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Dealing with Divinity in *De Rerum Natura*

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Dealing with Divinity in *De Rerum Natura*

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**This report is dedicated to Christopher Hitchens,
who taught me not to have heroes
and to admire ideas rather than human beings.**

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Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* has as one of its main goals the extermination of traditional conceptions of the gods, but gods pervade the poem in a variety of roles, beginning with the very first line, invoking Venus. This report seeks to analyze the ways in which Lucretius exploits popular notions of the divine while remaining true to both his Epicurean beliefs and his anti-theistic agenda, as well as the reasons behind these decisions. We begin with an exploration of the role of the poetic medium in this situation, followed by a close examination of the entire poem. Lucretius' negative views about *religio* are brought to light and are contrasted with his supportive views regarding religious metaphor, partly through an investigation into Lucretius' representation of Epicurus as divine. The final section of this report identifies some of the same dynamics at play in Lucretius as in modern atheistic discourse and draws more general conclusions about the nature of anti-theistic discourse in a world dominated by theistic assumptions.

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I. Introduction

Of all the great works of the ancient Romans, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*) is one of the most inconsistent in its identity. It is a work undeniably Greek but trying desperately to appeal to a Roman audience; it is a work of oftentimes abstruse philosophy rendered in the traditional medium of beautiful and grandiose epic poetry. Most of all, it is a work the very purpose of which is to advance ideas that would have seemed so radical to traditional Romans as to violently transgress their sensibilities. Not least of these is the central tenet of Epicureanism that the gods are not present in our world and do not interact with it. This is of course completely at odds with the centrality of religion within Roman society. The problem is highlighted by the medium Lucretius chooses to use, the dactylic hexameter epic, which invariably includes mentions of and homage to the gods. The nature of this conflict and the ways in which Lucretius deals with it are the subject of this report.

First, we will discuss Lucretius' initial decision to compose his work in poetry and how this choice plays a central role in all the other inconsistencies being addressed, seeming or real. This will be followed by a close examination of the poem's proem (I.1-159), which will serve as a case study illustrating the strategies Lucretius employs to deal with the chasm between traditional Roman

religious beliefs and his own Epicurean views. The middle section of this report explores some of the other ways that Lucretius treats divinity throughout his poem, examining the seemingly self-contradictory tactics he uses, and the justifications he gives for doing so. Finally, we will explore some of the ways in which the dynamics at work in Lucretius are paralleled in the modern discourse or religious skeptics, and why.

Although Epicurean doctrine regarding the gods will be touched on briefly, the niceties thereof are not central to the matter of the strategies Lucretius employs with regard to divinity and therefore will not be dealt with extensively, nor will the debate regarding Lucretius' debt to any number of Greek influences be inspected closely. It may, however, be useful to start with the literary background to which his work responds.

Background

As Bakhtin made clear, every utterance cannot but respond to previous utterances, and this is especially true of great works.¹ For Lucretius, his predecessors are mostly Greek rather than Roman. Lucretius' main source of inspiration was obviously Epicurus himself, whom Lucretius reveres without

¹ Bakhtin (1986: 60-102) Ch. 3 "The Problem of Speech Genres."

qualification, and enough of whose writing is extant that it is clear that Lucretius renders the ideas of the philosopher fairly faithfully. Lucretius deals more critically with the theories of Heraclitus and Anaxagoras (*DRN* I.635-704 and I.830-920, respectively), but he is most favorable to Empedocles, who is also a major influence on Lucretius.² In fact, Empedocles' famous work was entitled Περὶ Φύσεως, the same title as Epicurus' great work, and the phrase of which *De Rerum Natura* is a translation. Furthermore, Empedocles wrote his poem, which covers similar topics as Lucretius', in dactylic hexameters, and it is clear that Lucretius' admiration of Empedocles was not limited to his ideas³ (although he doesn't hold back in his critique [*DRN* I.742-829]). Ennius is his primary Roman predecessor, to whom Lucretius also pays homage while respectfully disagreeing with some of his ideas.⁴ Ennius was the first great Latin poet to write in dactylic hexameter, and although his poem, the *Annales*, was a history, Ennius covered philosophical topics in his prose works. These included the *Epicharmus*, which contained an account of the gods and a physical theory of the universe, and the *Euhemerus*, which posited that the gods of Olympus were simply great generals

