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Chapter 42

Lucretius

c. 99-55 BC

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Our terrors and our darkneses of mind
Must be dispelled, not by the sunshine's rays,
Not by those shining arrows of the light,
But by insight into nature, and a scheme
Of systematic contemplation.

De Rerum Natura. Book I lines 146-148,
trans. here and elsewhere by Humphries

Titus Lucretius Carus was an ardent disciple of Epicurus and the author of the *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), one of the greatest poems in Latin. Other than his approximate dates of birth and death, we have next to no reliable information about him. (St. Jerome's report, in the 4th Century AD, that Lucretius was driven insane by a love potion and composed the *De Rerum Natura* in the lucid intervals between bouts of madness has been widely repeated but is almost certainly scurrilous.) Because of his family name and his apparent familiarity with Roman upper-class mores, it is thought that Lucretius was probably a member of the aristocratic clan of the Lucretii, but this is not certain. And so any insight we wish to gain into the thought and personality of Lucretius must come from *the De Rerum Natura* itself.

Lucretius burns with devotion to the Greek philosopher Epicurus, whom he regards as the savior of humanity. The *De Rerum Natura* is Lucretius' attempt to spread the gospel of Epicureanism. But Epicurus is a strikingly atypical messiah, and the *De Rerum Natura* a correspondingly odd bearer of good news. We are enslaved, thinks Lucretius, by the empty superstitious fears fostered by religion. Epicurus has delivered us from these fears by revealing to us, by the use of reason, that the universe is nothing more than a concatenation of atoms flying through the void, with no purpose or plan, and that death is annihilation, the permanent cessation of all consciousness. And so we do not need to worry about meddling gods or punishments in an afterlife. Instead, we are freed to concentrate on attaining tranquility here and now.

When human life, all too conspicuous,
Lay foully grovelling on earth, weighed down
By grim Religion looming from the skies,
Horribly threatening mortal men, a man,

A Greek, first raised his mortal eyes
Bravely against this menace.
[...]
So his force,
His vital force of mind, a conqueror
Beyond the flaming ramparts of the world
Explored the vast immensities of space
With wit and wisdom, and came back to us
Triumphant, bringing news of what can be
And what cannot, limits and boundaries,
The borderline, the bench mark, set forever.
Religion, so, is trampled underfoot,
And by his victory we reach the stars. (*De Rerum Natura* I 62-79)

The *De Rerum Natura* is an epic poem, in six books, which tries to establish the truth of the Epicurean atomic hypothesis and show how it can successfully account for all natural phenomena. The scope of the poem could not be more ambitious—Lucretius seeks to determine the nature of the fundamental building-blocks of the universe and explain the origins of the earth, life, and society. But in order to fulfill these ambitions, the poem contains page after page of versified arguments concerning matters like why Empedocles' four-element theory is false, how mirrors operate, and why foods have the tastes that they do (sweet foods are composed of smooth round atoms which caress our tongue, whereas bitter foods are composed of barbed atoms that slash at our tongue).

Lucretius explains his choice of epic poetry as the vehicle to express such arguments by comparing himself to a doctor. If a doctor has to administer some nasty-tasting medicine to a child, says Lucretius, he will smear the lip of the cup with honey in order to make the draught more palatable. The child is 'fooled, but not betrayed, but rather given health and strength.' Likewise, says Lucretius, many people find philosophical argument dry and repellant, or initially think that the Epicurean world-system is impious and harsh, and so he is clothing the healing message of Epicurus in poetry in order to make it go down more easily. (*De Rerum Natura* IV 10-25)

Lucretius explicitly claims to be following in the footsteps of Epicurus, and so chances are that little of his argumentation is original. However, Lucretius' therapeutic project extends beyond simply giving rationally convincing arguments. He also wants to redirect harmful attitudes and emotions in the reader and reveal their true nature. He does this mainly in two areas—attitudes towards nature and toward death.

