

Lucretius and the philosophical use of literary persuasion Tim O'Keefe, Georgia State University

[Penultimate draft. Final version is in *Approaches to Lucretius: traditions and innovations in reading De Rerum Natura*, ed. Donncha O'Rourke. Cambridge University Press, 2020, 177-194. Please cite that version.]

Lucretius makes no pretence to producing original philosophical arguments—instead, he is presenting Epicurus' arguments in an attractive form in order to spread his healing gospel to an audience of Romans. So one of the primary focuses of attention when looking into Lucretius' use of his philosophical sources has been to discern what exactly those philosophical sources are. Obviously, the ultimate source of most of Lucretius' arguments is Epicurus himself, but this leaves open the question of Lucretius' proximate sources. Does he sometimes draw on later Epicurean texts, ones that debated the precise meaning of Epicurus' own doctrines and engaged in disputes with Academic skeptics and Stoics? Or does Lucretius draw exclusively on Epicurus himself?

In the first part of this chapter, I will review this *Quellenforschung* and argue that, in the case of the *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*), this debate will likely be inconclusive and fruitless, notwithstanding exciting new discoveries of texts from Herculaneum or elsewhere. In the second part of the chapter, I will turn to a consideration of how Lucretius, in the way he appropriates and presents his philosophical sources, might be considered original philosophically and not just poetically. Drawing a parallel with recent reconsideration of Cicero as an original philosopher, I will sketch out how Lucretius' presentation of his arguments is philosophically distinctive, even though the arguments themselves are derived from others.

Tradition: Lucretius' philosophical sources

The search for Lucretius' philosophical sources has a long history, but the touchstone for recent discussions is David Sedley's *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Sedley

1998), which argues that Lucretius' only philosophical source is Epicurus' *On Nature*. We can usefully divide the debate into two broad camps of opinion: that Lucretius is working exclusively from Epicurus' own texts (or, in Sedley's terms, 'Lucretius the fundamentalist'),¹ and that Lucretius also draws on later sources ('Lucretius the *au courant*').²

One can look into the question of Lucretius' sources for its own sake, just because one is curious as to what they are; but in theory, discovering Lucretius' sources could have intellectual value beyond merely satisfying this intellectual curiosity. Our understanding of an argument can be shaped by knowing the context in which it was produced.³ For instance, Lucretius argues that the world was not created by the gods for our benefit, because it is far too flawed (*DRN* 5.195-234, cf. 2.167-82). It is common and understandable to read this argument as a contribution to the 'Problem of Evil', i.e. as a challenge to the existence of God as traditionally understood in Judeo-Christian theology: a maximally great being, who is omnipotent, omniscient and all-good.⁴ We can legitimately ask how Lucretius' argument *would* apply to such a god, but we anachronistically distort the argument if we view it in itself as an attempt to show that such a god does not exist, because such a god was not part of the intellectual landscape in either Epicurus' or Lucretius' time. Instead, Plato's craftsman god of the *Timaeus* and the Stoics' immanent cosmic deity are wise and perfectly good, but they fall short of omnipotence, needing to exercise

I'd like to thank Donncha O'Rourke, Hal Thorsrud, and the readers for Cambridge University Press for their valuable feedback on this paper.

¹ Sedley 1998, esp. ch. 3 (pp. 62-93), is the primary exponent of the 'fundamentalist' position, although Furley 1966 is also important for debunking claims that Lucretius is responding to Stoic influence.

² See, e.g., Asmis 1982; Clay 1983; Schrijvers 1999.

³ A representative example of trying to do this in the case of Lucretius is Algra, Koenen and Schrijvers 1997.

⁴ For instance, the early church father Lactantius reports the Epicurean arguments in such a way (*Lactant. De ira dei* 13.20-22), and David Hume quotes Lactantius' report when he attributes the problem of evil to Epicurus (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10).

their power within the limitations of matter.⁵ If, then, we were able to ascertain (for instance) that one of Lucretius' arguments is aimed at the Stoics in particular, this might help improve our understanding of Stoic theology.

Before looking in detail at the content of the *DRN* itself, there is little reason to assign a higher prior probability to either the fundamentalist or *au courant* position. We have no reports on the sources for the *DRN*, either from Lucretius himself or others, and next to no information about Lucretius' life. The *DRN* itself shows that Lucretius was a devoted adherent of Epicurus familiar with the ways of Rome's upper classes,⁶ and he was plugged-in enough to the Roman *literati* that Cicero obtained a copy of his poem and admired its quality (*QFr.* 2.9.3). Even from this scant information, it seems more likely that Lucretius had some commerce and familiarity with other Epicureans of his time and place, and hence could have drawn upon their texts and engagement with other philosophical schools, rather than toiling in isolation with access to nothing but Epicurus' own texts. Also, Epicureanism stresses the importance of friendship with like-minded people in obtaining a pleasant life, and Lucretius cared enough about his wider society that he wrote the *DRN* in order to try to bring more people into the Epicurean fold. Although possible, it would be anomalous for a committed Epicurean with an evangelical streak to wall himself off from local Epicureans.⁷

⁵ For instance, when trying to reconcile God's providential care for us with the evils in the world, the Stoic Chrysippus claims that god made our skulls as (relatively) thin and fragile as they are because, if he had made them any thicker, we would be stupider (*Gell. NA* 7.1.1–13).