² *DRN* I.716-741. The way that Lucretius pays homage to Empedocles while at the same time distancing himself in the following lines from the ideas of his that he does agree with parallels the way that later poets do the same with the monumental poetry and controversial ideas of Lucretius himself. For a thorough study of Lucretius' debt to Empedocles, see Sedley (1998) Ch. 1.

³ See *DRN* I.730-734.

⁴ *DRN* I.112-126. Incidentally, Ennius' name in line 117 and again in line 121 is the first human name mentioned in *DRN*, besides Memmius'. This occurs even before the naming of Epicurus, who, although his achievements are lavishly described in lines 62-79, is not mentioned by name until nearly the end of Book III (line 1042).

and statesmen of yore whose legends had been embellished into the supernatural, to which notion Lucretius was surely sympathetic. Lucretius also followed in the tradition of Greek didactic poets such as Nicander, who also wrote in hexameter.⁵

Little is known about Lucretius himself. He lived approximately 99 BCE – 50 BCE, and his *magnum opus* is a testament to the possibility of the coexistence of art and technicality, although scholars are still debating to what extent they work together and to what extent they are in conflict.⁶ This relationship corresponds to the difficulties between traditional religion and Epicurean doctrine. Despite the conflict, however, composing his work in poetry was a wise choice for Lucretius to make.

The Enabling Honey

Lucretius recognized that if he should write *De Rerum Natura* in prose, its appeal would be limited. Lucretius is highly sensitive to reader response.

For obviously my actual technique does not lack a
motive. Doctors who try to give children foul-tasting

⁵ A note on terminology: It is undoubtedly true that Lucretius borrows features from both branches of the epic tradition, to wit, heroic and didactic. For the didactic nature of *De Rerum Natura*, see Gale (2001). The focus of this report is more narrow than that discussion, however, and I will not attempt to distinguish these two subgenres. I will refer to the supergenre simply as epic, or dactylic hexameter. *DRN*, left out of some studies of Roman epic, such as Boyle (1996) and von Albrecht (1999), is not always recognized as an epic; for an excellent study on the many ways that *DRN* can be seen as an epic, see Murley (1947).

⁶ See Smith (2001: xv-xvi) for the debate.

wormwood first coat the rim of the cup with the sweet juice of honey; their intention is that the children, unwary at their tender age, will be tricked into applying their lips to the cup and at the same time will drain the bitter draught of wormwood – victims of beguilement, but not of betrayal, since by this means they recover strength and health. I have a similar intention now: since this philosophy of ours often appears somewhat off-putting to those who have not experienced it, and most people recoil back from it, I have preferred to expound it to you in harmonious Pierian poetry and, so to speak, coat it with the sweet honey of the Muses.⁷

The first concern Lucretius anticipates for the reader is the problem of inaccessibility. In the transition leading into this passage, he says, “on an obscure subject I compose such luminous verses, overspreading all with the charm of the Muses”;⁸ and likewise, immediately following the above indented passage, “My hope has been that by this means I might perhaps succeed in holding your attention concentrated on my verses.”⁹ To be clear, Lucretius does not necessarily think that a careful reader will have trouble understanding his reasoning; rather, he is concerned that the technicality of his content will discourage careful reading in the first place. What better way to overcome the difficulty of the

⁷ *DRN* I.935-950. Part of this passage is repeated at IV.1-25. All translations of *DRN* are from Martin Ferguson Smith (2001), unless otherwise noted. In this report, when quoting translated Latin, the original Latin will be quoted in a footnote if only a few lines; if longer, as in this instance, the full passages may be found in the *Index Locorum Latinorum*, which begins on p. 58. Other passages from *DRN* not directly quoted but referred to will also be included in the *Index*.

