

– Lucretius and Religion –

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15 April 2005

Lucretius: De Rerum Natura (WBMA4043 CS OME TEKST)
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Preface

“Therefore, Superstition is now in her turn cast down and trampled underfoot, whilst we by the victory are exalted high as heaven” – De Rerum Natura, Book I, 78-79

This paper is the completion of the master course Lucretius at Utrecht University. The poem *De Rerum Natura* is comprehensive exposition of the Epicurean world view, and is an influential and important work in the Epicurean tradition. Within this paper, there is regularly being referred to the original text, and, where needed, passages are cited. For reasons of clarity I have chosen not to quote in Latin, but to quote in English only. For this I have used the translation of W.H.D. Rouse, which has been revised by M.F. Smith. When referring to the text, the number of the book (Latin) concerned is followed by the number of the verse in this book (numerical). For example I.136-145 refers to book one, verses 136 to 145. The numbers to the original verses refer to the line numbers of the original Latin verse.

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Eindhoven, 15 April 2005

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1. Introduction

Aim

Lucretius approach to traditional religion will be discussed in this paper. First, the way in which traditional myth is valued by Lucretius will be described. Second, the alternatives which Lucretius has to offer after criticizing the traditional view of religion will be examined. Finally the use and reinterpretation of the tradition in the *De Rerum Natura* will be discussed.

The content of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*

The *De Rerum Natura*, which consists of six books, undertakes a naturalistic explanation of the physical origin, structure and destiny of the universe. In this epic, Lucretius tries to convey the Epicurean philosophy¹ in a poetic form. The work consists of three pairs of books, concerning the atoms and their compounds, the human physiology, and the world around us successively². The first book of each pair handles sets out the nature and lifespan of the item concerned, the second book exposes related phenomena to this item³. Also, the first three books focus on the fear of death, where the last three books accentuate the fear of the gods⁴. The sequence of themes is therefore slightly different from the sequence in Epicurus' *On Nature*.

According to Sedley⁵, this illustrates that Lucretius must have based his work on *De Natura*, but has made changes in favour of a clear structure. However, the source text which Lucretius might have used for the *De Rerum Natura* has been widely discussed⁶. According to Furley and Sedley, Lucretius has only used Epicurean sources⁷. Possibilities are the use of Epicurus' works *On Nature*, the *Letter to Herodotus*, the *Great Epitome*, or some combination of these. Diskin Clay and Rössler argue that Lucretius has used no source text at all. Alternatively, he might have used only more recent Epicurean writings. Rössler claims that Lucretius must have been able to write everything from doxographies, and therefore did not need original writing of Epicurus: all could have been written from interpretations of Epicurus⁸.

Controversies of the poem

The discussion of the poem can be concentrated mainly around three themes, namely the opposition heterodoxy-orthodoxy, poetry and orthodox content, and the religious tradition within Lucretius.

¹ cf. V.55: "His steps I trace, his doctrines I follow (...)"

² Gale (2001), p.43

³ Sedley (1997), p.6-7; see also: Gale (2001), p.32

⁴ Gale, (2001), p.43

⁵ Sedley (1997)

⁶ Sedley (1997), p.1

⁷ Cf. Furley, (1989); Sedley (1998)

⁸ Epicurus also made use of doxographies and therefore, according to Rössler, the use of doxographies by Lucretius can be regarded as an Epicurean influence.

The first controversy is about whether Lucretius has solely interpreted the works of Epicurus, or has adapted Epicurean thought, which made it possible to react for example on recent Stoic accounts⁹. As mentioned before, Lucretius himself claims to follow Epicurus literally. Sedley¹⁰ claims that Lucretius has not changed or adapted Epicurean thought, and therefore has treated Epicurean thought in an orthodox way. Schrijvers argues that Lucretius tried to enrich Epicurean philosophy by criticizing the Aristotelian philosophy of Theophrastos.

