

The Epicureanism of Lucretius

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What is distinctive about Lucretius's version of Epicureanism? The answer might appear to be "nothing," for two reasons. First, Epicureanism in general is doctrinally conservative, with followers of Epicurus claiming to follow his authority. Second, Lucretius in particular claims to be merely transmitting the arguments of his beloved master Epicurus in a pleasing manner. He is eager to extol his poetic accomplishments in presenting these arguments, but specifically claims that the arguments themselves are not his own.

I will argue that these considerations do not prevent *De Rerum Natura* from presenting a distinct version of Epicureanism. Its arguments in physics are almost certainly drawn from Epicurus himself, either directly or as mediated by later Epicurean sources. But in the examples Lucretius uses to illustrate these arguments, as well as in his descriptions of things like the fear of death and the formation of society, Lucretius delivers unexpected insights into human psychology, ones that are not clearly present in the other sources we have on Epicureanism. Furthermore, the way in which Lucretius presents his arguments can rightly be considered original philosophically and not just poetically.

1. *Obstacles to Considering Lucretius a Distinctive Philosopher*

While Lucretius is one of our main sources on Epicureanism, he has not been much studied as a philosopher in his own right. This neglect is understandable. Later Epicureans regarded Epicurus not merely as a person with some important insights, but as the savior of

humanity, and they wished to say nothing that would contradict him.¹ Medical advances after Epicurus's time established that, if the mind has a bodily seat, it is in the head and not the chest, as Epicurus had said. Rather than simply admitting that Epicurus had been mistaken on this specific issue, later Epicureans struggled with how to reconcile these advances with their respect for Epicurus' authority.² And Lucretius proclaims of Epicurus, "you are our father and the discoverer of truth: you supply us with fatherly precepts; and from your pages, illustrious master, like the bees which in flowerful vales sip each bloom, we sip on each golden saying – golden and ever most worthy of eternal life" (Lucr. 3.9–13).³

However, from the mere fact that later Epicureans claim to be faithful to Epicurus, it does not follow that they have nothing distinctive to say. Later Epicureans had to contend with philosophers Epicurus did not. For instance, Philodemus (c. 110–c. 30 BCE) grappled with the Stoics on the basis for inductive generalizations in his treatise *On Signs*, and Colotes (fl. c. 310–260 BCE) argued that the Academic skeptics destroyed the basis for action. Also, it's not as if every thing Epicurus said was entirely clear or that he had definitively settled every question. Epicureans vigorously disagreed about how to properly understand Epicurus's doctrines and how to apply them to specific cases. For instance, at *Fin.* 1.65-70 Cicero relates that various groups of Epicureans advanced three different accounts of the origins of friendship and the way in which a friend could be said to love his friend as much as himself, and rival factions of

¹ For more on Epicurean reverence of their master and how it led to an unwillingness to contradict him, see Sedley (1989).

² Sedley (1998) 68-72 explains this controversy in more detail. Lucretius himself seems unaware of the problem, confidently asserting that the mind is in the chest and that it would be equally ridiculous to suppose that the mind is in the head as in the feet (Lucr. 3.788-93), which Sedley gives as one reason to think that Lucretius draws exclusively from Epicurus himself in composing the *DRN*. I have my doubts on how conclusive this argument is; see O'Keefe (2020) 182-3.

³ Translations of Lucretius are from Smith (2001).

Epicureans argued over whether the wise person would ever experience anger, and if so, what kinds of anger.⁴

But Lucretius appears to be in a weaker position than Epicureans like Philodemus when it comes to philosophical originality. Philodemus may pledge fealty to Epicurus, but he is self-consciously trying to interpret Epicurus correctly against rivals and extend Epicurus's thought into new areas, whereas Lucretius says at 3.1-30 that he is not trying to compete with Epicurus in discovering anything new but is merely transmitting the golden truths that have been revealed to him by Epicurus his "father," and at 5.55-56 he says he has been treading in Epicurus' footsteps and following his doctrines. If we take Lucretius at his word, he is not trying to devise any arguments of his own, and it may seem that in order to discover which "version" of Epicureanism is contained in his poem, we should engage in *Quellenforschung*, i.e., we should try to discern what sources Lucretius drew on to compose the *DRN*.