⁶ See Gale 1994: 89-90 for a brief review of the evidence that the poem is written 'in terms appropriate to a cultured and aristocratic audience'.

⁷ For more on Epicureanism around the time of Lucretius see Sedley 2009; for a list of Romans who were (or might have been) Epicureans and the evidence for their allegiance, see Castner 1988.

However, even if we grant this conjectural case for Lucretius' involvement with other contemporary Epicureans, it does not follow that he utilized any texts post-dating Epicurus. The proems in *DRN* show that Lucretius idolizes Epicurus, and, as James Warren notes, Lucretius does not seem particularly interested in extended dialectical engagement with other philosophical schools; rather, his goal is to put forward the saving message of Epicurus as effectively as he can, and he engages with others on only a limited basis where doing so helps advance Epicurus' own position.⁸ So even if Lucretius had access to more recent material and was aware of later Epicureans' disputes with the Stoics and Academic skeptics, it would be consistent with his aims to work exclusively with Epicurus' own texts when explaining Epicurean physics.

Turning to the *DRN* itself, the most obvious problem with ascertaining its sources is that we have access to almost none of the texts of either Epicurus or subsequent Epicureans that plausibly could be its sources to compare it against. The only complete texts by Epicurus we have on physics and celestial phenomena are the *Letter to Herodotus* and *Letter to Pythocles*, summary overviews too compressed to have been Lucretius' source. We have only bits and pieces recovered from Herculaneum of Epicurus' *magnum opus*, *On Nature*, and the text is for the most part highly fragmentary. The only later Epicurean for whom we have substantial texts is Philodemus, also recovered from Herculaneum. Although these texts are also incomplete and often fragmentary, we possess portions of several treatises that are in far better shape than what we currently have from Epicurus' *On Nature*.⁹ However, these treatises generally deal with

⁸ Warren 2007: 21-22. As Warren notes, this lack of engagement includes philosophers prior to Epicurus such as Plato and Theophrastus that Epicurus himself engaged with. The major exceptions are Lucretius' refutations of Heraclitus, Empedocles and Anaxagoras in *DRN* 1.635-920. I discuss them below.

⁹ See Gigante 1995 for a history of the recovery of the Herculaneum papyri. Some of the more complete and prominent treatises are Henry 2009, Konstan, Clay and Glad 1998 and Tsouna

ethical topics that aren't covered at any length by Lucretius. Moreover, given how extensively Lucretius reworks material for his own poetic ends, it would probably be challenging to conclude with confidence that Lucretius was working from some treatise, even if further portions of Epicurus' *On Nature* or of Philodemus dealing with the same topics as *DRN* were deciphered to the point where we could compare them.¹⁰

It is worth noting that even if we could make a match between a passage of the *DRN* and a potential source text, this may not settle the overall question of whether Lucretius is an Epicurean 'fundamentalist' or philosophically *au courant*. Let us presume for a moment that we were able to match a stretch of the *DRN* to a newly discovered and deciphered text from Epicurus' *On Nature*. That would be exciting, but it would not prove that Lucretius draws exclusively from Epicurus throughout the *DRN*.¹¹ The comparable scenario regarding Philodemus initially appears a little different: if we found a text of Philodemus that closely followed what Lucretius was saying, wouldn't that be enough to show that Lucretius at least

2012, with facing Greek and English text. See Essler 2017 for an excellent compilation of modern editions of Philodemus.

¹⁰ Challenging, but not impossible. The publication of the Strasbourg papyrus of Empedocles led David Sedley to issue a limited retraction (Sedley 2003b) of his earlier claim that Empedocles is only a poetic and not a philosophical source for Lucretius, as Lucretius does draw from Empedocles in a few places in his account of biology. In doing so, Sedley shows the careful linguistic work needed to ascertain that Lucretius is drawing from a particular text.

¹¹ Similar considerations apply to Sedley's claim that the overall organization of the *DRN* mirrors the organization of the first 15 books of Epicurus' *On Nature*. (See chapter 4 of Sedley 1998, pp. 94-133, for Sedley's reconstruction of the overall plan of *On Nature*, and chapter 5, pp. 134-165, for his argument that Lucretius follows *On Nature*.) Sedley's case is conjectural—both because we are often unsure of the exact contents of *On Nature*, as Sedley admits, and also because Sedley claims that Lucretius was part-way through a radical reorganization of *DRN* upon his death to explain why the *DRN* closely follows the order of *On Nature* in some places and not in others. However, even if we grant that the initial organization of *DRN* as a whole was modelled after *On Nature* prior to a partially-completed reworking of its structure, that is consistent with Lucretius at particular points in the poem—e.g., in his discussions of why the world is not providentially organized for our benefit, or of the origins of species and the development of society—drawing upon other texts.

sometimes uses a later Epicurean as a source? Before drawing that conclusion, however, we would first need to rule out the possibility that each of them is drawing independently from a third source, such as Epicurus.

In the near-absence of such potential source texts, another way of trying to ascertain Lucretius' sources is to infer what they are from the content of the *DRN* alone. For instance, let us imagine that in his description of perception, Lucretius had included a detailed refutation of the doctrine that some (but not all) of our sense-impressions accurately and infallibly represent the objects they are from, and that such 'graspable' impressions form the foundation for our knowledge. We could conclude that such a refutation of a Stoic theory would have been drawn from later Epicurean polemics against the Stoics, even if we did not have access to the source Lucretius was using.

