

## VALERIUS MAXIMUS (9.2.EXT.11) – QUESTIONING NATURE?\*

Abstract: In relation to the sentence that concludes Valerius Maximus' treatment of cruelty, to take the subjunctives *queramur* and *feramus* as interrogatives rather than jussive subjunctives and to understand the following *cum* clause as concessive permits Valerius' idea to be located within a broadly Stoic frame of thought. The conclusion may be supported by parallels from Cicero and Seneca.

Keywords: Valerius Maximus, Nature, Stoicism

As a coda to his chapter *De crudelitate*, the second and longest chapter of his extended treatment of vice, positioned at the end of 15 *exempla* of harsh treatment of fellow human beings by both Roman and non-Roman exemplars, Valerius Maximus produces a sentence that requires some examination. Valerius' view on the relationship between human beings and Nature appears to embody elements that may shed light on the potential philosophical background to his view.<sup>1</sup>

The two most recent editors of Valerius offer a text that is identical but for one thing, the final mark of punctuation after *excogitaverit*:<sup>2</sup>

---

\*) I thank Clive Chandler, Miriam Griffin and Jeffrey Murray for their comments on this note. All shortcomings are to my account.

1) It may be that Valerius was led to introduce his reflection on Nature by his final *exemplum* which illustrates the climactic cruelty of an unnamed foreign people in prolonging the death of their victims by exposing them to slow putrefaction, which he ends *donec intus putrefacti laniatui sint animalibus quae tabidis in corporibus nasci solent* (9.2.ext.11). The etymological link between *nasci* and *Natura* was widely recognised (see R. Maltby, *Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies*, Leeds 1991, 404–5, and C. Marangoni, *Supplementum Etymologicum Latinum*, Trieste 2007, 86).

2) J. Briscoe, *Valerius Maximus*, Stuttgart / Leipzig 1998 and D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Valerius Maximus: Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000. Their most notable predecessor K. Kempf, *Valerii Maximi Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium libri novem*, Leipzig 1888, punctuates with a full-stop. The most recent English translation by H. J. Walker (*Valerius Maximus. Memorable Deeds and Sayings: One Thousand Tales from Ancient Rome*, Indianapolis 2004,

*Queramur nunc cum rerum natura, quod nos multis et asperis adversae  
valetudinis incommodis obnoxios esse voluerit, habitumque caelestis  
roboris humanae conditioni denegatum moleste feramus, cum tot cru-  
catus sibimet ipsa mortalitas impulsu crudelitatis excogitaverit*

Briscoe ends the sentence with a question mark and Shackleton Bailey with a full-stop, decisions which fundamentally affect the way we understand *queramur* and *feramus* – are these jussive subjunctives, i. e. “let us take issue with” or interrogatives, i. e. “are we to take issue with?” – and the *cum* clause – is it temporal, causal or concessive?

Shackleton Bailey offers the following translation:

Let us now take issue with the Nature of Things because she has wished us exposed to the many harsh ordeals of ill health and grumble that a sturdy celestial constitution has been denied to our human state, when mortality has itself devised so many tortures for mortality under the impulse of cruelty.

### *Queramur or queramur?*

If we examine Valerius’ conception of Nature (*Natura rerum*) in relation to human life and death and what can be surmised about the philosophical background (if any) to his views, is it likely that

---

318) which is based on Kempf’s text follows his punctuation: “So let’s complain against the nature of the universe, because it has wanted to expose us to the harsh afflictions of ill health. And let’s be disappointed, because the resilience of the gods has been denied to human beings. And yet mortals themselves have been driven by cruelty to invent so many tortures for each other”; similarly the French translation of P. Constant, *Valère Maxime. Actions et paroles mémorables*, Paris 1930, with “al-lons . . . reprocher . . . pleignons-nous” and the Italian translation of R. Faranda, *Valerio Massimo. Detti e fatti memorabilia*, Turin 1971, with “prendiamocela . . . sop-portiamo”. The 1678 English translation of Samuel Speed interestingly renders with an interrogative: “Can we complain of Nature, for having made us lyable to many and dire inconveniencies of Sickness; or take it ill that Celestial Strength should be denied to humane condition, when Mortality hath invented so many torments to ruine itself, by the impulse of Cruelty?”; H.-F. Mueller, *Roman Religion in Valerius Maximus*, London 2002, 167, presents a hybrid – with a word order that suggests an interrogative, but final punctuation with an exclamation mark: “So should we now lodge a complaint with nature, because it has seen fit to subject us to many and rough trials of ill health, and endure with difficulty the fact that the vesture of heavenly vigor has been denied to the human condition, when mortals themselves through their impulse to cruelty have contrived so many tortures for themselves!”