The search for Lucretius's sources, however, has been inconclusive and is likely to remain so. The primary obstacle is that almost all of the sources Lucretius may have had at hand—such as Epicurus's *On Nature*, or the treatises of later Epicureans—are lost to us. In the absence of such sources to check the *DRN* against, looking at the content of the *DRN* itself does not show whether Lucretius drew exclusively on Epicurus himself or also on later sources. It was once thought that Lucretius's polemics against divine providence and teleology in biology were aimed against the Stoics, and hence drew from a source after Epicurus. But the Stoics themselves drew on earlier philosophers such as Plato, especially his creation myth in the

⁴ For Philodemus and his arguments with other Epicureans on anger, see chapter 9 of Tsouna (2007) 195-238. The papers in Fish and Sanders (2011) show that later Epicureanism was not philosophically stagnant.

Timaeus. And when criticizing other philosophical positions, Lucretius generally advances generic “catch-all” arguments—ones that can target both Platonist and Stoic providentialist theologies, teleological biologies of various stripes, and all those who cast doubt on the senses as sources of knowledge, as shown also, for example, in the critique of the ‘Epicurean’ Velleius in Book One of Cicero’s *DND*].⁵ Given this procedure, we would equally expect to find the sorts of arguments we do find in the *DRN*, whether Lucretius is drawing on Epicurus himself or a later source.⁶

In any case, even if we concede that the specific arguments in *De Rerum Natura* are unlikely to be original, it does not follow that philosophically Lucretius is acting merely as the mouthpiece for whatever text he happens to be versifying. Unless you are transmitting somebody’s words *verbatim*, any attempt to explain another person’s philosophy will inevitably also be an interpretation of that philosophy. When I present Aristotle’s physics or ethics to my students, I am not trying to do anything at all original; instead, I want to explain Aristotle’s own views on the four causes or other topics in a way that is accurate, understandable, engaging, and memorable. But in my choices regarding which parts of Aristotle’s text to emphasize and which to pass over, how I try to present a systematic account that addresses apparent gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions in the argumentation, the examples I construct to illustrate his

⁵ An instructive contrasting case is Velleius’s Epicurean critique of the theologies of a wide range of philosophers in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* 1.10-15. Velleius goes through these philosophers by name and gives criticisms of their doctrines keyed to particular things that they say, e.g., in *DND* 1.12 where he criticizes Empedocles for saying that the 4 elements are divine even though they come into being, perish, and lack all sensation.

⁶ Campbell (1999) is responsible for dubbing Lucretius’ arguments “catch-all.” Furley (1966) presents a convincing rebuttal of earlier arguments that Lucretius is targeting the Stoics in particular. Sedley (1998) is the most influential argument that Lucretius is an Epicurean “fundamentalist,” drawing exclusively on Epicurus for his arguments. See Asmis (1982), Clay (1983) and Schrijvers (1999) for arguments that Lucretius also draws on later Epicureans. For more on my own doubts regarding the viability and fruitfulness of the search for Lucretius’s sources, see O’Keefe (2020) 177-184.

views, and in a myriad of other ways, my students will receive a version of Aristotle that is different from the version of Aristotle in other ancient philosophy classes. Furthermore, the examples a person gives may implicitly contain psychological, ethical, or political content of their own, apart from the philosophical points they are meant to clarify. For instance, if I spell out a detailed scenario of a person becoming angry when somebody makes fun of their daughter's speech impediment in order to illustrate Aristotle's ideas about the causes of anger and when it is appropriate to feel it, the example may contain ideas about how people do and should treat those with disabilities, unrelated to Aristotle's ethics.

And so, neither the general doctrinal conservatism of later Epicureans, nor the fact that Lucretius specifically claims not to be offering original arguments, bars Lucretius from presenting his own distinctive version of Epicureanism in *De Rerum Natura*.

2. *Lucretius on Human Psychology*

In order not to give a misleading impression when making a case for a distinctively "Lucretian Epicureanism," it's important to note first that, by and large, what we get in *De Rerum Natura* is no different from what all of our other sources on Epicureanism give us. According to the Epicureans, the highest good is pleasure, and everything else we do—including philosophizing—is done for the sake of obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain. But a truly pleasant life is not filled with the titillations of luxurious food, fine wine, and orgies. Instead, it is founded upon peace of mind (*Ep. Men.* 131-132). In order to obtain peace of mind, we must eliminate the fears that plague humanity, and a correct understanding of the world is required to eliminate these fears. As Lucretius puts it, in a *leitmotif* of *De Rerum Natura*, we must study

the underlying principles of nature in order to dispel the terrifying darkness that covers our minds (Lucr. 1.146–48, 2.59–61, 3.91–93, 6.39–41).