Lucretius' own attitudes toward nature are complex. He argues at length that the natural world is not prepared for us by any gods, because there is too much wrong with it, and the poem closes with a horrific description of the ravages of the bubonic plague on Athens. Furthermore, nature has no sentience or purpose inherent in it—it is simply the result of the blind motions, reboundings, and entanglements of atoms. At the same time, Lucretius says that having the working of nature exposed to him fills him with a sort of 'divine pleasure' and 'shuddering.' (*De Rerum Natura* III 28-30). In fact,

Lucretius often describes nature in religious terms. The *De Rerum Natura* opens with a hymn of praise to nature as Venus and a request for her help. Later, he says,

We have all come from heavenly seed; we all
Have the same father, and our mother earth
Receives from him the fertilizing showers.
So pregnant, she brings forth the shining grain,
The trees that make us glad, the race of men,
The generations of wild beasts, the food
By which they feed, increase, and multiply.
She is rightly called our mother. (*De Rerum Natura* II 991-998)

But Lucretius is ambivalent about using this sort of imagery. Immediately after his most elaborate description of earth as a mother-goddess, he adds that we must be careful not to let religion infect and pollute us when using such metaphorical personifications, because the world is entirely insensate and ‘acts’ without purpose. (*De Rerum Natura* II 594-660) Lucretius wants to show that we can retain attitudes of awe toward nature, even if we do not have the usual sorts of religious beliefs about divine providence directing nature. In addition, by skillfully evoking such an attitude in his poetry, minus any teleological underpinnings, Lucretius hopes to direct the attitude toward its proper object—the natural world itself, in all its marvelous complexity—rather than allowing it to reinforce damaging, superstitious beliefs.

Lucretius pursues a similar project against the fear of death. Again, the main weapon in his therapeutic arsenal is rational argumentation—Lucretius tries to establish that death is annihilation, and thus that there is nothing to fear in death, since in death nobody exists to be either benefited or harmed. But in a remarkable passage that is reminiscent of the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, Lucretius argues that the various mythological afterlife tortures described by Homer and Hesiod are really projected versions of fears of pain in this life. One by one, he goes through the figures tormented in Hades and says that, even though no such afterlife sufferings literally exist, we can see earthly versions of them all around us:

Sisyphus, too, is here
In our own lives; we see him as the man
Bent upon power and office, who comes back
Gloomy and beaten after every vote.
To seek for power, such an empty thing,
And never gain it, suffering all the while,
This is to shove uphill the stubborn rock
Which over and over comes bouncing down again
To the flat levels where it started from. (*De Rerum Natura* III 995-1002)

Lucretius concludes his catalog by saying ‘Hell does exist on earth—in the life of fools.’ (*De Rerum Natura* III 1023) Once we have unmasked our fears of Hades and recognize that they really are just such projections, we can

stop worrying about nonexistent afterlife punishments and redirect our attention to avoiding pain and suffering in this life—the only life there is.

Lucretius is not an original philosopher, but he is still a tremendously important figure, both poetically and philosophically. Because almost all of the writings of Epicurus are lost to us, Lucretius is one of our main sources of information about Epicureanism. The rediscovery of *De Rerum Natura* in the Renaissance helped shape the birth of modern science. The *De Rerum Natura* was an inspiration for many thinkers who were forging a new, ‘mechanistic’ conception of nature against the dominant Aristotelianism of the medieval period.

Most of the particulars of the atomic theory that Lucretius expounds—the indivisibility of atoms, his accounts of vision and magnetism, etc.—have been subsequently disproven. Nonetheless, the basic world-view he so eloquently expresses—his rejection of an afterlife, his awe at beholding a complex world without purpose or plan, his trust that through the use of reason we can both discover the way the world works and attain blessedness—is still very much a live option today.

Suggestions for further reading

Humphries, Rolfe, trans. 1968. Lucretius. *The Way Things Are. The De Rerum Natura of Titus Lucretius Carus*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968.

There are a huge number of translations of the *De Rerum Natura*. But for those who want to experience (in English) Lucretius’ poetry as poetry, Humphries’ translation is best. Accessible, accurate, and powerful. (All translations of Lucretius in this entry are by Humphries.)

Johnson, W. R. 2000. *Lucretius and the Modern World*. London: Duckworth, 2000.

An introduction to the *De Rerum Natura* by an unabashed and enthusiastic apologist for Lucretius’ world-view, written in an engaging and accessible style. Johnson also gives a good overview of the reception and influence Lucretius has had from the 17th century until today. A very good read.

Sedley, David. 1998. *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A detailed study of Lucretius’ poetic debt to Empedocles, his philosophical debt to Epicurus, and how he combined the two to construct the *De Rerum Natura*. For those interested in the sources for the *De Rerum Natura*, this is the book to look at, although it’s aimed mainly at specialists.