⁸ *obscura de re tam lucida pango / carmina, musaeo contingens cuncta lepore* (*DRN* I.933-934).

⁹ *si forte animum tali ratione tenere / versibus in nostris possem* (*DRN* I.948-949).

philosophy than to engage the reader with pleasant verse? The dichotomy between the interest of poetry and the tedium of prose is made clear by Quintilian, who quotes Lucretius' doctor simile in his own apology for the dryness of his content:

I know that those who asked me to write this work were specially interested in that portion on which I am now entering, and which, owing to the necessity of examining a great diversity of opinions, at once forms by far the most difficult section of this work, and also, I fear, may be the least attractive to my readers, since it necessitates a dry exposition of rules. In other portions of this work I have attempted to introduce a certain amount of ornateness, not, I may say, to advertise my style (if I had wished to do that, I could have chosen a more fertile theme), but in order that I might thus do something to lure our young men to make themselves acquainted with those principles which I regarded as necessary to the study of rhetoric: for I hoped that by giving them something which was not unpleasant to read I might induce a greater readiness to learn those rules which I feared might, by the dryness and aridity which must necessarily characterise their exposition, revolt their minds and offend their ears which are nowadays grown somewhat over-sensitive. Lucretius has the same object in mind when he states that he has set forth his philosophical system in verse; for you will remember the well-known simile which he uses: "And as physicians when they seek to give / A draught of bitter wormwood to a child, / First smearing along the edge that rims the cup / The liquid sweets of honey, golden-hued," and the rest. But I fear that this

book will have too little honey and too much wormwood, and that though the student may find it a healthy draught, it will be far from agreeable.¹⁰

There is another reason why Lucretius has to fear the reaction of his readers: the controversial nature of his content.¹¹ He is straightforward about this early on: "I fear that you may perhaps imagine that you are starting on the principles of an irreligious philosophy and setting out on a path of wickedness" (I.80-82). There are not only the reader's own sensibilities to consider, but also the influence of those who would discredit Lucretius' doctrine: "The time may come when you yourself, terrorized by the fearsome pronouncements of the fable-mongers, will attempt to defect from us" (I.101-102). We will describe in the next section of this report how poetry provides Lucretius the use of religious metaphor to ameliorate this problem; suffice it to say for now that poetry helps Lucretius sell his message by making it more appealing in both form and content.

Lucretius implicitly admits the importance of the poetic medium near the end of the proem, acknowledging the intricacy of his task:

¹⁰ Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* III.1.2-5 (Butler 1920). Quintilian's quotation of Lucretius is inexact. See the Latin in the *Index* on p. 67.

¹¹ It may seem contradictory that Lucretius is afraid that his audience will be both bored with his writing and excessively provoked by it, but he is explicitly concerned with both possibilities: A reader can find both a writer's style tedious and his ideas abhorrent, and Lucretius may have expected different reactions from different readers.

I am wide awake to the difficulty of the task of illuminating the obscure discoveries of the Greeks in Latin verse. The main obstacles are the inadequacy of the language and the novelty of my subject – factors that entail the coinage of many new terms. But your fine qualities, Memmius, and the hope of gaining the pleasure of your delightful friendship spur me to make a success of my task, however laborious, and induce me to forego sleep and spend the still calm of the night in quest of words and verses that will enable me to light the way brightly for your mind and thus help you to see right to the heart of hidden things.
(I.136-145)

In this passage Lucretius is focusing on the mechanical aspect of conveying his message, but he mentions verses, which do not help with the inadequacy of Latin or the coining of new terms. What they do help with is overcoming the two obstacles about which we have seen him express concern. Part of the difficulty for him lies in the difference between Greek and Latin, as Lucretius makes clear, but putting everything into hexameters might have been just as challenging. But Lucretius knows that the poetic medium is just as important as the translation; when he refers to the “words and verses” that will enable him to enlighten Memmius, “words” refers to the translation while “verses” refers to the meter. They seem to be on an even footing.