So, Lucretius tries to demonstrate that the world consists fundamentally of bodies travelling through empty space (a.k.a. void), with the bodies we see composed of indivisible bits of matter (a.k.a. atoms). Everything that occurs is the result of atoms moving in the void. After establishing the basic tenets of atomism, Lucretius spends most of *De Rerum Natura* showing how this worldview can account for the operations of the mind, the formation of the cosmos, the origin of species, and celestial and terrestrial phenomena like eclipses, thunderbolts, and earthquakes. Two crucial consequences follow from the Epicurean view of the world. The first is that death is annihilation, because the mind is a bodily organ that dies along with the rest of the body. And if death is annihilation, it is not bad for anybody: not for the living, because they have not died, and not for the dead, because they do not exist, and a person must exist in order for something to be bad for them (*Ep. Men.* 125, Lucr. 3.861–69). The second is that the gods have nothing to do with the creation of the world or with the events that occur within it. Explanations of phenomena like thunderbolts in terms of the motions of atoms are supposed to displace ones that appeal to the will of Zeus or other deities, and the random way thunderbolts hit both the guilty and innocent, uninhabited deserts, and even the shrines to the gods show that they are not the result of any divine purposes (Lucr. 6.219–422). And so, we have no reason to fear death or the gods.

Because we have lost most of Epicurus's own writings, as well as those of later Epicureans, Lucretius is our main source for many important parts of Epicurean physics. These include the infamous occasional sideways "swerve" of atoms, which is supposed to be

necessary for the formation of the cosmos and the ability of animals to act freely (Lucr. 2.216-93), and the initial creation of life from the earth and the subsequent process of natural selection that resulted in the existence of the species we see today (Lucr. 5.783-924). The *DRN* also contains specific arguments not available elsewhere, such as ones against the notion that the soul is immortal and undergoes a cycle of reincarnation from life to life (Lucr. 3.670-783).

However, if we're interested in trying to discern which parts of *De Rerum Natura* give a distinctively *Lucretian* version of Epicureanism, the examples above are unlikely to be original to Lucretius. After all, as noted above, Lucretius specifically claims that the arguments in *DRN* are Epicurus's. While it is possible that Lucretius's own explanations of Epicurus's arguments introduce interesting new wrinkles to his source material, where we do have the corresponding arguments in Epicurus's summaries of his physics and accounts of meteorological phenomena (the *Letter to Herodotus* and the *Letter to Pythocles*), Lucretius seems to follow Epicurus, although Lucretius' treatment is typically more detailed than the one in Epicurus's letters.⁷

It is not in his physics that Lucretius is most likely to be presenting something distinctive, but in his psychology. Lucretius' manner of presenting the Epicurean positions on the fear of death, the formation of society, and many other topics seems to presuppose a more complicated view of human psychology than we might expect from other texts reporting

⁷ However, see Hankinson (2013) for one possible exception, in the doctrine of "multiple explanations." The Epicureans believe that many cosmological and meteorological phenomena are consistent with multiple physical explanations, and in such cases, we should be content with disjunctively listing all of the possible explanations ("Eclipses are caused by X or Y or...") rather than settling on just one (*Ep. Hdt.* 79–80; *Ep. Pyth.* 85–88, 92–115; Lucr. 5.592–770). Hankinson argues that, while Lucretius largely follows Epicurus in his presentation of this doctrine, they differ in a crucial way: for Epicurus, the multiple explanations may be only physically possible, whereas Lucretius commits himself to thinking that each of these possible explanations are, at some point in time and space, actual.

Epicurus's views. Let me briefly sketch out the picture of Epicurean psychology present in other texts, before turning to the ways Lucretius seems to be distinctive. (By "psychology," I mean topics such as human motivation, beliefs, emotions, etc., not ones such as the material makeup of the mind or the atomic basis for processes like perception.)

