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## Free Will and the Purpose of Man in Nature

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## Free Will and The Purpose of Man in Nature

Helena Lyons, '21

Throughout *On the Nature of Things* and the *Georgics*, Lucretius and Vergil argue that nature is innately tended toward a worse state and the implementation of free will allows the temporary reprieve from nature. Lucretius comments on the nature of free will in *On the Nature of Things*, 2.263-277 by stating “When the starting gate swings open at the races, don’t you see how the horses’ energy, champing at the bit, cannot burst free as quickly as the mind itself desires?...motion has its impetus in Thought, we find, first rising from a whim of spirit, then travelling all through the flesh, and through the limbs.” Free will, as explained through this excerpt, is what establishes motion in an otherwise unchanging universe and begs the question of how much physical forms limit the potential of existence. Here, a great force of will is required to make a simple choice—to move forward. Free will grants the potential to implement this motion and change into the environment. It further suggests that an even greater force would be required to affect change not only on ourselves, but in nature.

Vergil’s analogy of the horse offers a greater scope to this line of thought while only modifying a small aspect of it. He writes; “It’s as when from the starting line at the track the

chariots break loose. Lap after lap, around and around, and the driver pulls on the reins and it's no use, and the chariot rushes on, all out of control..." (*Georgics*, p.43). Here, humans are likened not to horses, but to charioteers. Where control over thought and action is shown by Lucretius, the opposite is shown here as the driver is unable to control the chariot which seems to be representative of life. The desires of the driver do not surmount those of the horse, so man is not able to affect his change on the horses. This quote also brings forth the idea that nature, when left to its own devices, is not a place of peace. The uncontrolled horses bring unbridled chaos to the driver.

This concept of the earth as being a place where evil exists is addressed in *On the Nature of Things*. Lucretius says that "The earth does not obstruct our view of everything below: All in the void beneath our feet lies open to our sight...Nature everywhere in every part lies open; all her secrets laid bare" (*On the Nature of Things*, 3.26-30). This is said when speaking to the good and perfect nature of heaven as juxtaposed against the poor nature of earth. The aspects of hell don't remain hidden from man, as the void of such existence exists among man. Nature here is portrayed as innately possessing evils.

This idea is further explored in the *Georgics* as Vergil specifically addresses the nature of things stating "All things

by nature are ready to get worse, lapse backward, fall away from what they were, just as if one who struggles to row his little boat upstream against a powerful current should but for a moment relax his arms, the current would carry him headlong back again downstream” (*Georgics*, p.17-19). This passage presents the earth as an unchanging regression toward a worse state which man will constantly try to work against. If nature is defaulted to not create goodness, then this must come from man. Only through interventions against this natural order are reprieves from this poor state achieved.

The arguments made by both philosophers encapsulates this innate pessimism about the world and the role man plays within it. Despite their difference in opinion to the origins of such evils and hardships plague the earth, both agree upon an intrinsic setting towards bad in the earth. The implementation of free will works actively against the natural preordinance of the universe. Perhaps the pessimistic approach is not meant to inspire disheartenment in its readers. Such a view on the world could allow people to enjoy the small good that can sometimes be brought into this world, despite the great effort of spirit it would take to enact such change in an earth which otherwise rebels against this state.

Even so, this interpretation of the texts may only create a feigned purpose outside the monotony of human existence within nature, creating an illusion of peace for

readers in an otherwise meaningless existence. Both Lucretius and Vergil describe the earth, by its very nature, as being both a place which possesses known evils and a natural tendency towards badness. This unchanging regression to a worse state is what will forever be worked against, much like Sisyphus and his eternal task of rolling a boulder up a hill. The fate of man is to push ceaselessly against the nature of the earth to affect free will and put good into the universe, only to inevitably be conquered by life in the end.