While it is important that Lucretius make his overall message palatable, this is especially important at the beginning of a work. Cicero makes clear in his

early work *De Inventione*, which Lucretius could have read, how important it is to start with a hook that will catch and hold your audience's attention:

An exordium is an address bringing the mind of the hearer into a suitable state to receive the rest of the speech; and that will be effected if it has rendered him well disposed towards the speaker, attentive, and willing to receive information.¹²

Lucretius, as we have seen, is very concerned with reader response, and as a proselytizer he wants to make his reader attentive and well disposed to the information he is imparting. The way to do this is to start in a place that looks comfortable to the reader, surrounded by familiar assumptions, and then coax him gradually into the space of true Epicurean philosophy. These two spaces, the traditional Roman starting space and the end space of Epicurean doctrine, have many incompatibilities, however, and the path between them is a rocky one, with fits and starts (though its net movement is progressive).¹³ We will now examine the proem of *De Rerum Natura* and dissect the subtle ways that Lucretius gets and holds his reader's attention without alienating him.¹⁴

¹² *Exordium est oratio animum auditoris idonee comparans ad reliquam dictionem: quod eveniet, si eum benivolum, attentum, docilem confecerit (De Inventione I.20).*

¹³ This pattern does not last for the whole poem; at a certain point, the reader is either going to keep reading or not. Much of Lucretius' maneuvering therefore takes place in the proem.

¹⁴ See the *Index Locorum Latinorum* for the Latin text of the first 159 lines, which may be useful to refer to in this next section on the opening of *DRN*. I will refer to these lines throughout the report interchangeably as the opening or proem of *DRN*.

II. The Proem of *DRN*: Lucretian Schizophrenia?

The poem begins with a hymn addressed to Venus. This is what the reader would expect when embarking upon dactylic hexameters. Lucretius represents her as a generative force and a force of tranquility – each themes of *De Rerum Natura* as a whole. He describes her as being the governess of the nature of things (*quae [...] rerum naturam sola gubernas*) (I.21)¹⁵ and includes a sensual scene (I.30-40) wherein Venus calms Mars down from waging wars because he is infatuated with her. So far, the reader hasn't seen anything at all discomfiting. Everything seems rather familiar, until line 44:

For it is inherent in the very nature of the gods that they should enjoy immortal life in perfect peace, far removed and separated from our world; free from all distress, free from peril, fully self-sufficient, independent of us, they are not influenced by worthy conduct nor touched by anger. (I.44-49)

This passage is controversial because the statement blatantly contradicts what has just been described. Either the gods intervene or they do not. Either the gods are affected by emotion or not. How to explain this flagrant inconsistency has troubled many readers of Lucretius.

¹⁵ As mentioned previously, *natura* is a translation of the Greek word Φύσις, denoting a process at least as much as it denotes a state. See Smith (2001: 2-3) for a discussion of Venus' multifarious symbolic role here, including as a stand-in for the Empedoclean fundamental generative force.

There are a few options with how to deal with this passage.¹⁶ One method is to claim that Venus here is the name put onto a properly “Epicurean divinity,” and not the traditional goddess at all.¹⁷ As will be addressed later, there is in fact a great deal of allegory involved with this inclusion of Venus by Lucretius, but this explanation is insufficient for our current purposes because it only serves to justify her presence, not to explain why it was motivated.

A more popular method of resolving the conflict is by deleting the seemingly problematic passage (or a less offensive alternative, positing a lengthy lacuna before it to lessen the impact of the contradiction).¹⁸ As with Vergil, Lucretius died before he could put the finishing touches on *De Rerum Natura*. Unfortunately, this leaves scholars the handy excuse that the poet died before making the posited revision. This approach may be convenient for those who utilize it, but it is also insufficient because it merely postpones the problem. After all, the conflict between the philosophy and the proem is still there, only delayed. It is better to try to figure out first if Lucretius is doing something interesting, on purpose.