The Epicureans are psychological hedonists: they think that all of our actions are explained by our desire for pleasure, our aversion to pain, and our beliefs about how best to obtain pleasure and avoid pain (*Ep. Men.* 128, *Fin.* 1.23, 1.30, 1.46). From birth, humans and all other animals instinctively pursue pleasure and shun pain, driven by their natural desires for the necessities of life, like food, drink, and shelter from the elements (*Fin.* 1.30, *Diog. Laert.* 10.137). However, as humans mature, they acquire beliefs about the way the world works, and this shapes their behavior and their desires. This development can be useful, as adults are able to engage in cost-benefit analysis and accept pain in the short term for the sake of more pleasure in the long term, e.g., having dental work done to avoid worse problems down the road (*Ep. Men.* 129–30). But it also opens up the possibility of corruption. People engage in wrongdoing and acquire harmful desires because they have incorrect beliefs about what will bring them pleasure. (*RS* 7, 10, *Sent. Vat.* 16, *Fin.* 1.32–33, 1.55). For instance, some people raised in a materialistic society might believe that having great wealth brings security and allows them to fulfill their desires. This false belief will make them greedy, and they will be willing to act unjustly to obtain wealth. But having that sort of character and living that kind of life will bring them nothing but misery.

Fortunately, our reason gives us control over our beliefs. We can learn to distinguish which of our desires are for things we really need, and which desires cause us harm, and

thereby reject the harmful desires (*RS* 18-22, 29-30). Using our reason, we can overcome hate, envy and contempt, and other emotions that might lead us to wrongdoing (*Diog. Laert.* 10.117). So Epicurean ethical philosophy is a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy, in which you seek to uncover and eradicate the false beliefs and dysfunctional behaviors that prevent you from obtaining what you really want.

Furthermore, while our possession of reason means that there are distinctively human emotions and desires, the Epicureans stress the continuity between humans and other animals. The Epicureans distinguish between bodily and mental pleasures and pains. Bodily pleasures and pains are confined to the present, in the sense that they arise only from the present state of the body, such as the sweet sensation of a back massage or the ache of hunger. Mental pleasures and pains, by contrast, are not confined to the present, but can arise from the recollection or anticipation of pleasures and pains. The anticipation of a beating can cause anxiety now, and the Epicureans think you should train yourself to recall sweet memories and anticipate future pleasures, so that you can always have pleasure available to you (*Fin.* 1.57). However, while the mental pleasures and pains are much more important for determining whether your life is happy (*Diog. Laert.* 10.137, *Fin.* 1.55-56), mental pleasures and pains *arise* from bodily pleasures and pains (*Fin.* 1.25, 1.55). For example, the mental pain of anxiety can be based upon the anticipation of the bodily pain of a beating, and the fear of death is predicated on the false belief that you will suffer pain when dead. And even in a case where somebody is anxious because they are afraid of losing some coveted political office, the desire for political power is itself based upon the belief that gaining power is an effective means of gaining security against other people (*RS* 6-7), and so the anxiety *indirectly* depends upon the

anticipation of bodily pain. (The rival hedonists the Cyrenaics disagree with this thesis, giving the counterexample that we can take joy simply in the well-being of our fatherland, just as we do in our own well-being: Diog. Laert. 2.89).

Lucretius does not disagree that the desire for pleasure is what ultimately motivates humans, that our reason gives us control over our beliefs and desires (Lucr. 3.288-322), and that we need to uncover and eradicate the false beliefs that prevent us from attaining happiness. However, he introduces elements to human psychology that one might not anticipate from the above thumbnail sketch of Epicurean psychology. Furthermore, he seems to be one of those later Epicureans—whom the Epicurean spokesman Torquatus says in Cicero's *De Finibus* 1.55 exist but speak with no authority—who do not believe that all mental pleasures and pains arise from bodily ones.

Here is a brief summary of some of what Lucretius says regarding human psychology.

Subconscious beliefs. Lucretius thinks that we do not know ourselves well, and that we are often driven by subconscious beliefs and desires. The man who recoils in horror at the thought of his corpse being torn apart 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 (Lucr. 3.870-93). And we are often unaware of the irrational causes of our beliefs and desires. Infatuated lovers, through a process of selective perception or motivated reasoning, turn their beloved's flaws into assets—Lucretius gives a scathing catalogue, with “the fiery-tempered gossip” becoming a “sparkler,” while

“another, fighting a losing battle with bronchitis, is ‘a delicate creature’” (Lucretius 4.1160-1169).⁸

Lucretius also gives the example of a bored, restless, and dissatisfied man, dashing back and forth from his mansion to his country home, who does not know the cause of his psychic illness, which is rooted in his fear of death (Lucretius 3.1053-75).⁹

Awe before nature. 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 (Lucretius 5.1183-1240). 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 (Lucretius 5.110-45), he shares his audience’s feelings of wonder before nature and thinks they are perfectly appropriate. At 2.1030-37, 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 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*).¹⁰