However, the *DRN* as we actually have it contains no such passages. It used to be thought that many of Lucretius' arguments were aimed against the Stoics, but David Furley has shown convincingly that these arguments could equally be aimed at philosophers preceding Epicurus (philosophers from whom the Stoics themselves probably drew).¹² For instance, Lucretius' argument that the flaws in the world show that it was not made by the gods for our benefit could apply in equal measure to the god of the Stoics and to the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, and we have good reason to believe that the *DRN* specifically engages with the *Timaeus* in places.¹³ Likewise, Lucretius' anti-teleological arguments that organs such as the heart have no function and that their apparent functionality should instead be attributed to a process of natural selection

¹² Furley 1966.

¹³ See Solmsen 1953 for an argument that Lucretius' account of the growth and decline of the cosmos draws upon and modifies the cosmology and biology of the *Timaeus*, and De Lacy 1983 for many other examples of Lucretius' engagement with the *Timaeus* and other Platonic dialogues.

(4.823-857; 5.783-877) apply equally against the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle. To give a non-Stoic example, Lucretius argues that anybody who does not have confidence in the trustworthiness of the senses would have no basis for action (4.500–510). We know that precisely this charge was made against the Academic skeptic Arcesilaus by Colotes, a younger compatriot of Epicurus (Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1120C-D). But Epicurus himself made the same argument against Democriteans whose denial of the existence of sensible qualities like sweetness led them also to deny that the senses were trustworthy.¹⁴ As we have it, Lucretius' argument could be drawn from either Colotes or from Epicurus, or again from some later Epicurean writing against the academic skeptic Carneades.

Given Lucretius' goals and approach in the *DRN*, absence of evidence for an *au courant* Lucretius should not be taken as evidence for his absence. As James Warren notes, Lucretius' overriding goal is to have his readers accept Epicurus' saving message, not to give an overview of the merits and demerits of various philosophical positions, and 'he will consider un-Epicurean ideas only if by doing so he can clarify the Epicurean truth or head off dangerous misunderstandings'.¹⁵ Lucretius very seldom refers to philosophers other than Epicurus—besides referring to Democritus on three occasions (3.370-95, 3.1039-41, 5.621-36), his only extended engagement is with Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras, each of whose physical theories Lucretius brings in for (relatively) detailed refutation in *DRN* 1.635-920.¹⁶ This exception to Lucretius' general practice can be explained by noting, as Warren does, that they represent 'the range of alternative conceptions of the fundamental elements of the universe'— i.e., monist,

¹⁴ A recent overview of the texts and issues is Lee 2011; see O'Keefe 1997 for my own interpretation.

¹⁵ Warren 2007: 21.

¹⁶ For the Latin text with a detailed commentary in Italian, see Piazzzi 2005.

finite pluralist, and extreme pluralist—and that refuting their views suffices, in Lucretius' eyes, for refuting similar ontologies.¹⁷ His usual procedure against other philosophers is to issue more generic 'catch-all' arguments, as Gordon Campbell dubs them—ones that can target both Platonist and Stoic providentialist theologies, teleological biologies of various stripes, and the positions of all of those who cast doubt on the senses as sources of knowledge.¹⁸ Given this procedure, we would equally expect to find the sorts of arguments we do find in the *DRN*, whether or not Lucretius is drawing from Epicurus himself or from a later source.

Similar considerations of Lucretius' purposes undercut one of David Sedley's positive arguments for Lucretius either being ignorant of or deliberately ignoring all philosophical and scientific developments after Epicurus.¹⁹ Sedley notes that Lucretius' argument regarding the nature and location of the mind entirely ignores medical advances after Epicurus' time, which had established that, if the mind has some seat in the body, that seat is in the head and not the chest. In fact, Lucretius specifically says that it would be equally ridiculous to suppose that the mind is in the head as in the feet (*DRN* 3.788-793). Unlike Lucretius, later Epicureans such as Demetrius of Laconia struggled with how to reconcile these advances with their respect for Epicurus' authority.²⁰

This argument does have some weight, but I am not entirely convinced. First of all, even if we concede that Lucretius was ignorant of this particular issue, which had been debated by some contemporary Epicureans, I do not think we have enough information on how prominent

¹⁷ Warren 2007: 27.

¹⁸ Campbell 1999.

¹⁹ Sedley 1998: 68-72.

²⁰ For more on Epicurean reverence of their master and how it led to an unwillingness to contradict him, see Sedley 1989b. However, this reverence did not make later Epicureanism philosophically stagnant, as demonstrated by the papers in Fish and Sanders 2011.

this issue was in the general educated public to conclude that somebody ignorant of it must thereby have been ignorant of all philosophical and scientific advances post-Epicurus. (For example, Cicero, who never seemed to miss an opportunity to ridicule Epicurus for his mulish ignorance and later Epicureans for their slavish devotion to their master, did not criticize contemporary Epicureans for insisting that the *animus* is located in the chest.) And if Lucretius was aware of this debate, it is one that contemporary Epicureans were apparently divided on how to resolve, and getting into the weeds of such an unresolved intraparty dispute would derail Lucretius from his primary goal, which is to establish that the mind is a material organ and hence mortal. So if Lucretius decided simply to ignore one contentious contemporary dispute for that reason, this would not give much evidence of an across-the-board policy to ignore all post-Epicurus material.

