

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Lucretius (98-55 B.C.)

**Roman epic and Greek culture.** You will quickly see, from Potter's *Roman History*, that Roman culture is from the start deeply indebted to Greek culture, and Lucretius' epic, *De Rerum Natura; On the Nature of Things*, is just the proof we need. To write a long philosophical poem in Latin was to follow in the footsteps of early Greek literature, in which at least two major writers—Hesiod (in the *Theogony*, 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and Parmenides (in *On Nature*, early fifth century B.C.)—developed their views of the world in formal epic poetry. (In so doing those Greek writers emulated the tradition, which goes far back into Middle Eastern and Indian philosophical and religious expression—*Enuma Elish* in Babylon, the *Vedas* in India—of consigning cosmological thought to poetry. To which we might add that the primal form of serious expression, throughout early cultures, is poetry, while prose is generally later to develop.)

**Epicurus.** Not only is Greek poetry, but also Greek thought, the founding energy for Lucretius. The third century B.C. Greek philosopher, Epicurus, was the master thinker behind Lucretius' view of the world. (Of him Lucretius writes:

*O glory of the Greeks, the first to raise  
The shining light out of tremendous dark  
Illumining the blessings of our life,  
You are the one I follow...*

As the founder of the Epicurean school, Epicurus exercised great influence on the thought of Hellenistic Greeks and of many Romans. His dominant principle was atomism; a belief that the world is composed of atoms collocated by chance, and responsible, in their infinitely subtle interweavings, for the entirety of existence, from the infinitesimal to the cosmically vast. Lucretius develops many riffs off of this basic perception. The best known of these concern his headlong assault on the fear of death, which he sees as the supreme disturber of mortal peace and happiness.

**Lucretius and the fear of death.** Like Epicurus, and indeed like many Hellenistic thinkers, Lucretius thought the fear of death sufficient to destroy the pleasure of life, and overgrown with all kinds of misconceptions, principally the ignorant belief that we will have sensation, and be aware of our 'dead condition' after death. Lucretius takes special pains to argue away this ignorance, and to address also the subtler objections of those who see the world differently from him. One of those objections was that, even though we may be composed of atoms, and scatter to the winds at death, we may reassemble by accident and once again, at some time in the future, be conscious wholes again, essentially the persons we were before. To this Lucretius responds that even were this almost incalculably chance event to occur, we would be totally without memory, a new collocation entirely. So thorough does he believe the dispersal of the person at death, and the absurdity of fearing death as though it had any connection with our conscious presence?

**Venus and the swerve.** The vast poem in which Lucretius embedded this argument—and which is carried out in splendid dactylic hexameters, just as did Homer in the past and as Virgil will soon do in his *Aeneid*—scrutinizes all that is, starting with the human person, with his/her weaknesses, hopes, and dreams, and then moves on to encase the human in its worldly and finally cosmic setting. After an initial exordium to the goddess of love, Venus, who brings all organic things to growth and life, Lucretius takes his reader farther out into the world of human senses and perceptions, then into the inorganic stages of development of the world around us, with a magnificent reach into the nature of human societies and their growth, and onward out into the cosmos so noble but so devoid of all those theistic god-presences on which we typically rely for comfort in our human world. At the most, we might say, the universe provides a staging ground for our human efforts at society, and in particular for our free will—which might seem to be precluded by the compulsive and random movement of atoms in the void. This free will element, which

for Lucretius is the foundation of the peculiar dignity of the human, enters through a *clinamen*, or *swerving*, of the atoms in the void, a swerving which introduces chance into random necessity.

**Love and spring.** Even the power of love, as we see in the opening of the poem (below) is to be understood in the terms of Epicurean physics, rather, say, than in the terms of Romance. The following passage may seem to boil down to a splendid praise of spring, and to the regeneration of nature through desire, and yet as the reader pursues the passage—reminiscent, say, of Chaucer’s wonderful prologue to spring, or Wordsworth’s loving poems about spring and daffodils—we find ourselves drifting powerfully into a universe where random movements of atoms, not any benevolence in things, is the driver.

Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,  
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars  
Makest to teem the many-voyaged main  
And fruitful lands--for all of living things  
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,  
Through thee are risen to visit the great sun--  
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,  
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,  
For thee the daedal Earth bears scented flowers,  
For thee waters of the unvexed deep  
Smile, and the hollows of the serene sky  
Glow with diffused radiance for thee!  
For soon as comes the springtime face of day,  
And procreant gales blow from the West unbarred,  
First fowls of air, smit to the heart by thee,  
Foretoken thy approach, O thou Divine,  
And leap the wild herds round the happy fields \\\nOr swim the bounding torrents...

## Readings

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987).

Godwin, John, *Lucretius* (Bristol, 2004.)

## Discussion Topics

Why do you suppose Lucretius wrote his epic vision in poetry?

Would we write such a vision in poetry or prose today? What is the peculiar power of poetry, in rising to the height of such an argument about reality?

How do you interpret Lucretius’ claim, that he composed *De Rerum Natura* in order to help free human beings from the fear of death? Does the argument he develops seem calculated to achieve that freeing? Are you afraid of death? What do you do about it?

Does Lucretius integrate the idea of the swerve into his argument, or does it seem to be an artificial ingredient, introduced in order to preserve the possibility of free will?

What Stoic and Epicurean ideas did Lucretius import into his epic, *De Rerum Natura*? Are those ideas incorporated in such a way as to constitute parts of a flowing narrative? Does Lucretius manage to avoid didacticism?