Parental love, compassion, and guilt. Infamously, Epicurus denies that humans love their offspring by nature. Instead, just like the virtues and friendship, parental love arises from a calculation of self-interest, e.g., thinking that cherishing your children will bring you security in

⁸ The infamous and scathing indictment of romantic love that closes book 4 of *DRN* (1037-1287) is full of details on the irrationality of those blinded by their infatuation, including the thesis that a lover really wishes to possess and consume his beloved, but sex fails to fulfill this desire. (Lucretius 4.1058-1120) For more on Lucretius’ denunciation of romantic love, see Brown (1987), chapter 5 of Nussbaum (1994), pp. 140–191, and Gordon (2002). For the Epicurean attitude on sex in general, see Arenson (2016). See Brown (1987) 128-132 and 280-294 for possible Greek sources, including Plato, of Lucretius’s litany of lovers’ deluded epithets for their beloved.

⁹ For more on the topic of Lucretius on unconscious motivation, see Jope (1983).

¹⁰ On Lucretius on the sublime in these and similar passages see further Most (2012) and Porter (2007).

your old age.¹¹ But Lucretius describes how, among animals, offspring and mothers naturally and instinctively recognize and bond with one another. If a calf has been slaughtered in a stupid religious ritual, its bereaved mother will wander the fields searching for its offspring. (Lucretius 2.349-70) And since the Epicureans think that non-human animals do not engage in deliberation about what is in their self-interest, the mother's love, grief, and search for its calf are not motivated by such a calculation.¹²

Lucretius does not explicitly contradict Epicurus by stating that humans naturally have affection for their offspring, just as some other animals do. The first humans were solitary and self-sufficient individuals, striving to benefit themselves alone and with no concern for the benefits of cooperation (Lucretius 5.958-61). No mention is made of how children were cared for. A crucial change later comes over the human race, however. Men and women begin to live with one another, use fire, and raise their children together. The use of fire makes their bodies less tough and resistant to the elements, and "the children with their charming ways easily broke down the stern disposition of their parents" (Lucretius 5.1011-18). Once the men were softened in these ways, they began to form mutual pacts neither to harm nor to be harmed, and "claimed protection for their children and womenfolk, indicating by means of inarticulate cries and gestures that everyone ought to have compassion on the weak." Without these pacts, the human race would have gone extinct (Lucretius 5.1019-1027). Here, Lucretius is largely following Epicurus's description of justice as an agreement not to harm one another, entered into because of its usefulness to the parties to the agreement (*RS* 31). But Lucretius adds an

¹¹ Cic. *Att.* 7.2.4; Arr. *Epict. Diss.* 1.23; Plut. *De amore proliis* 495A–C, *Adv. Col.* 1123A; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 3.17.5. For much more on Epicurus and Lucretius on parental love, see McConnell (2018); my account here is indebted to his.

¹² See Konstan (2013) for more on the Epicureans on grief.

important element to this account: the men who were parties to this agreement, whose spirits had been softened by the charms of children, were also motivated by compassion for those under their care.¹³

Konstan (2019) argues that Lucretius, in passing, also puts forward a distinctive conception of guilt and conscience. At 3.824-29, Lucretius describes how the consciousness of past misdeeds afflicts a person with remorse, and in the middle of a description of how romantic love ruins a person (Lucr. 4.1141-91), Lucretius remarks that “perhaps his conscience experiences a twinge of remorse at the thought of a life spent in sloth and squandered in debauchery” (Lucr. 4.1135-36). Epicurus believes that acting unjustly is not bad *per se*; instead, what makes it bad is punishment and the fear of punishment (RS 34). He adds that, even if you “get away” with your injustice, you can never be certain that you will not one day get caught, and so you still will suffer the pain of fear (RS 35). This fear of detection and punishment, however, is quite different from the pain of *guilt*, a distress caused by the conviction that you have done something wrong.

Attitudes like awe before nature, parental love, grief, and guilt are not themselves desires, although they can shape our desires. And so, Lucretius’s inclusion of these attitudes is not inconsistent with Epicurus’s psychological hedonism, i.e., his insistence that all human action is ultimately motivated by the desire for pleasure. But these attitudes can widen the scope of objects we take pleasure or pain in, and they can shape our beliefs about what will bring us pleasure or pain. Furthermore, it is initially difficult to square things like feeling a divine

¹³ In addition to McConnell (2018), a good starting place for more on these issues (along with many references to other literature) is Holmes (2013). Campbell (2003) offers a detailed commentary on these sections of the *DRN*.

pleasure at beholding the wonders of nature with the thesis that all mental pleasures arise from bodily ones. Likewise, it is not inconsistent with psychological hedonism to think that our beliefs are often hidden from ourselves and have subterranean, irrational sources. But if many of our beliefs are like that, it complicates the therapeutic process of uncovering and eliminating the false beliefs that lead to misery.