So the question of Lucretius' philosophical sources is inconclusive and will probably remain so, because the evidence we have and that we might obtain is equally likely on either the fundamentalist or *au courant* positions. But I think that little hangs on answering the question, other than satisfying our intellectual curiosity. Let us imagine that, because of further discoveries from Herculaneum, we are able to establish conclusively the source for Lucretius' anti-providential argument from the flaws of the world—that it is drawn either from a stretch of Epicurus' *On Nature* that had been engaging with Plato's *Timaeus*, or from one of the recent Epicurean handbooks of theology that Cicero used when composing *De Natura Deorum*, which have the Stoics as one of their main targets. What difference would it make? In either case, Lucretius is still putting forward a rather general argument against the notion that our world is the creation of a god who is powerful, wise and loving, which is precisely where we stood before the discovery. The 'catch-all' character of Lucretius' arguments, which makes it difficult to

ascertain their sources, also means that finding their precise sources doesn't much matter for understanding them. It also means that, even if we were able to establish that a recent Epicurean handbook was the source of Lucretius' arguments, this discovery would probably add little to our understanding of Stoic theology.

Furthermore, even if we could establish that Epicurus himself is Lucretius' only philosophical source, it does not follow that Lucretius' arguments target only contemporaries and predecessors of Epicurus. As an educated Roman, Lucretius was surely aware of Stoicism, and there are some places in the *DRN* that are plausibly taken to refer to the Stoics.²¹ At 5.22-54, Lucretius favourably compares Epicurus' revelations to the deeds of Heracles, who was one of the heroes to the Stoics. At 2.600-660, Lucretius first enumerates the ways in which the Earth has been regarded as a divine Mother before warning against the dangers of allegorically applying traditional myths to natural processes, a Stoic practice which contemporary Epicureans criticized, as in *Cic. Nat. D.* 1.40. Lucretius' audience also knew of the Stoics and the Academic skeptics, and this knowledge will have mediated their reception of the *DRN*. In that context, if Lucretius came across an argument in Epicurus that criticized Plato's *Timaeus* based on the flaws of the world, and used that argument in his own poem when arguing that the world is not the creation of a benevolent deity, then Epicurus' argument thereby becomes a rebuttal of Stoic theology, too. Likewise, if Lucretius drew upon an 'inaction' argument against skepticism by Epicurus, one that was directed at skeptical atomists like Metrodorus in particular, that argument would thereby also become an argument against the Academic skeptics.²²

²¹ These examples are from Campbell 1999. See also Gee in Ch. 9 of this volume.

²² Fowler 2000: 140 makes a similar point. See Fowler 2000 for more on the relationship between source-texts and reception in understanding Lucretius' literary references.

Innovation: Lucretius and the psychology of philosophical persuasion

In this section, I turn from the question of what precisely Lucretius' philosophical sources were, to the question of how Lucretius' use of these sources in his poetry may establish him as a distinctive philosopher in his own right. Lucretius has been considered a great poet, and a vital source for the philosophy of Epicurus, but not as a philosopher in his own right. The obvious reason for not considering Lucretius as a philosopher is that he says he is indeed following in the footsteps of his master Epicurus and transmitting his doctrines (*DRN* 5.55-56, 3.3-4). But I do not think that this bars us from considering Lucretius as a distinctive philosopher. Before making my case regarding Lucretius, let me briefly sketch out an instructive parallel case, that of Cicero.

Like Lucretius, Cicero was long treated mainly as source of information for the arguments and positions of other philosophers, such as Arcesilaus, Carneades, the Stoics and the Epicureans. As with Lucretius, this reductive assessment of Cicero as a philosopher arises from his claim that his philosophical dialogues did not contain much original argumentation (*Att.* 12.52.3).²³ Instead, when composing them, he used the handbooks of various schools as his source for arguments, translating them into Latin and supplying a dramatic setting and conversation between spokesmen representing the various schools.²⁴ But there has been an increasing trend towards treating Cicero as a significant philosopher in his own right. This trend has developed in at least three distinct ways.

²³ Striker 1995 contains a good summary of the reasons for not thinking highly of Cicero as a philosopher, along with useful pushback against them, and Schmidt 1978-9 gives an account of how Cicero fell into philosophical disrepute, after previous esteem, on account of his unoriginality.

²⁴ It is worth noting that Cicero himself (correctly) considered his coinages for Greek philosophical terms—'teaching philosophy to speak Latin' as he put it (*Tusc.* 2.3)—to be among his most important contributions.

The first way is to claim that Cicero has staked out significant philosophical positions and arguments of his own, and not merely transmitted the positions and arguments of others. In his *On Laws*, for instance, Cicero presents a theory about the relationship of law to ethics that is indebted to the Stoics but is still very much his own, and one that has a significant impact on the Natural Law tradition.²⁵ This line of argument is not promising when it comes to Lucretius, as he says at *DRN* 3.1-30 that he is not trying to compete with Epicurus in discovering anything new, but is transmitting the golden truths that have been revealed to him by Epicurus, his ‘father’ (*9 tu pater es*).²⁶

The second way is to claim that while Cicero’s basic philosophical positions may often be drawn from others, if we attend to the specific manner in which he articulates them, given his own social standing and interests, we shall see that the exact content of these positions is distinctive. For instance, Cicero harshly criticizes the Epicureans for subordinating virtue to pleasure, and the basic shape of his critique is appropriated from the Stoics.²⁷ However, Pamela Gordon has argued that, for Cicero, *virtus* is not merely generic human ‘virtue’, but a particularly Roman ideal linked, both etymologically and conceptually, to *manliness*. For Cicero, identifying pain as the greatest evil is not merely immoral but ‘emasculating and effeminate’.²⁸ For

²⁵ A good recent paper on this topic is Asmis 2008b. For an excellent recent example of presenting Cicero’s philosophy as a whole on its own terms, without attempting to titrate out what is original from what is not, see Woolf 2015.

