosophy of being, which is characterised as a fundamental divide.

Indeed, the expression of a radical materialism is to say that there are innumerable bodies in an infinite void and nothing else. Values and thinking exist as secondary activities caused by us, and these values and thoughts are determined not by the body, but by the situation of physics itself; the situation of *natura* is that it does not think or have value. Value and consciousness are created because we 'live', which acknowledges our emergence from the structure of what is inanimate and based on complexity and hazard.

There is no reduction to the elements since they are not alive. The matter/void double retains its identity even in emergence, because it is clear that atoms have no secondary qualities, they are without smell, taste, noise, temperature, and they are without sensitive life or spirit; they have only a form, a mass, a force which moves them and a movement. They are infinite. The universe is thus infinite. Being infinite, atoms have neither a centre nor a limit, which is the source of 'freedom' for nature. Atoms are without any subject or end that could govern them, and the freedom of nature is that it is, to conclude, *summarum summa*. If gods exist they form part of this 'all', but they cannot govern its destiny.

But nature cannot create, as we think to do with our human inventions. In Bk. II, 292-293, the consequences of the situation of the atom/void disjunction remains free because it has neither end nor subject, and what prevents the mind from being necessary within it, even as a secondary emergence from the infinite of atoms and void, is that the mind is not mastered or forced to endure because of the 'minute swerving of the first beginnings at no fixed place and at no fixed time'.

id facit exiguum clinamen principiorum
nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo.

This is a unique usage of *clinamen* in Latin, and it

inevitably echoes the subversion which Democritus makes of the Parmenidean One, since here, it is not that 'being' can be said in many ways, but rather it multiplies, or, more accurately, it is multiple – even infinitely multiple. Monism and pluralism are one and the same. As Comte-Sponville remarks: 'Tel est le coup de force, ou le coup de génie, de l'atomisme.'¹³

What Bk. II broaches is the dynamic and cinematic movement of atoms, which is perpetual and sempiternal, without beginning or end. The succinct argument can be found at lines 83-102 of that section. The truth of being is movement not rest, and the analogy of the dust-motes, which can also be found in Democritus and Aristotle, helps one picture the situation (lines 114-122). To closely paraphrase: 'where one is said to see dancing motes or dust beams, as the sun streams into shuttered rooms, yes, like a little army in manoeuvre, with squadrons charging, retreating, joining, parting'. From this one can infer that on a nanoscale, there is similar turbulence and/or whirling. And there is more to say: these dust particles tell us that there is motion in what seems solid and durable, and this restlessness, which one sees in their coming and going every which way, indicates the inner atomic restlessness, at first moved by its own inner impulses. Motion comes from first beginnings and grows until we can see the process just as we see dancing motes in sunlight.

However, we cannot see the 'urge' that pushes this, nor really appreciate the speed. Again, only analogy can help, and analogy already presupposes too much understanding. There is no first mover, the weight and shocks of atoms themselves constitute dynamic and movement; 'above' and 'below' are not in relation to a place, but a direction, and the explanation given is the *clinamen*. The whole of the difficult section of Bk. II can be cited from lines 217-93, and the complexity of the arguments requires, and happily has, a meticulous

commentary by Don Fowler, cited above at note 8.

What is one to make of the deviation, the *parenklisis*? Does it introduce chance and chaos as the source of the multiple or is the multiple directed, as if by a kind of spiritual 'free will', through such a deviation? One can, it seems, view the *clinamen* as the power of the event, which the eternity of atoms could not produce themselves. In one sense, the swerve is anti-fatalist; it is that which creates the possibility of the event arriving, something new that comes into time as a present. It arrives; it is where the eternal present of nature makes time as event.

The notion that a causality must take place somewhere, in a linear way, is not required by the theory of the void and matter. In a logical sense, it is the *clinamen* that gives the eruption of the new as time and place. We can speak of a discontinuous causality, because the swerve allows the event of time. This is the primacy of the actual over the virtual, since it is the event which makes time. The *clinamen* is an atemporal condition of time, and it allows beginning without itself having a starting point. Because of its relation to the indetermination of the atoms/void, it breaks the chain of succession, and necessity must then act in time, which breaks its absolute power of determination. This is how necessity becomes simultaneously multiplied and partialised by the constraint of the infinite accordance with the order of time. The *clinamen* is a permanent power of the accidental, which ruptures necessity as it temporalises the eternal present of matter/void as the event. By its own perpetual creation of the new, instant by instant, nature is *natura creatrix*, and this takes place *ipsa sua per se sponte*; that is to say, spontaneously and from itself. There are no gods, no constraints, no impositions. Nature is 'free'.¹⁴