While Lucretius does seem to have some noteworthy and distinctive psychological insights, we should not overstate what is there. *De Rerum Natura* contains some theses about human psychology, but it puts forward nothing like a full-blown theory. And unlike his assertions that atoms occasionally swerve to the side or that the gods are not responsible for what happens in our world, Lucretius does not give spelled out arguments for these ideas. Instead, they are contained in descriptions of people, animals, and his own attitudes, which makes it more difficult to pin down precisely what they are.

3. *The Philosophical Use of Literary Persuasion*

In the previous section, I outlined the ways in which the *content* of *De Rerum Natura* might be distinctive. In this section, I turn to considering the *manner* in which Lucretius presents his arguments in his poetry and how it may be philosophically distinctive. Before making my case regarding Lucretius, let me briefly sketch out an instructive parallel case, that of Cicero. Cicero was long treated mainly as source of information on other philosophers because he claimed that his philosophical dialogues contained little original argumentation (*Att.* 12.52.3).¹⁴ But Cicero is increasingly treated as a significant philosopher in his own right.

¹⁴ See Striker (1995) for a summary of the reasons for not thinking highly of Cicero as a philosopher and pushback against them, and Schmidt (1978-9) for an account of how Cicero fell into philosophical disrepute after previous esteem.

Sometimes this is done by claiming that Cicero has staked out noteworthy philosophical positions and arguments of his own, or at least that the manner in which he articulates the philosophical positions of others is distinctive. For instance, his *On Laws* presents a theory about the relationship of law to ethics that is indebted to the Stoics but is still Cicero's own, and Pamela Gordon has argued that Cicero's Stoic-inspired criticisms of the Epicureans for subordinating virtue to pleasure is modulated by a Roman conception of *virtus* as not merely generic virtue but as "manliness," and hence Cicero views Epicureanism as not merely vicious, but as effeminate.¹⁵

Another thing that makes Cicero philosophically distinctive, however, is the literary form he uses to present his ideas, dialogues in which the spokesmen for various philosophical schools put forward their arguments. Although they consist mainly of long stretches of exposition, the participants do question and criticize one another. The dialogue form reflects Cicero's own conviction, as an Academic skeptic, that you 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 opinions about the positions articulated—not in order to convince his reader to agree with him by appealing to his authority, but to illustrate the skeptical thesis that he is free to give his provisional assent to whatever seems to him to be the most reasonable position after engaging in inquiry. If we ignore his

¹⁵ A good recent paper on Cicero's *On Laws* is Asmis (2008). Cicero's most sustained critique of Epicurean ethics is *Fin. 2*, especially *Fin. 2.45-77*. See Gordon (2012) 109-38 on Cicero's gendered polemics against the Epicureans. An excellent example of presenting Cicero's philosophy as a whole on its own terms, without attempting to titrate out what is original, is Woolf (2015).

manner of presenting his arguments, we miss something important about Cicero as a philosopher.¹⁶

Similarly, the way Lucretius uses poetry to present Epicurean arguments is philosophically significant. Lucretius himself at 4.10-25 explains his choice of poetry to express his arguments: like a doctor who persuades a child to drink some nasty-tasting medicine by smearing the lip of the cup with honey, Lucretius coats the healing message of Epicurus in poetry, since many people find attending to philosophical arguments unpleasant. Working through explanations of the atomic basis for hunger can be difficult, but the aesthetic pleasure of poetry helps keep you going. On this model, the persuasive work is done 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, let me note a few examples, and then describe their significance:

Using vivid imagery to evoke emotions. *De Rerum Natura* tries to get its readers to repudiate traditional Greco-Roman religion. The opening of the poem contains a full-throated condemnation of the evils such religion has caused (Lucr. 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

¹⁶ See Annas and Woolf (2001) x-xvii for a brief explanation of Cicero's use of the dialogue form along these lines, and Schofield (2008) for an in-depth consideration.