The second problem concerns the tension between poetry and orthodox content. Epicurus, who regarded poetry and myth as an objectionable decoy in reaching *vera res*. The use of the poetic form, attention for the grandeur of nature, as well as the references to myth and poetry do not seem to be in line with Epicurean thought. Therefore it is interesting how the poet Lucretius integrates poetry and Epicurean thought in the *De Rerum Natura*. Cardinal Melchior de Polignac¹¹ and Patin try to reveal the contradictions in Lucretius, which emerged as a result of this combination. Other viewpoints have discarded the idea of an anti-Lucrèce. One can for example also state the Epicurean philosophy stays within the conventions of the ancient epic. Lucretius' careful use of Epicurean thought and the clear distinctions between *vera ratio* and myth in his work, can be regarded as successful attempt to unite philosophy and poetry¹².

The third issue concerns the relation between Lucretius' philosophy and the religious tradition. The belief that the gods govern the world, and that they can be influenced by rites has to be discarded. The fear of the gods and the fear of death can be taken away when the traditional worldview is refuted by the Epicurean naturalistic approach. Internalizing this *vera ratio* will finally lead to *ataraxia*, the imperturbable state of mind by which we regard ourselves, reality and life, not being tormented by pain or worries. On the other hand, Lucretius refers to the traditional religion in several occasions, and seems to make use of underlying references to mythological accounts¹³. His critique on religious tradition, the alternatives he has to offer, and the use and reinterpretation of myth will be examined more closely.

⁹ cf. Cyril Bailey's viewpoint on Lucretius' reaction to the Stoics. In: Furley (1989); p. 183

¹⁰ Sedley (1997)

¹¹ cf. Cardinal Melchior de Polignac's *Antilucetius* (1745) and Patin's '*Du poèm de la nature. L'antilucrèce chez Lucrèce*' in *Etudes sur la poésie latine* (1868)

¹² cf. Ackermann (1979), p.217; Gale (1994), p.231

¹³ For example Lucretius' *Kulturgeschichte* seems to use mythological accounts of human prehistory and the development of culture (Gale, 1994; p.156). On this can be commented, that elements in the *Kulturgeschichte* now identified as mythological were commonly accepted in ancient culture.

2. Lucretius' view on traditional religion

Religion as superstition

Next to illustrating the folly of the fear of death in the first three books, the second major task which Lucretius faces is to free the reader from superstition, or more specific, the belief that the gods have anything to do with the human world, and that they can be influenced. Epicurus' idea of *religio* is does not refer to superstition only but also includes religion, rites etc.¹⁴ *Religio* has led to criminal and impious deeds, for example when Iphigenia was ritually sacrificed to give a fortunate release to the fleet. To Lucretius, this illustrates that Epicurean philosophy is much less impious than *religio*¹⁵, and Epicurus can be considered the first philosopher who made a stand against it¹⁶.

Origins of the belief in gods

This *superstitio*, as Lucretius regards it, does not imply complete absence of reason, but merely a poverty of reasoning. It shows the search of human beings for explanations for things that puzzle and trouble them. However, their explanations are completely wrong. The doubt and fear, which is caused by ignorance¹⁷, stresses to urge for an explanation, but by lack of these explanations, and people resort to the idea that all is under divine control¹⁸. The piety people strive for is nothing but a source of unnecessary anxiety¹⁹. In short, myth is the false answer of primitive man to combine his accurate apprehension of the divine nature with his also accurate observation of the natural world²⁰. By lack of Epicurean materialistic explanations, early man took refuge in mythological explanations. Here, the observations of the natural world were combined with the existence of the gods in a false manner. The myths do contain a kind of truth, when stripped from these false assumptions. They can provide powerful images to illustrate the phenomena, nevertheless Lucretius stresses they may not be taken literally.

The existence of gods appeared to men by receiving *simulacra* in dreams and waking visions. These impressions are, in line with Epicurean epistemology, true. Nevertheless the deductions we make can be deceptive. Deductions like the gods having eternal life, in *ataraxia* and influence on the cosmos²¹. Especially the latter is the cause of the fear of gods. According to Lucretius, myths which attribute activities to the gods which are not in line with *ataraxia* cannot be true.