he wishes his reader to blame her for man's essential mortality. Valerius holds that Nature is the creator of all things, good and bad and that she cannot explain her reasoning in creating *miracula: ne ipsa quidem, omnis bonae malaeque materiae fecunda artifex, rationem rerum Natura reddiderit* (1.8.ext.18).<sup>3</sup> Rather than sounding a philosophical note against the rationality of Nature, a key tenet of Stoicism, this is Valerius introducing the common notion of *Natura ludens*, and by inference rejecting the more negative concept of *Natura saeviens*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the Stoic pedigree of the concept of *Natura ludens*, seen in Chrysippus' φύσις τῆ ποιικιλία χαίρουσα and Posidonius' ποικίλτρα, needs to be acknowledged.<sup>5</sup> So far a Nature that is inscrutable, but not cruel. While Valerius does attribute *malignitas* to her: *proeliatu est cum rerum Natura et quidem victor abiit, malignitatem eius pertinacissimo animi robore superando* (8.7.ext.1), Demosthenes overcame his physical weaknesses to become a great orator. Perhaps the force of the *malignitas* is undercut by its being overcome – here was no ineluctable Fate, but circumstances that the diligent *sapiens* could change. Significantly too, in the final phrase of this chapter on *crudelitas*, Valerius does not call death and illness themselves 'cruel', but reserves that condemnation for the refinements that human beings have devised. In the passage that concludes his treatment of death (9.12.ext.10), after two examples of great athletes who perished because of reliance on physical strength and faulty understanding, Valerius states that both physical and intellectual excellence do not occur in any one individual. The way he phrases this, *quasi abnuente Natura utriusque boni largitionem*, with *quasi* tones down the denial of bounty – Nature is not mean or begrudging. *Natura* for Valerius is *artifex*

---

3) The force of the subjunctive *reddiderit* is brought out well by F. X. Ryan, How to Handle Inexplicable Natural Phenomena (V.M. 1.8.ext.12–18), 1–2, academia.edu, Jan. 2013, [http://www.academia.edu/2352339/How\\_to\\_Handle\\_Inexplicable\\_Natural\\_Phenomena\\_V.M.\\_1.8.ext.12-18\\_](http://www.academia.edu/2352339/How_to_Handle_Inexplicable_Natural_Phenomena_V.M._1.8.ext.12-18_), accessed 14.6.2017.

4) See e.g. M. Beagon, Roman Nature, Oxford 1992, esp. 88–91 and eadem, The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal, Oxford 2005, 162.

5) Chrysippus from Plutarch's (Mor. 1044D = SVF 1163) introduction to a quotation from his περί φύσεως; Posidonius in Strab. 17.1.36 = Theiler fr. 64. Proclus attributes the idea of φύσις παίζουσα to Heraclitus (Tim. 101F). See K. Deichgräber, *Natura varie ludens*. Ein Nachtrag zum griechischen Naturbegriff, Wiesbaden 1954 (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse 1954. No. 3), esp. 78–82.

(1.8.ext.18) and has a will,<sup>6</sup> but her inventiveness is not for evil, a regrettable facet of human ingenuity that Valerius highlights throughout his treatment of vice in Book 9.<sup>7</sup>

The combination of *natura* and *rerum* occurs thirteen times in the work, not all of which are relevant to its usage in this passage.<sup>8</sup> From the related uses, Valerius' emphasis lies in two main areas, firstly certain patterns of behaviour are natural – notably that there should be affection and respect from children for their parents and ancestors.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, and most relevant, in connection with human mortality: (i) *non ignorabit ita liberos esse procreandos ut meminerit iis a rerum Natura et accipiendi spiritus et reddendi eodem momento temporis legem dici, atque ut mori neminem solere qui non vixerit, ita ne vivere aliquem quidem posse qui non sit moriturus* (5.10.ext.3), Virtue herself teaches that all who are born will die and that Nature sets down the terms on which life and death are granted.<sup>10</sup> (ii) *Sophocles quoque gloriosum cum rerum Natura certamen*

6) Valerius' use of *voluerit* (9.2.ext.11) is not, it may be argued, loose or casual, but reflects the Stoic idea of Nature / God being rational and possessing will (see texts collected by A. S. Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De Natura Deorum*, Cambridge, Mass. 1955, 257–8).