that the reader shares Lucretius' outrage.¹⁷ Another example occurs in Lucretius' description of sex. The Epicureans hold that sexual intercourse never helped anybody, and that you are lucky if you are not harmed by it (Diog. Laert. 10.118). Lucretius condemns in particularly strong terms romantic infatuation. In his denunciation, Lucretius presents a disturbing description of frenzied lovers having sex, in which they intermingle their saliva and crush lips with teeth, making their consummation repellent and disgusting. (Lucr. 4.1037-1191)

Raising and redeploying powerful cultural tropes. In one of his eulogies of Epicurus, Lucretius surprisingly describes the theoretical intellectual activities of Epicurus, who investigated the causes of natural phenomena, in terms of the deeds of epic heroes (Lucr. 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.¹⁸ Elsewhere Lucretius maintains that what Epicurus has done for us is far greater than any of the deeds of Heracles (Lucr. 5.22-54). In these passages, Lucretius evokes the awe and admiration we feel towards epic heroes and redirects them toward a quite different object. Another surprising comparison is Lucretius's extended description of the earth as a mother goddess, awesome and worthy of respect—a metaphor he defends using, even though he admits that it is dangerous and literally false, as the earth is neither divine nor sentient. (Lucr. 2.594-660) Here, Lucretius evokes the feelings of awe people have towards the earth conceived

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ For detailed consideration of this metaphor see Buchheit (2007).

of as a mother-goddess and redirects them towards the earth as understood by the Epicureans—as a non-sentient, non-purposive conglomeration of matter.¹⁹

Ridicule. One of Lucretius' targets, when trying to establish that death is annihilation, is the theory that the soul 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 suggests that maybe the souls avoid this conflict by agreeing to a "first come, first served" policy (Lucretius 3.776-83). Here, Lucretius tries to discredit the theory of transmigration by making it look silly.²⁰

Lucretius' use of non-rational methods of persuasion such as appealing to emotions and ridicule may appear non-philosophical, or even anti-philosophical, if philosophy is in part defined by a commitment to rational persuasion. After all, the appeal to pity is fallacious, and concluding that the doctrine of transmigration is false because a mocking depiction of it makes it seem silly is invalid.

Martha Nussbaum accuses the Epicureans generally of committing this sort of intellectual sin, a willingness to use effective but irrational methods of persuasion, which is based on their therapeutic conception of argumentation, combined with their hedonistic conception of the human good.²¹ Epicurus holds that philosophy produces mental health (*Sent.*

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ See Gellar (2012) for much more on Lucretius' use of ridicule and satire.

²¹ Nussbaum (1986).

Vat. 54), and the Epicureans compare philosophy to medicine: just as medicine derives its value entirely from its effectiveness in driving out bodily disease, philosophical arguments derive their value entirely from their effectiveness in driving out psychic diseases (*Porph. Ad Marc.* 31). And because happiness consists primarily in freedom from mental turmoil, the Epicureans have no reason to respect the rationality of their interlocutors, if using irrational means of persuasion effectively promotes their peace of mind. Nussbaum claims that, if we look at the actual practices recommended and followed by the Epicureans, we will see that they are willing to violate the norms of rational discourse for the sake of therapeutic effectiveness.²²

But a willingness to use rationally dubious methods of persuasion does not fit with other important commitments of the Epicureans, including Lucretius. As noted above, Lucretius believes we must study the underlying principles of nature in order to dispel the terrifying darkness that covers our minds, 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 only because a mocking description of the cycle of rebirth made it seem silly, such a belief cannot serve as a secure foundation for peace of mind. Instead, I must understand the reasons why the *animus* is material, and hence mortal, including the reasons for rejecting transmigration.

Lucretius does not merely mock transmigration; he also gives arguments against it.

Fortunately, I think that Epicurean ethical views generally, and Lucretius' views on human psychology in particular as outlined in the previous section, show how Lucretius can use

²² These practices include threats of shunning, informing on wrongdoers, and encouragement of uncritical adulation of authority figures. Nussbaum's main source for such practices is Philodemus's treatise *On Frank Criticism*, although she draws upon Epicurus and Lucretius. Tsouna (2007) 91-118 offers a useful overview of Philodemus's treatise and argues against some of Nussbaum's characterizations of Philodemus's therapeutic practices.

literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion while insisting that we need a reasoned understanding of the workings of the world to secure happiness.

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 gets ahead. We revere jealous and capricious gods who do not merit reverence. As noted above, Lucretius adds that we do not know ourselves well, that we are often driven by subconscious beliefs and desires.