²⁶ Volk 2002: 107-112 argues that Lucretius is ‘paradoxically’ claiming not to compete with Epicurus *as a poet*. She cites the imagery used in 3.3-8, comparing Epicurus to a swan and a racehorse, animals symbolizing poetic activity. But the wider context of *DRN* 3.1-30 makes it clear that Lucretius is praising Epicurus for illuminating the blessings of life (3.2) and as a discoverer whose reasoning proclaims the nature of things and drives away our terrors (3.9-17), and it is in this arena that Lucretius is not competing with Epicurus but merely imitating him.

²⁷ He criticizes the Epicureans on this basis in many places, but the most sustained critique is in *Fin.* 2, especially *Fin.* 2.45-77.

²⁸ Gordon 2012: 111 in a chapter (pp. 109-38) on Cicero’s gendered polemics against the Epicureans.

Lucretius, this line of inquiry is more promising than the first: for instance, it could be argued plausibly that in the particular way he depicts the horrors of civil strife (1.29-43, 3.48-93, 5.1120-50, 6.1282-6), Lucretius puts a distinctive spin on the Epicurean ideal of security from danger.

The final way is to look not at the particular arguments and positions within Cicero's works, but at the literary form he uses to present them. Cicero writes dialogues in which the spokesmen for various philosophical schools put forward their arguments on topics such as the nature of the gods and the highest good, and while these dialogues consist mainly of long stretches of exposition, the participants do get to question and criticize one another. Cicero's use of the dialogue form is not merely a convenient and user-friendly way of transmitting various arguments to his Roman audience. It reflects his own conviction as an Academic skeptic that a person should engage in inquiry by undogmatically considering all of the pertinent arguments on a topic. Cicero also often puts himself within his dialogues as a character, where he expresses his own opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the positions articulated—not in order to convince his audience to agree with him by an appeal to his authority, but to show that, as an undogmatic Academic, he is still free to give his provisional assent to whatever seems to him to be the most reasonable position after engaging in inquiry. If we look merely at the arguments and positions within Cicero and ignore his manner of presenting them, we will miss something important about Cicero as a distinctive philosopher.²⁹

This last is the kind of case I will pursue in respect of the *DRN*: the way Lucretius uses poetry to present Epicurean argument is as *philosophically* significant as the way Cicero uses the

²⁹ For a good brief explanation of Cicero's use of the dialogue form along these lines see Annas and Woolf 2001: x-xvii. For in-depth consideration of Cicero's use of the dialogue form see Schofield 2008.

dialogue to present the arguments of various schools. As is well known, Lucretius himself explains his choice of poetry to express his arguments by comparing himself to a doctor (*DRN* 4.10-25): in order to persuade a child to drink some nasty-tasting medicine, a doctor will smear the lip of the cup with honey; likewise, says Lucretius, many people find attending to philosophical arguments unpleasant, and so he coats the healing message of Epicurus in poetry in order to make it go down more easily. Working through explanations of how magnets work or demonstrating the atomic basis for hunger can be tedious and difficult, but the aesthetic pleasure of reading well-crafted poetry helps keep you going. On this model, the persuasive work is done entirely by the arguments, with the poetry playing only an ancillary role of helping you attend to the arguments.

However, this view of what Lucretius accomplishes with his poetry risks selling him short. The *DRN* is filled with literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion. Without giving a complete catalogue of these, let us note a few salient examples before considering their philosophical significance:

Using vivid imagery to evoke emotions

One of the primary tasks of the *DRN* is to get its readers to abandon their allegiance to traditional Greco-Roman religion. The opening of the poem contains a full-throated condemnation of the evils such religion has caused (1.80-101). But Lucretius does not merely list these evils and explain how religion causes them; instead, he gives a heartrending description of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon in order to appease the anger of Artemis. This description evokes pity for Iphigenia and indignation at Agamemnon, so that the reader shares Lucretius'

outrage.³⁰ Another example occurs in Lucretius' description of sex. The Epicureans hold that sexual intercourse never helped anybody, and a person is lucky if they are not harmed by it (Diog. Laert. 10.118). Lucretius condemns in particularly strong terms romantic infatuation, which distorts a person's judgement and leads to the neglect of duty. In the course of his denunciation, Lucretius presents a disturbing description of frenzied, infatuated lovers having sex, in which they intermingle their saliva and crush lips with teeth, making their consummation seem repellent and disgusting (4.1037-191).³¹

Raising and redeploying powerful cultural tropes

Lucretius uses a wide range of metaphors in his eulogies of Epicurus. One of the more surprising is that Lucretius describes the theoretical intellectual activities of Epicurus, who investigated the causes of natural phenomena, in terms of the deeds of epic heroes (1.62-79): when we were grovelling in the dust under the weight of traditional religion, Epicurus dared to raise his eyes to challenge it. He boldly burst through the gates of nature and roamed throughout the cosmos in order to cast down traditional religion at our feet and liberate us from it.³² Elsewhere Lucretius maintains that what Epicurus has done for us is far greater than any of the deeds of Heracles (5.22-54). In these passages, then, Lucretius evokes the awe and admiration we feel at the courageous actions of epic heroes and redirects them toward a quite different object. Another

³⁰ Morrison 2013 shows how Lucretius evokes emotions here and in other passages describing death, and how the evoked emotions are supposed to help persuade his readers to accept the Epicurean message.