¹⁴ cf. I.101: 'So potent was Superstition in persuading to evil deeds'

¹⁵ cf. I.80-101

¹⁶ cf. I.62-79

¹⁷ V.1211

¹⁸ V.82-90; also VI.58-91

¹⁹ Gale (2001), p.49

²⁰ Gale (1994), p.229

²¹ Gale (1994), p.130

The gods do not reside in the world. The nature of the gods, being thin and far removed from our senses, can hardly be seen. It cannot be touched by the hands, and cannot touch anything that we can touch, for that what can not be touched itself, cannot touch. Therefore, their abode must be thin in accord with their bodies. The gods cannot interfere with our world²².

Natural phenomena

Lucretius emphasizes that natural phenomena like lightning, earthquakes, waterspouts and plagues are all susceptible for rational, scientific explanation²³. He questions why gods would strike their own temples, or why lightning never strikes from a clear sky, for example. Also, plague is considered a occurrence in a non-teleological world. For worship of gods, when a plague has struck, always seems to fall into neglect²⁴.

²² cf. V.146-155

²³ Gale (2001); p.50-51; VI.379-422

²⁴ VI.1276-1277

3. Lucretius' alternative for traditional religion

Lucretius' alternative

Now Lucretius' view on the traditional myth and religion has been described, the alternatives which Lucretius has to offer will be examined. The main aspects that will be discussed are the non-teleological, naturalistic worldview, the role of the gods, euhemerism, dogmatic assertion.

The naturalistic worldview

Lucretius considers Epicurean thought as a more truthful and effective strategy to explain the phenomena of the world, and to reach *ataraxia*. This *vera ratio* is Lucretius' antidote for superstition, which causes fear through false belief. This reasoning is considered truthful because it involves laws of nature^{25,26}. It is necessary and enlightening, for when we reason correctly about the world, there will be no gap between ourselves and nature.

Nature both determines the way things are, as well as the causal system which explains these things. This physical system, as described in the poem, provides insight in the purposeless laws of nature can explain all phenomena. It explicates a non-teleological world view²⁷. All phenomena can be explained in mechanistic and materialist terms, so there is no need for explanations which include divine intervention of any kind²⁸. The infliction of sexuality and love by the gods for example, is regarded a misconception²⁹: love is delusion. It can be considered a kind of madness, which consists of a wrong evaluation of reality.

Disposing false conceptions of the gods

According to Lucretius, gods do exist, and we have clear knowledge of them, for example by their appearance in dreams or daytime visions. The notion of gods is an abstraction from real sensations (preconception).

However, three major false characteristics have been attributed to the gods: their cosmic role, their residence in the heavens, and idea that natural phenomena result from their wrath. According to Lucretius, all three opinions about are false; the phenomena need to be explained physically by the people. Since these ideas are obviously false, people do not have to be afraid to discard this religious tradition, and being punished for impiety. True godless, Lucretius adds, is the one who attributes to the gods what the masses think of them: true piety is to survey with a tranquil mind³⁰.

²⁵ 'naturae species': I.146

²⁶ Long (1997), p.130

²⁷ Gale (2001), p.48

²⁸ cf. I.150: 'No thing is ever produced from nothing *by divine agency*'

²⁹ cf. IV.1278

³⁰ V.1203

Praying to the gods can, according to Lucretius, be reinterpreted philosophically. It can be regarded as a form of self-addressing, by which one has to make oneself the right mental attitude. They are ways of meditating on *voluptas* and *ataraxia*.

The absence of divine intervention

Nature supplies anything, and nothing impairs the peace of mind of the gods³¹. The very nature of divinity, Lucretius mentions, must necessarily imply immortal life in the deepest peace, far away and separated from our affairs. Mighty by its own resources it does not need us at all, and is neither influenced with services nor touched with wrath. If one decides to apply names of gods to corn, liquor, sea or earth, provided that he forebears in reality himself to infect his mind with base superstition³². Nature works on herself. It is improbable that a god would strike down his own temple, or that there is a god strong enough to rule the sum of the immeasurable³³. The government of an infinite universe would be quite incompatible with the perfect peace that the gods were traditionally held to enjoy³⁴.

The godlike status of Epicurus

Euhemerism can be regarded a form of allegorism, which attempts to reveal a hidden, pseudo-historical truth, which is underlying to myths³⁵. From this perspective, gods used to be people, which have recovered something special. Afterwards, they were honored as gods. Because of this, Euhemerism is in direct conflict with Lucretius' idea of divinity.