These false beliefs and misguided attitudes block us from accepting Epicurus's healing message. Lucretius uses literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion to counter such beliefs and attitudes and thus open up his reader to his arguments. And so these methods do not displace argumentation; instead, they work together with it. Let me briefly discuss how this would work in the examples above.

Typical Romans, even if they do not believe in the literal truth of all of the traditional stories about the gods, probably have a reflexive and deep-grained reverence for the gods as traditionally depicted.²³ They know about stories such as Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia but aren't bothered by them. To break through this harmful cultural conditioning, Lucretius vividly portrays what this story really involves, in order to bring home its horror. The emotional reactions of pity and indignation that Lucretius's poetry produces are apt and do not produce an irrational belief in the evils religion causes. Instead, they help counter an irrational

²³ See Gale (1994) 85-98 for more on the complicated topic of the religious positions of Romans at the time. She concludes that belief in the literal truth of "superstitious" myths regarding the gods may have been widespread among the lower classes but was relatively rare among the elite. However, even the elites generally regarded historical myths (e.g., about the founders of Rome) as accurate and treated the traditional stories regarding the gods with respect as an important part of civic *religio*.

complacency that the reader previously had, a deadening of their sensibilities.

Similar considerations explain Lucretius's mockery of transmigration. Many people view transmigration with a misplaced sense of respect and reverence—it seems sublime and befitting the dignity of the soul to move from life to life. Mocking the doctrine deflates this misguided sense of awe, lessening a person's emotional attachment to the doctrine and making them more open to the arguments against it.

In the case of romantic love, maudlin popular celebrations lead people to view it with a sentimental attachment, and they may even think of the consummation of their love in quasi-divine terms, as in Aristophanes' myth of erotic reunification in the *Symposium*. Lucretius's harsh depiction of infatuated lovers as frenzied, dissatisfied animals acts as a corrective to such attitudes.

Greek and Roman culture also contains a broad strain of anti-intellectualism, celebrating virile men of action, while pitying the impractical philosopher with his head in the clouds. Callicles' denunciation of philosophy as unfit 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 the attitude. For Lucretius, this gets things deeply wrong, because the actions of the epic heroes were usually destructive, whereas Epicurus's intellectual work has a tremendous positive 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's depiction of the earth as mother-goddess is one of a number of passages in which he deploys figures of traditional religion or otherwise personifies nature, including the opening invocation of Venus (Lucr. 1.1-43) and Nature's chastisement of those

who fear death (Lucretius 3.931-77). Lucretius is doing multiple things by deploying these images, and he doesn't have a single set of purposes across all these passages. But one purpose he probably has is to help convince his reader that atomism need not lead to the disenchantment of nature.

As noted in the previous section, many people view nature with wonder and awe, feelings that Lucretius shares. By evoking the feelings of awe associated with traditional tropes like the earth being our mother, and transferring them to the dancing of atoms in the void, Lucretius reduces one source of resistance to Epicureanism: the sense that the Epicurean view of the world is cold and shorn of wonder.²⁴ To evoke these feelings while explaining the Epicurean worldview is much more effective than just giving an argument that you can, without impropriety, both believe that the heavenly bodies are insentient and behold them with awe.

The way in which Lucretius presents his Epicurean arguments is informed by his understanding of human psychology and of the point of philosophical argumentation. As noted above, Epicurus stresses 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.²⁵ 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

²⁴ For more on this topic, see O'Keefe (2003) 57-60.

²⁵ 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.

“doctor” merely reasons with 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.²⁶

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 in what we have of his writing. Epicurus shows some sensitivity for communicating effectively to a wide audience: the *Principal Doctrines* are handy for memorizing important points of dogma, and Epicurus notes that he composed the *Letter to Herodotus* as a summary of the main points of Epicurean physics for those unable to work through the long treatises (*Ep. Hdt.* 35-36). Yet the *Letter to Herodotus* is an unadorned presentation of doctrines and arguments, and is at points obscure for beginners. In his use of literary and rhetorical methods of persuasion alongside his argumentation, Lucretius alone among the Epicureans shows a sensitivity to the need to present his arguments in a way that also 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 *De Rerum Natura* is a more effective embodiment of Epicureanism than anything written by Epicurus.²⁷

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²⁶ *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.

²⁷ I’d like to thank David Konstan and Gretchen Reydams-Schils for their input, and David Konstan for his cheerful encouragement. Much of this paper, especially in the third section, is adapted from O’Keefe (2020).

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