

Lucretius, De Rerum Natura Books 5-6

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Cosmology (5.91-508)

After more praise of Epicurus and a forecast of Book 5, L details his cosmology.

First, *negative arguments* against a divinely created and immortal world.

First, the world is mortal: it will "crash" (95). To have his readers follow him, L must dissuade them of the belief that the celestial beings are immortal because they are divine intelligent bodies. But among the world's diverse bodies, only a few are fit to become conscious (125), and these do not include sun, moon, stars, etc.

Nor was the world produced by the gods. For what future reward would they perform such labor? (166) Here we see L attack the production model of divine creation. If one is going to project human production onto the gods, why not project the entire social act, including reward? But given the complete self-sufficiency of the gods, they are not in need of any reward. (Here production to make up lack--the alienated labor model of production, as it were.)

Other arguments against divine production: 1) what were the models? (180); 2) what about the imperfections of the world? (199ff).

Next L seeks to prove the mortality of the world. He shows that the elements: earth, water, air, and fire are themselves temporary atomic compositions (235ff). If the elements are temporary compositions, so must be larger bodies made of them, and so must be the world, the collection of bodies.

Other arguments follow, among them: 1) the limits of human history suggest the world is new (323-36); and 2) the strife of the elements suggests an apocalypse sometime (380).

L's *positive account* begins at 416. Infinite time, space, and matter allows for all possible combinations via atomic collisions to form diverse bodies and test their viability. At first a "raging hurricane" (435), the atomic cloud sorted itself out by the principle of "like combining with like" (442). Once again, it's not the details we're interested in, but the scientific method, the appeal to argument: principles deduced from observed facts used to explain other facts.

Social Contract (5.925-1240)

Lucretius' account of human social evolution conforms to the "social contract" model we saw in Plato's incomplete cities, and was resuscitated in 17th C Europe. Postulating a time of individuality, with chance coupling of male and female, is mere fantasy. Almost assuredly, humans have always been social. The real question is how do certain societies produce effects of individuality, not how do individuals come together to form societies.

In any event, L conforms to the logic of the model by postulating a time of "no thought of the common good, no notion of the mutual restraint of morals and laws" (960). As with all such models, there's no differentiation of technological and social complexity, and no explanation of increasing social complexity. Rather, we have merely the statement, "As time went by, men began to build huts and to use skins and fire. Woman mated with man, moved into a single home ..." (1010). Then, again, inexplicably, the "neighbors began to form mutual alliances, wishing neither to do nor to suffer violence among themselves" (1020).

The interesting parts of the story come next, in the accounts of language and fire acquisition. We see L attempting naturalistic explanations, demythologizing the traditional accounts. Later he will do the same with "reverence for the gods" (1162ff). First, the image of gods come from dream images, onto which men project what they do not have in their society: a secure and powerful life. The gods were then credited with responsibility for celestial movement, for which ignorant men had to explanation (1186). True piety, L explains, is removing such ignorance by scientific investigation, not obeying superstition-mongering priests and their ridiculous rituals (1203).

Serenity and pleasure (5.1105ff)

Then another account of interest, as L intersperses his account of kingship with Epicurean advice to avoid pursuit of wealth and power in economics and politics in order to cultivate serenity (*ataraxia*). For money: "if a man would guide his life by true philosophy, he will find ample riches in a modest livelihood enjoyed with a tranquil mind" (1117). For politics: "Far better to lead a quiet life in subjection than to long for sovereign authority and lordship over kingdoms" (1128). Notice two things here. Re: economy, the question here is of appropriate level of money gained via trade, not of self-sufficient land ownership, the small farm having lost its viability. Re: politics, the choice is between quiet subjection or striving for rule over a kingdom, the citizen equal to others deciding course of the *polis* having disappeared.

Here's the place to discuss Lucretius and Epicurus' *hedonism*. The term refers to an explanatory theory of human--and animal--action: pursue pleasure and avoid pain. These must be balanced: a little pain now for modest but secure pleasures later? or risk big pains to shoot for big and refined pleasures? In a historical irony--or bcs of ascetic propaganda--"Epicureanism" became a word for pursuit of refined pleasures. The real picture is the pursuit of serenity (again, note the chaotic social background), which is best done by minimizing tastes, not refining them! The Epicurean (and implied Lucretian) advice would always be to secure modest pleasures by minimizing tastes (see Intro xvii-xx).

Celestial phenomena (6.379-422)

In Book 6 Lucretius sets out to explain celestial phenomena, because not knowing the causes of these is such a source of superstition. The details aren't as important, once again, as the attempt. One shouldn't miss, however, the delicious sarcasm of 6.379-422, where L mercilessly debunks the priestly interpretation of Jove's (Zeus') lightning bolts.

Disease and the Athenian plague (6.1090-1286)

This is a famously troubling passage, a strangely pessimistic end to such an affirmative work. Deleuze says somewhere, only partially joking, that he always wanted to write an article showing L could not have written it, but that it was a slanderous later addition by the pessimism-mongering Christians.

Whatever your thoughts here, the account is interestingly and thoroughly ecological and naturalistic, without a hint of moralizing: it is by no means a punishment for Athenian *hubris* or whatever. In a complex world, situations can develop that are inimical to human life: but that just shows that human life is not the pinnacle of a divinely-guided and protected and/or punished creation. Rather, we are only a non-privileged part of nature.