Nevertheless Lucretius seems to state in book V that people with great influence on humanity may be rewarded with a kind of apotheosis. Epicurus can be regarded as a Euhemeristic hero; he is attributed the status of a god³⁶. Where for example Ceres is honored for the grain and Liber for the Wine, Epicurus has shown how we can live 'puro pectore'³⁷, with a purged mind. Regarding to his work, traditional heroes like Hercules are less important, for Epicurus has liberated mankind by his intellectual deeds³⁸.

Multiple explanations versus dogmatic assertion

Epicurus and his followers have small esteem in poetry, a condemnation which seems to rest primarily on its mythological character. Therefore, a plurality of explanations in accordance with the phenomena is preferable to the dogmatic assertions of myth³⁹. This can be illustrated by Lucretius' explanation of the movements of sun and moon, for which he offers four different, mutually

³¹ cf. III.23-24

³² II.600-660

³³ II.1090-1104

³⁴ Gale (2001), p.48

³⁵ Gale (1994), p.75

³⁶ V.8

³⁷ cf. V.18

³⁸ Ackermann (1979), p. 217

³⁹ Gale (1994), p.18

exclusive explanations. Nevertheless, as long as they do not conflict with the perceived phenomena, they are all regarded truth candidates, and a far better explanation than the superstitious ideas considering involvement of the gods.

4. Lucretius' use and reinterpretation of traditional religion

Introduction

Now Lucretius' alternatives for religious thought are examined, the use and reinterpretation of traditional religion by Lucretius will be discussed. As mentioned, Lucretius regards myth as misinterpretations of true perception. Epicurus objected firmly to the use of poetry, because of its ambiguous use of language. Nevertheless, Lucretius did not exclude mythological and poetic elements from the *De Rerum Natura*, but showed that they can actually be used to reinforce rational argument⁴⁰. Moreover, even in justifying poetic language, Lucretius displays those aspects of poetic discourse of which Epicurus was most critical: mythological and figurative language⁴¹.

Lucretius' use of the traditional religion

Allegorists like the Stoics have claimed that myth can teach us a deeper understanding of the world. Lucretius does not agree with this viewpoint: myth can not teach us anything which cannot also be learned from looking at the world that surrounds us. Its function is illustrative, not didactic. Nevertheless Lucretius' mythological images are not 'remote from the truth'; they actually arise from it⁴². It is only natural science, which can uncover this truth that is concealed in myth. To uncover their true content, myths have to be stripped from their false interpretations.

As stated before, myth is regarded to be the result of the inability of people the answer questions about the natural world⁴³. According to Lucretius, the supernatural is an invention of local people, who have a desire – common to human nature – to tell stories and hold an audience⁴⁴. Here, a useful aspect of myth is mentioned, namely that myth has the power to glorify and attract.

However, the poetic element is subordinated to the philosophical argument. Lucretius allows this use myth, as long as it is used within poetic convention, and is not presented as *vera res*. One strategy to make this combination of myth and his concern for *vera res* possible is by reinterpreting myth through rationalization (like allegory or personification).

The honeyed cup

Lucretius' use of myth tries to appeal to common feelings of the reader, so clarity will be reached *per falsa ad vera*⁴⁵. The philosophical content can be told by means of poetry, as to touch this content with the 'Muses' delicious honey'⁴⁶. In this way, the mind of the reader can be engaged, while learning to see in what shape the whole nature of things is framed. Lucretius makes the

⁴⁰ Gale (1994), p.138

⁴¹ Gale (1994), p.141

⁴² Gale (1994), p.143

⁴³ Gale (1994), p.134

⁴⁴ cf. IV.594

⁴⁵ Ackermann (1979), p.216

⁴⁶ cf. I.921-950 and also IV.1-25; verses I.926-949 and VI.1-24 are exactly identical

analogy of a physician who gives a bitter medicine in a honeyed cup. The Epicurean ratio corresponds to the bitter but healing draught which actually is the cure for mankind's sickness and fears. Nevertheless the 'honey of the Muses' itself remains neutral⁴⁷, since the benefit or harm of poetry depends upon the truth of its content.

