

Lucretius, De Rerum Natura Books 3-4

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Book 3 begins w/ another paean to Epicurus for revealing nature of the universe. To further his exposition, L will now explain mind and spirit.

Fear of death

First, another condemnation of fear of death by showing its ill effects: superstitious observance and greedy looting. "For abject ignominy and irksome poverty seem far away from the joy and assurance of life, loitering already in effect at the gateway of death." Life/death here in intermingled biological and social sense: the socially "alive" man, the self-directed order-giver has indeed a more secure grip on biological life, for two reasons: 1) better health through leisured--fit and rested--body; 2) political terror that reinforces leisure system targets poor disproportionately.

"So in their greed of gain they amass a fortune out of civil bloodshed ..." Notice L gives social explanation of greed, not human nature explanation. If it's social, then reform is possible (even if L thinks it so unlikely that he counsels political withdrawal).

Mind and spirit as material and local parts of body

L's first step is to show mind and spirit are not a mere "harmony" of body, but are locally determined parts of human bodies. To our minds, he may be wrong on his physiology, but at least he offers arguments, and thus, as a scientist, he's more than happy to accept another explanation, as long as it is accessible and not mysterious.

He gives 2 major principles to account for the accepted facts: 1) mind and spirit are interconnected; 2) mind and spirit are material (spirit is small, fine atoms dispersed throughout body, which is made of larger, coarser atoms). Again, his physiology is not as important as his principles. Body and spirit together make life--but for L, spirit is material! Thus life is the conjunction of groups of different size and shape atoms (3.323-347).

Mortality of the soul

Next, L will demonstrate the birth and death of the soul: that mind and spirit are "neither birthless nor deathless" (3.418). "Birthless" refers to believe in reincarnation. L is ruthlessly satiric against reincarnation: "Again, it is surely ludicrous ... " (3.778-82).

His arguments for mortality of the soul, which mostly revolve around the observed facts of physical effects on mental processes--disease, alcohol, medicine--aren't as interesting as the fact that he makes them (a fact that wrecks the common postulation of the immortality of the soul as a perennial philosophical problem), and what he thinks acceptance of the mortality of the soul will do: free people from manipulation by superstition-mongering priests working as agents of social control.

Mortality of soul frees us of fear of eternal punishment after death

The end of Book 3 (830-1094) shows that death, as dissolution of consciousness and personality, can hold no terrors, as only a subject, a conscious person can suffer. "If the future holds misery ... " (862-68). L then goes on to make fun of people who worry about the state of their corpse. Everyone is terrified that vultures will pick their bones, but they don't seem to mind being torched on a pyre or stuffed into a box! But this is pure projection of a conscious self onto a dead body coupled with a gross ethnocentric preference for one set of customs rather than another (870-92).

Next, L gives a fascinating "demythologizing" of stories about torments after death. He shows they are really just projections of evils that living people suffer on earth: punishment after death is just a projection of punishments suffered in prisons: hell is fiery, so it branding! (1017). (By the way, current demythologizations would locate many of the punishments after death as displaced images of the anxieties provoked by current torments visited upon slaves. For example, Tantalus, the one who couldn't eat the fruit just past his grasp, is the everyday life of the kitchen slave.)

Finally, L cites the inevitability of death: all the great ones, even Epicurus himself, died: who are you to complain, then?

Sex

Book 4 has a long discussion of sensation: something only wretched philosophers could find of interest. The end discussion of sex is disappointing. Its model is a male hydraulic model, all about buildup and discharge. To avoid turmoil, the advice is promiscuity. He at least recognizes mutual pleasure in sex, but that need not be progressive: for millennia, it was women's alleged sexual insatiability that reinforced patriarchy.