7) Cf. 9.1.1, 9.1.7, 9.2.ext.6, 9.2.ext.11.

8) 3.2.23: *in utraque parte rerum naturae* is a rhetorical description of 'land and sea', the two spheres in which Scaeva manifested extreme courage, and thus not a philosophical sense; 3.3.ext.2: *in dispicienda rerum natura* means no more than 'natural science', Zeno's investigations into natural phenomena; 5.3.2d: *Numantia atque Karthagine, imperio Romano imminentibus ex rerum natura depulsis* is a grandiose and exaggerated expression for 'existence'.

9) 5.4.7: *putarit aliquis hoc contra rerum naturam factum, nisi diligere parentes prima Naturae lex esset* of a daughter suckling her mother to keep her alive in prison; and 5.4.ext.5: *prima igitur et optima rerum Natura pietatis est magistra*, inspired by the barbarian Scythians' respect for their ancestors' graves. The concluding sentence of the extended treatment of *pietas* under three different headings (5.4–6) underlines the idea emphatically: *sanctissimisque Naturae legibus mirificorum etiam exemplorum clara mundo subscripserit ubertas*. Later Valerius implicitly at least embraces the idea again (8.1.abs.13): *iudicatum est enim rerum Naturam non recipere ut occiso patre supra vulnera et cruorem eius quietem capere poterint* – the jury in coming to a verdict on a case of parricide acquitted the brothers Cloelii because they believed that children could not have gone to sleep after killing their father, a verdict at which Valerius expresses no surprise.

10) A deterministic element may be present, i. e. Valerius attributes to Nature the power to set times that are inescapable, but that is not essential to my argument. That Valerius may in one part of his work suggest that things lie beyond the individual's power to influence and elsewhere (indeed for the work as a whole to have a role in inculcating moral values) presume the power of the individual to choose,

*habuit, tam benigne mirifica illi opera sua exhibendo quam illa operibus eius tempora liberaliter sumministrando* (8.7.ext.12): writing plays until he was nearly one hundred, Sophocles struggled with Nature; although she was generous in granting him such a long lifespan, he had to die.<sup>11</sup> So in these examples not a hint of criticism of Nature for imposing death on human beings. In fact, a highly rhetorical sentence from the climactic Roman *exemplum* of changes of fortune on Caesar's capture by pirates brings together the closely related notion of fortune and complaint in such a way as to confirm that one should not complain about one's lot (6.9.15): *quid est ergo quod amplius de ea queramur, si ne consortibus quidem divinitatis suae parcat?* The conclusion from this is that Valerius is unlikely at 9.2.ext.11 to be encouraging his reader to complain at the inescapable reality of death, and thus that the interrogative form is to be preferred.

A comparable passage in Seneca's *De providentia* (5.7), a dialogue indisputably focused on the Stoic doctrine of providence and bringing together the main elements of Valerius' words, may confirm the finding: *quid itaque indignamur? quid querimur? ad hoc parti sumus. utatur ut vult suis natura corporibus.*

---

is not mere contradiction, but a consequence of what Rebecca Langlands calls "situation ethics" (see R. Langlands, *Roman exempla and Situation Ethics: Valerius Maximus and Cicero De Officiis*, JRS 101, 2011, 100–122).

For the same idea, but without the addition of *rerum*, Valerius cites with approval the rebuke of the censors of 403 BC against aged bachelors (2.9.1): *Natura vobis quemadmodum nascendi, ita gignendi legem scribit, parentesque vos alendo nepotum nutriendorum debito, si quis est pudor, alligaverunt. accedit his quod etiam Fortuna longam praestandi huiusce muneris advocacionem estis adsecuti, cum interrim consumpti sunt anni vestri et mariti et patris nomine vacui.* Although Valerius presents this in *oratio recta*, the rebuke is undoubtedly his own formulation of what he found in his source (cf. A. Themann-Steinke, *Valerius Maximus: ein Kommentar zum zweiten Buch der Facta et dicta memorabilia*, Trier 2008, 488–9).

