

PHI 171 – PROB. OF PHILOSOPHY – ARGUMENTS & POETRY - DUE NOV 6

This assignment is about Lucretius's different argument patterns and his use of poetic language to make philosophical arguments. In this assignment, you are expected to:

Answer at least four questions from (a) through (f), and in addition, answer questions (g), (h) and (i). *No essay format. Please itemize your answers.*

I. Argument by contradiction One argument pattern Lucretius uses to prove a thesis is to assume that the thesis is false and then derive absurd consequences. Since assuming the falsity of the thesis leads to absurdity, the thesis cannot be false and must be true instead. This is an *argument by contradiction*. An example is in Book 1, verses 160-175:

“If things could be created out of nothing, any kind of thing could be produced from any source; nothing would need a seed. In the first place, human beings could spring from the sea, squamous fish from the ground, and birds could be hatched from the sky; cattle and other farm animals and every kind of wild beast would bear young of unpredictable species, and would make their home in cultivated and barren parts without discrimination.”

- (a) What is the thesis Lucretius is trying to prove? What are the absurd consequences he derives from assuming that the thesis is false?
- (b) Find another example in Lucretius' text (book 1 or book 3) of an argument by contradiction. Cite the relevant text and explain why it is an argument by contradiction.

II. Argument by cases Another argument pattern Lucretius uses to prove a thesis is to consider alternative cases, say case A and case B, and see what happens in each case. If, given case A, the thesis in question holds, and given case B, the same thesis holds, and if the two cases are all the possible cases, it follows that the thesis in question is always true. This is an *argument by cases*. Another form of argument by cases is one in which, say, case A and case B are all the possible alternatives to a thesis, and it turns out that both A and B must be false. The thesis in question must therefore be true since all of its alternatives were proven false. Here is an example from Book 1, verses 520-530:

“There is the further point that, if there were no empty space, the whole universe would consist of solid matter; conversely, if there were no definite bodies to fill the places which they occupy, the whole universe would

be space, vacuum, and void. So it is evident that matter and void are interspersed and alternate with one another, since the universe is neither a complete plenum nor a complete vacuum. There are, therefore, definite bodies that have the effect of interspersing empty space with full space.”

- (c) What is the thesis Lucretius is trying to prove? What are the cases he identifies? How does the thesis in question follow by considering the cases? Explain carefully. Do you think Lucretius has considered all the possible cases or has he forgotten something?
- (d) Find another example in Lucretius’ text (book 1 or book 3) of an argument by cases. Cite the relevant text and explain why it is an argument by cases.

III. Inference to the best explanation Another argument pattern Lucretius uses to prove a thesis is to begin with an observable fact and then allege that this fact can be best explained—or can only be explained—by assuming that the thesis in question is true. This is an *inference to the best explanation*. Here is an example from Book 2, verses 163-179:

“The same method of argument teaches us that the mind and spirit have a material nature. For it is an observable fact that they impel the limbs, wrench the body from sleep, transform the countenance, and pilot and steer the whole person; and since we perceive that all these operations imply touch, and touch in its turn implies matter, are we not bound to acknowledge that the mind and spirit consist of material substance?”

- (e) What is the thesis Lucretius is trying to prove? What is the observable fact he starts out with? How does the thesis explain the observable fact? Do you think there is a better explanation of the observable fact which Lucretius did not consider?
- (f) Find another example in Lucretius’ text (book 1 or book 3) of inference to the best explanation. Cite the relevant text and explain why it is an inference to the best explanation.

IV. Poetic Language A peculiarity of Lucretius’ writing is that his arguments are interspersed with images, metaphors, lyrical expressions, stories and more. This makes his philosophical writing less abstract and more concrete and vivid. Such images and the like, however, are often parts of his abstract philosophical arguments. Consider, for example, this passage from Book 3, verses 189–208:

“Compare how water is made to move and now by ever such a gentle impulse, since it is formed of small particles shaped so that they can roll. On

the other hand, the substance of honey is more cohesive, its fluid more viscous, and its flow more dilatory; and the reason why the whole mass of its matter has closer cohesion is undoubtedly that its constituent particles are less smooth, less subtle, and less round. Compare, too, how even a gentle, checked puff of breath can spill a high heap of poppy seed from the top downward, whereas it can make no impression on a pile of stones or ears of corn. Therefore the smaller and smoother bodies are, the more mobility they enjoy; conversely, the heavier and rougher any are found to be, the more stability they have. Now, therefore, since the substance of the mind has been discovered to be exceptionally mobile, its component particles must be extremely small, smooth, and round. If you grasp this my good friend, you will find that it will stand you in good stead in many connections."

- (g) What is the image of viscous honey supposed to suggest? What is the image of the puff of breath spilling a heap of poppy seeds intended to suggest? What role do these images play in Lucretius' argument here?

Sometimes vivid poetic language is meant to shake the reader, to make a point which a cold rational argument could hardly make. For example, consider Book 3, verses 1030-1052:

"Will you, then, be hesitant and indignant, when death calls? You, even while you still have life and light, are as good as dead: you squander the greater part of your time in sleep; you snore when awake; you never stop daydreaming; you are burdened with a mind disturbed by groundless fear; and often you cannot discover what is wrong with you, when, like some drunken wretch, you are buffeted with countless cares on every side and drift along aimlessly in utter bewilderment of mind."

- (h) What point is here Lucretius trying to make? What type of poetic language, images and words does he use? Do you think they were effective or ineffective at conveying Lucretius' intended point? If necessary, how would you rewrite the above text in a more effective, vivid and modern language?
- (i) Find another example in Lucretius' text (book 1 or book 3) of poetic language (images, metaphors, lyrical expressions, stories, etc.). Cite the relevant text; identify the poetic language in it; and explain the role which the poetic language plays in the text. Is the poetic language being used effective or ineffective at conveying Lucretius' intended point? If you think it ineffective, how would you rewrite the text in a more effective, vivid and modern language?