³¹ That Lucretius condemns romantic love and depicts the sex of infatuated lovers in a repellent way does not entail that he similarly condemns all forms of love or sex. See Arenson 2016; Brown 1987: 60-100, and the sources in n. 43.

³² For detailed consideration of this metaphor see Buchheit 1971. For further discussion of this passage in this volume see Shearin in Ch. 7, Asmis in Ch. 12 and Kennedy in Ch. 13.

surprising comparison by Lucretius is his extended description of the earth as a mother goddess, awesome and worthy of respect—a metaphor he defends using, even though he immediately adds that the metaphor is dangerous and literally false, as the earth is not divine and not sentient (2.594-660). Here, then, Lucretius evokes the feelings of awe people have towards the earth conceived of as a mother-goddess and redirects them towards the earth as understood by the Epicureans—as a non-sentient and non-purposive conglomeration of matter.³³

Ridicule

Besides eliminating the fear of the gods, the other main task of the *DRN* is eliminating the fear of death. This is done by showing that death is annihilation, and hence not bad for us. One of Lucretius' targets is the Pythagorean and Platonic theory of there being a soul which survives the death of the body and lives again when it unites with a new body, in a cycle of reincarnation. Lucretius presents a wide array of arguments against the theory, but he also mocks it. He says that it is ridiculous to imagine innumerable immortal souls gathering around a pair of rutting animals, jostling one another in order to be the first one in when new life is conceived; he then suggests that maybe the souls avoid this conflict by agreeing to a 'first come, first served' policy (3.776-83). Here, Lucretius would discredit the theory of transmigration by making it look silly.³⁴

³³ For a much more in-depth treatment of Lucretius' usage of these mythological tropes that partially overlaps with the approach taken in this chapter, see Gale 1994, esp. 129-155. See Taylor 2016 for a detailed examination of how Lucretius uses allusions to comedy and tragedy in the theatre, including the sacrifice of Iphigenia, in his mission to relieve his readers of false and damaging beliefs.

³⁴ See Gellar 2012 for much more on Lucretius' use of ridicule and satire.

That Lucretius uses such literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion is, I trust, uncontroversial. But this still leaves open the question of their philosophical significance. It might be thought that Lucretius' use of non-rational methods of persuasion such as appealing to emotions and ridicule is non-philosophical, or perhaps even anti-philosophical. After all, the appeal to pity is a fallacy, and concluding that the doctrine of transmigration is false because a mocking and unfair depiction of it makes it seem silly would be invalid.

If this charge that Lucretius is anti-philosophical is warranted, he would be guilty of the same intellectual crime that Martha Nussbaum accuses the Epicureans generally of committing.³⁵ Nussbaum claims that the Epicureans are willing to use effective but irrational methods of persuasion. This willingness is based on their therapeutic conception of argumentation, combined with their hedonistic conception of the human good. Epicurus holds that philosophy produces mental health (*SV* 54), and the Epicureans compare philosophy to medicine, as we have seen above: just as the value of medicine derives entirely from its effectiveness in driving out bodily disease, so too the value of a philosophical argument derives entirely from its effectiveness in driving out diseases of the mind (*Porph. Ad Marc.* 31). But the Epicureans conceive of happiness as consisting in freedom from pain, especially freedom from fear, regret and other forms of mental turmoil. Unlike Aristotle, the Epicureans do not think that being rational is *per se* a good thing for a human being, and so an Epicurean has no reason to respect the rationality of her interlocutors, if using irrational means of persuasion is effective at promoting their peace of mind.³⁶ Nussbaum claims that, if we look at the actual practices

³⁵ Nussbaum 1986.

³⁶ Similar considerations underlie the Epicurean doctrine of 'multiple explanations.' To have peace of mind, we must have absolute confidence that cosmological and meteorological phenomena are not due to the will the gods, and physics supplies us with the arguments we need to exclude the gods from the cosmos (*Ep. Hdt.* 76–8). However, knowing the exact explanation

recommended and followed by the Epicureans, we will see that they are in fact willing to violate the norms of rational discourse for the sake of therapeutic effectiveness.³⁷

But a willingness to use rationally dubious methods of persuasion, even if it initially seems warranted, does not fit with other important commitments of the Epicureans, and of Lucretius in particular. One of Lucretius' repeated refrains is that we must study the underlying principles of nature in order to dispel the terrifying darkness that covers our minds (*DRN* 1.146–8, 2.59–61, 3.91–3, 6.39–41),³⁸ and Epicurus thinks that only the wise person is unshakably persuaded of anything (Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1117F). So if I believe that transmigration is false, but I have that conviction only because a mocking description of the cycle of rebirth made the doctrine seem silly, such a conviction will not serve as the secure foundation for the peace of mind that I need. Instead, I must understand the reasons why the *animus* is material, and hence mortal, which will include understanding the reasons for rejecting the doctrine of transmigration. Lucretius does not merely mock the doctrine of transmigration; he also gives arguments against it.