11) Cf. 8.7.4: *nam ut senem illum Natura, caecum Fortuna facere potuit, ita neutra interpellare valuit ne non animo et videret et vigeret*, of the jurist consult Livius Drusus. Valerius grants that it lay with Nature's power to permit Drusus to reach old age, but he attributes the imposition of a physical disability to Fortune, again seeming to differentiate the rational from the irrational.

*The cum clause*

As Shackleton Bailey understands this passage, Valerius is encouraging his reader to blame Nature, and his rendition of *cum* as ‘when’ seems to be temporal, i. e. adding additional circumstances of misery: not only do we have to die, but we human beings have increased our woeful lot by devising painful ways to end life.<sup>12</sup> However, if we take *queramur* as an interrogative, it is possible, and indeed preferable, to envisage a concessive meaning for the *cum* clause, i. e. are we to blame nature for the fact that we get ill and die, although (we have to recognise that) we human beings have made our mortal condition worse by devising painful ways to end life?

*The typology of Valerius’ argument*

If Valerius’ statement is to be denied any real philosophical standing, it may be written off as a *locus communis* that perhaps owes its existence to declamation.<sup>13</sup> In somewhat similar vein Rebecca Langlands, somewhat dismissively, has suggested that Valerius sheds light on Roman values “at a sub-philosophical level”.<sup>14</sup> However, Sarah Lawrence has shown that in his treatment of death, through his editing of the *exempla* he has chosen and in his own explicit framing of them, Valerius repeatedly presents ideas using appropriate Stoic terms fully consistent with Stoic psychology and teaching on the attitude to be taken to death.<sup>15</sup> A particular finding of her study highlights Valerius’ adaptation of Cicero’s *Tusculanae Disputationes* 4 and 5, concluding that Valerius is “actually amplifying the Stoic content of Cicero’s work”.<sup>16</sup> Along the same lines,

---

12) With his translation ‘and yet . . .’ Walker (n. 2 above) introduces a concessive sense, which I believe is correct (see below).

13) See B. W. Sinclair, *Valerius Maximus and the Evolution of Silver Latin*, Diss. Cincinnati, 1980, 130, who includes it in the list of *loci communes* he has identified, citing parallels in Sen. *Suas.* 2.2 and *Contr.* 7.1.9. The former, the words of Arellius Fuscus senior, illustrates well how declaimers could introduce philosophically inspired aphorisms.

14) R. Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge 2006, 125.

15) S. J. Lawrence, *Dead on Time: Valerius Maximus 9.13 and Stoicism*, *Antichthon* 49, 2015, 135–55.

16) Lawrence (n. 15 above) 155.

perhaps 9.2.ext.11 can itself be seen as an adaptation of the idea that Cicero sets out at the start of Book 5 of *Tusculanae Disputationes*: *vereor enim ne natura, cum corpora nobis infirma dedisset isque et morbos insanabiles et dolores intolerabiles adiunxisset, animos quoque dederit et corporum doloribus congruentes et separatim suis angoribus et molestiis implicatos. ... nos ... rerum naturam quam errorem nostrum damnare malumus* (5.3–4). In the face of Caesar, Cicero, who himself inclined to the teachings of the sceptical academy, could not react as Cato Uticensis had and presents himself as succumbing to fear and pessimism.<sup>17</sup> Cicero realistically admits that we prefer to blame Nature, but Valerius, true to his didactic mission, expects higher standards from his readers, in fact the response consistent with that of a Stoic.

Cape Town

David Wardle

---

17) For this passage in which Cicero reveals that personal application of the philosophical therapy he has advocated keenly earlier in the work is problematic for him in the context of Caesar's tyranny, see I. Gildenhard, *Paideia Romana. Cicero's Tusculan Disputations*, Cambridge 2007, 204–5 and E. Lefèvre, *Philosophie unter der Tyrannis. Ciceros Tusculanae Disputationes*, Heidelberg 2008, 142, 209–10.