Latent use of myth

Lucretius' use of mythological images is subtle, and sometimes takes the form of 'latent' allusion rather than overt reference⁴⁸, a technique also applied in his treatment of Epicurus. As mentioned, Epicurus is contrasted with gods and heroes in the mythological tradition. Also, he is portrayed as a giant, but one who has overthrown the old gods. In this occasion, Lucretius rejects myth, and at the same time uses mythological imaginery to enhance his argumentation, and the qualities of Epicurus.

The Venus-prooemium

In the Venus-prooemium, Lucretius hails Venus, and prays to her for inspiration and peace⁴⁹. This seems hard to implement in Epicurean philosophy, for there is no active role for the gods: they do not interfere with the world. The gods are perfectly happy, and live in *ataraxia* on their own place⁵⁰. It is likely that Lucretius uses the traditional religion here to integrate Epicurean gods.

When the prooemium is allegorical interpreted, the hymn can be regarded consistent with Epicurean thought. The use of Venus can be justified when considered as *Venus physica*: a force of nature, which is visible in animals and lifeless nature. On the first sight, this approach might seem to be more Stoic than Epicurean. However, the Epicurean Venus is a 'small Venus' and can be regarded as a symbolic figure⁵¹: a personification of Epicurean *voluptas*, the urge for pleasure which can be seen in all living animals. Of course, this does not imply a teleological world view. Therefore, the Venus prooemium of book I can be interpreted consistently from an Epicurean point of view.

A parallel of the interpretation of gods as personification can also be found in the description of the mother-goddess. Here, Cybele can be regarded as a personification of earth⁵². According to Lucretius, earth contains all kinds of elements, and can therefore be righteously called Mother. However, the way in which ancient and learned Greek poets have interpreted earth traditionally is far from true reasoning. For Lucretius, the poet is allowed to use such personifications, 'provided that he forbears in reality himself to infect his mind with base superstition'⁵³.

⁴⁷ Gale (1994), p.130

⁴⁸ Gale (1994), p.230

⁴⁹ I.40

⁵⁰ Interesting to mention is that verses I.46-51 and II.644-649 are exactly similar

⁵¹ Gale (2001), p.34

⁵² cf. Venus as personification of pleasure

⁵³ II.659-660

Other reinterpreted myths

Several myths concerning the underworld are reinterpreted allegorically by Lucretius (for example Acheron, Sisyphus, Tantalus)⁵⁴. Other examples are the myths of Phaeton and the Flood. These are considered a false interpretation of the struggle of the elements, which each want to possess the world⁵⁵. Both myths are the result of a certain historical moment in which fire or water respectively advanced in their possession. Therefore, also these myths have to be interpreted allegorically.

Next to this, Lucretius also dismisses the Muses, being creations of ignorance and superstition. This results in the loss of the traditional authority which poetry contained, being based on divine inspiration. However, another effect is that it elevates Lucretius' Muse, Epicurus to the status of a god^{56,57}. It is clear that the use of poetry in the *De Rerum Natura* can be regarded as much more than a sweetener for the Epicurean philosophy. Every poetic element is deliberately adapted to the clear and persuasive presentation of Epicurean thought⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ III.978-1023

⁵⁵ V.380-415

⁵⁶ Gale (1994), p.137

⁵⁷ Ackermann (1979), p.217

⁵⁸ Gale (1994), p.2

5. Conclusions

Lucretius' attack on the traditional religion comprehends an attack on the traditional religion, as well as a coherent alternative: it can be substituted by a naturalistic account. The world can be described solely in naturalistic processes, and there is no place for teleology. He does not discard the existence of gods; they have all characteristics of Olympian gods, but are disposed of intentionality. His primary concern seems to be to free people from fear of death and, as outlined in this paper, fear of the gods. Nevertheless Lucretius decided to use myth and poetry to convey Epicurean thought. This does not contrast with his philosophical aims, because of his efforts to make clear that they are never intended as *vera res*: he exploits the charms of myth and poetry to draw the reader to his view on the nature of things. Poetry and philosophy are united without creating an anti-Lucrèce. Both aims seem to be successfully and coherently combined in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*.

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