The question, then, is whether we can reconcile Lucretius' use of the literary and

of these phenomena does not much matter, as long as we know that there is *some* sort of natural explanation (*Ep. Hdt.* 79–80; *Ep. Pyth.* 85–8). Because of this, the Epicureans are content to go through lists of possible explanations of things like eclipses without settling on which one is correct (*Ep. Pyth.* 92–115; *DRN* 5.592–770), as knowledge is not *per se* valuable. For more, see Hankinson 2013.

³⁷ Some of these practices include threats of shunning, informing on wrongdoers, and encouragement of an uncritical adulation of authority figures. Nussbaum's main source for such practices is Philodemus' treatise *On Frank Criticism*, although she draws upon Epicurus himself and Lucretius too. Tsouna 2007: 91–118 offers a useful overview of Philodemus' treatise, and argues against some of Nussbaum's characterizations of Philodemus' therapeutic practices.

³⁸ I see no need to explain the repetition of these lines by saying that the *DRN* is unfinished. Instead, Lucretius deliberately deploys these lines as a *leitmotif* to reaffirm the fundamental justification for the poem as a whole. On these lines and those which precede see also Taylor in Ch. 3 and Kennedy in Ch. 13 of this volume.

rhetorical methods of persuasion outlined above with his insistence that we need to have a reasoned understanding of the workings of the world in order to secure happiness. Happily, I think that Epicurean ethical views generally, and Lucretius' views on human psychology in particular, enable precisely this reconciliation.

The Epicureans believe that, as members of a sick society, we have absorbed false beliefs and misguided attitudes that make us suffer. We think that money and social status are the keys to happiness, and we envy the unscrupulous businessman who manages to get ahead. We revere jealous and capricious gods who are not worthy of such reverence. Lucretius adds to this the observation that we do not know ourselves well, that we are often driven by subconscious beliefs and desires. The man who recoils in horror at the thought of his body being torn limb from limb by a pack of wild dogs may believe that he believes that death is annihilation, but his horror shows that unconsciously he still has some unacknowledged belief that a part of him survives his death (*DRN* 3.870-893). Another man is bored, restless, and dissatisfied, dashing back and forth from his mansion to his country home—he does not know the cause of his illness, an illness rooted in his fear of death (*DRN* 3.1053-1075).³⁹

These false beliefs and misguided attitudes, ones that are often subconscious, get in the way of accepting the healing message of Epicurus. Lucretius himself worries that Memmius might view Epicureanism as impious and sinful—and Epicureanism does indeed run counter to popular Roman views on the nature of the gods and the place of pleasure in the good life (*DRN* 1.80-3). I propose that Lucretius uses literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion to counter such beliefs and attitudes so that his reader will then be open to the arguments he presents. Viewed in this way, these methods do not displace argumentation; instead, they work together

³⁹ For more on the topic of Lucretius on unconscious motivation, see Jope 1983.

with it. Let me briefly discuss how this would work in the examples I have given above.

A typical Roman, even if they do not believe in the literal truth of all of the traditional stories about the gods, probably has a reflexive and deep-grained reverence for the gods as traditionally depicted.⁴⁰ They will be aware of the mythical stories such as Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia, but they've never been bothered much by them. (The same may be said in our culture of Yahweh ordering the Jews to commit genocide against the Canaanites.) In order to break through this harmful cultural conditioning, Lucretius vividly portrays what this mythical story really involves, in order to bring home its horror. The emotional reactions of pity and indignation that Lucretius' poetry produces are apt, and they do not produce an ungrounded and irrational belief in the evils that religion causes. Instead, they help counter an irrational complacency that the reader had before, a culturally induced deadening of their sensibilities.

Similar considerations can explain Lucretius' mockery of transmigration. Many people probably approach the doctrine of transmigration with a misplaced sense of respect and reverence. The idea that the soul could move from life to life can seem sublime, and befitting the dignity of the soul. Making fun of the doctrine helps to deflate this misguided sense of awe, lessening a person's emotional attachment to the doctrine, and hence rendering them more open to the arguments Lucretius offers against it.

In the case of romantic love, maudlin popular celebrations of it will lead people to view it

⁴⁰ The religious positions of Romans at this time were a complicated mix, and picking out typical religious views is not easy. See Gale 1994: 85-98 for more on the topic. She concludes that belief in the literal truth of 'superstitious' myths regarding the gods may have been widespread among the lower classes, although it is hard to tell, but seemed to be relatively rare among the elite. However, even the elites generally regarded historical myths (e.g., about the deeds of the founders of Rome) as accurate. But even among the elite, the traditional stories regarding the gods were generally treated with respect as an important part of civic *religio*. Lucretius would have been strongly opposed both to a belief in the literal truth of such myths and to an attitude of respect towards such myths as cultural touchstones.

with a sentimental attachment, and a person in the throes of infatuation may even think of the consummation of their love in quasi-divine terms, as in Aristophanes' myth of erotic reunification in the *Symposium*. Lucretius' harsh and debunking depiction of infatuated lovers as frenzied and dissatisfied animals acts as a corrective to such attitudes.⁴¹

There is also a broad strain of anti-intellectualism in Greek and Roman culture, which often celebrates virile men of action and accomplishment, while pitying the impractical philosopher with his head in the clouds. Callicles' denunciation of philosophy as unfitting for a grown man (Pl. *Grg.* 484c-486d) and the story of Thales falling into a well as he was gazing at the stars (Diog. Laert. 2.4-5, Pl. *Tht.* 174a) exemplify such an attitude. For Lucretius, this gets things deeply wrong: while he would have some sympathy for criticism of otherworldly philosophers who disdain the material world, the intellectual work of Epicurus has a tremendous practical impact. Accordingly, in his poetry Lucretius evokes the trope of the epic hero and redirects the admiration it elicits to a more appropriate object.