One concluding remark is in order, namely to point out how close Bergson's concerns in this work are to some reflections of English and Anglo-Irish

scientists, a matter which has only recently been discussed in Professor Daniel Brown's 2013 Cambridge publication, *The Poetry of Victorian Scientists*, where again one sees a reading of Lucretius that moves in the same direction as that adduced by Bergson. Moreover, Brown argues that in the work of the scientist Maxwell, and in Deleuze's reflections, there is a response to Lucretius that recognises a dynamic pluralism in thought and nature which does not surrender them to entropic randomness and meaningless empty nonsense.

Notes

1. Henri Bergson, *Extraits de Lucrèce* (Paris: Delagrave, 1884).
2. For the English citations of Lucretius I have for the most part used the translations of W.H.D. Rouse in: Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* (London: Heinemann, 1953).
3. <<http://archive.org/details/extraitsdelucr00lucr>> [accessed 07 April 2014]. For biographical information on this period of Bergson's life in France, see Philippe Soulez and Frédéric Worms, *Bergson* (Paris: PUF, 2002), cf. pp. 49-50 for comments on the *Extraits*.
4. *Écrits philosophiques* (Paris: PUF, 2011). Here, general principles of the edition are discussed at pp. 11-15.
5. *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
6. The substantial *Rezeptionsgeschichte* on Bergson in the Cambridge Companion traces philosophical responses up to the current period, but ignores *de facto* the important and persistent French work in the publications of Deleuze, Foucault, Serres, Bruno Latour and, most recently, Badiou. For this, one should turn to Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seed of Things* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). Goldberg's main interest is the reading of Lucretius in Foucault and Deleuze. He has taken little account of the work of Marcel Conche and André Comte-Sponville, and the note on Bergson is cursory; however, it is still a

very rich source for understanding modern French philosophical engagement with Lucretius and an indispensable addition to the Cambridge Companion to Lucretius published in the same year.

7. André Comte-Sponville, *Le Miel et l'Absinthe* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008), contains valuable meditations, which can be seen as a response to Bergson's reading and which also emphasise both the aspect of 'tragic' knowledge in Lucretius and the closeness to Pascal, Schopenhauer and existential philosophy.
8. For the Augustan situation with regard to shrines and religious cults, see Jennifer A. Rea, *Legendary Rome* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2007), pp. 65-85; Philippe Hardie, *Lucretian Receptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also the comments in the massive, exegetical work of Don Fowler, *Lucretius on Atomic Motion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and the note on line 44 Bk. II, pp. 123-24, which deals with *religio, religiones*.
9. This is the system of Democritus as presented in the extracts, shorn of any argumentative refinements. Bergson delivers to his students concise and direct statements without much exemplification. For his more detailed accounts from this period one has to have recourse to the lectures he gave on Greek philosophy, and indeed his entire course on pre-Socratic philosophy, which have re-surfaced from student notes and been published only fully in recent years. For this, see the bibliography in *Écrits philosophiques, ut. supra*, pp.1027-ff.
10. See Bk. III, 830-869; Bk. V, pp. 1169-1197.
11. See Bk. I, p. 112.
12. Professor Deborah Hauptmann and I have prepared a translation, complete with a full introduction, of the minor thesis *Quid Aristoteles de loco senserit*, in which Bergson's later development is charted. It is hoped that this will see publication in the not too distant future.
13. Comte-Sponville, *op cit.*, p.154.
14. For Althusser, this is the *matérialisme de l'aléatoire*. See Louis Althusser, *Sur la philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p.344.

Biography

After completion of studies in Philosophy and later Sociology and Near Eastern Languages, Pontifical University Maynooth, University College Dublin, Patrick Healy has been engaged in writing, research and teaching, mainly in the area of aesthetics and contemporary art. His recent publications include works on aesthetics, the philosophy of science and artists biographies, including a broad range of other activities associated with his work as Professor of Interdisciplinary research for the Free International University, Amsterdam, appointed 1997. He works as a Senior Researcher and tutor in the Architecture Theory Section, and provides lecture series in aesthetics and the Philosophy of Science.