Finally, Lucretius' depiction of the earth as mother-goddess is only one of a number of passages in which he surprisingly deploys the figures of traditional religion or otherwise personifies nature: the most conspicuous example in the invocation of Venus at the start of the poem (1.1-43); in Book 3, nature herself chastises those who fear death (3.931-77). Of course, Lucretius is doing multiple things by deploying these images, and he need not have a single set of purposes across all of these passages. But one purpose he might have, in line with the view I have been sketching here, is to help convince his reader that atomism need not lead to the disenchantment of nature.

⁴¹ For detailed (and contrasting) assessments of Lucretius' condemnation of romantic love, see Nussbaum 1994: 140-91 and Gordon 2002.

Many people view nature with a combination of wonder, awe and fear. Unless we have a proper account of the nature of things, these feelings can be dangerous, leading us in our ignorance to attribute the workings of the world to the gods (*DRN* 5.1183-240). For most of his audience, these feelings are now bound up with false religion or with viewing nature anthropomorphically. While Lucretius argues that the earth and celestial bodies are not sentient or divine (5.110-45), he shares his audience's feelings of wonder before nature and thinks they are perfectly appropriate. At *DRN* 2.1030-7, Lucretius says that nothing more marvellous than the spectacle of the sun, moon and stars can be imagined, but familiarity has deadened us to its wonders, and at *DRN* 3.28-30 he says that having the workings of the world revealed to him by Epicurus fills him with a 'divine pleasure' (*divina voluptas*) and a 'shuddering' or 'trembling awe' (*horror*).⁴² By evoking the feelings of awe bound up with traditional tropes like viewing the earth as our mother, and transferring them to the dancing of atoms in the void, Lucretius helps blunt one possible source of resistance to accepting Epicureanism: the sense that the Epicurean view of the world is cold, mechanical and shorn of wonder.⁴³ To evoke these feelings in the course of explaining the Epicurean worldview is much more effective than just giving an argument for the conclusion that there is no impropriety in believing that the heavenly bodies are insentient and at the same time beholding them with awe.

Whether Epicurus is Lucretius' only philosophical source, or he draws upon others, the way in which he uses his philosophical sources is informed by an understanding of human psychology and of the point of philosophical argumentation. As noted above, Epicurus stresses

⁴² On the sublime in these and similar passages see further O'Rourke in this volume.

⁴³ For more on this topic, see O'Keefe 2003: 57-60. Good overall considerations of Lucretius' non-theistic conception of the 'sublime', and how it connects to the history of the sublime, are Most 2012 and Porter 2007.

that the point of philosophical arguments is to help heal people from the psychic diseases of false beliefs, empty desires, and destructive emotions. Philodemus, in his *On Frank Speech*, discusses in detail how an Epicurean pedagogue will take into account a person's particular psychological profile when interacting with them.⁴⁴ In his *On Anger* he says that sometimes imagery is more effective therapeutically than argumentation: a person prone to harmful bouts of anger may not appreciate how badly off they are if their philosophical 'doctor' merely reasons to them about the effects of anger, whereas if the doctor brings the badness of anger before their eyes via a vivid depiction of its effects, he will make them eager to be treated.⁴⁵

But Epicurus' *On Nature* and the works we have of Philodemus are standard philosophical treatises. Philodemus describes how a pedagogue may use imagery as a tool of persuasion, but he doesn't employ this tool much in what we have of his writing. Epicurus does show some sensitivity for communicating his ideas effectively to a wide audience: the *Principal Doctrines* are handy for memorizing especially important points of Epicurean dogma, and Epicurus notes that the *Letter to Herodotus* was composed as a summary of the main points of Epicurean physics for those unable to work through the long treatises (*Ep. Hdt.* 35-6). Yet the *Letter to Herodotus* is a strictly unadorned presentation of doctrines and arguments, and moreover one that is at points desperately obscure for any audience of beginners. In his use of literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion alongside his argumentation, Lucretius alone among the Epicureans shows a sensitivity for needing to present his arguments in a way that also

⁴⁴ For instance, he will have to decide whether to use mild or stringent reproofs and how much praise to mix in alongside criticism, and these decisions will be based on both his experience of how a person's age, social standing, and gender effect the way they react to criticism, and on his knowledge of the individual. For more detail, see Tsouna 2007: 91-125.

⁴⁵ *De ira* IV 4-19. For more on this technique, see Tsouna 2007: 204-9, and more generally on the treatise *On Anger*, pp. 195-238.

takes into account the biases, stereotypes, and other psychological factors that hinder his audience from accepting the healing gospel of Epicurus. In this respect, the *DRN* is a more effective embodiment of Epicureanism than anything written by Epicurus.

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