¹⁶ See O’Hara (2006: 59-60) for the first two methods.

¹⁷ Asmis (1982: 458) suggests that this “Epicurean divinity” Venus is exalted in opposition to a more Stoic deity, Jupiter. Furley (1966) and Sedley (1998) take issue with this interpretation, however, unconvinced that Lucretius is arguing against the Stoics at all in *DRN*, and finding the notion of an Epicurean divinity incoherent.

¹⁸ See Courtney (1987) for a compilation of arguments to this effect.

The first clue to this occurs in Lucretius' invocation in lines 24-28. While an invocation to a Muse, or Apollo, or even Venus would be the normal procedure, Lucretius invokes Venus in an unusual way:

. . . it is you whom I desire to be my associate [*sociam*] in writing this poem *On the Nature of Things*, which I am attempting to compose for my friend Memmius. Through your will, goddess, he is always endowed outstandingly with all fine qualities. So with all the more justification, Venus, give my words charm [*lepos*] that will ensure their immortality. (I.24-28)

This passage would seem to endorse the idea that the gods intervene in the lives of humans, but Lucretius leaves a few clues that he means something deeper. In addition to the last sentence, which again demonstrates Lucretius' awareness that it is his poesy that will make his message amenable for reception, the word to note is "associate" (*sociam*). Normally, a poet calls on the invoked spirit or godhead to be the *source* of his inspiration. In this case, however, the deity will merely help Lucretius package his message attractively, with the charm (*lepos*) of poetry. We know that *lepos* does in fact refer to the poetic medium because of a passage we have already discussed: ". . . on an obscure subject I compose such luminous verses, overspreading all with the charm [*lepore*] of the Muses" (I.933-934). Venus also works allegorically here. In the opening section which describes Venus' governance of the natural propagation of animals, Lucretius says of the animals, "thusly captivated by your charm

[*lepore*] they follow you eagerly wherever you proceed to lead" (I.15-16).¹⁹

Lucretius clearly hopes that his readers will follow him in a similar way, captivated by the *lepos* of his hexameters, which he has borrowed from his allegorical Venus. In this way, Venus serves a rhetorical and presentational purpose, negotiating an acceptable space of discourse between Lucretius and his readers.

Lucretius also alters the conventions of the genre in shifting the source of his inspiration from an Olympian deity like Venus, or a Muse, to Epicurus himself (see I.62-79). And even though he calls upon the Muses and Venus to provide the medium of meter, he takes as his literary exemplars Ennius and Homer, whom he lists explicitly,²⁰ emphasizing the epic nature of his own poem, although he also includes a veiled reference to Hesiod, it would seem, in mentioning the mountain Helicon (I.118), thereby also harkening back to the didactic tradition.²¹

¹⁹ The translation is my own.

²⁰ *DRN* I.117-126. See Ch. 1 of Sedley (1998) for an extensive argument that, although he fails to acknowledge this explicitly, Lucretius also regards Empedocles as a primary literary forebear, and that the beginning of *DRN* is in fact modeled on the lost proem of Empedocles.

²¹ The naturalizing of Venus from a source of inspiration to a mere means to an end may also be interpreted through a lens of gender issues. In handing over his reverence to Epicurus, Ennius, and Homer, his male predecessors, and addressing the poem to a man (Memmius) and men in general, the space within the discourse for females is limited only to that which males find appealing. This is connected to Lucretius' disdain regarding about sex, which manifests in Book IV (1030-1191), which shows that there is no place for females in the philosophy itself, and certainly not as a source of inspiration. This is roughly contemporaneous with Catullus 68, in which the poet does a similar thing, giving lip service to Venus (l. 4, 9) and the Muses (l. 6, 9), but goes on not to credit them with inspiration, but to tell them to spread what he has written: "*sed*

We can see how Lucretius cleverly appears to present an uncontroversial view of the gods while surreptitiously writing in clues to his real view of the nature of the gods as a subtext that readers knowledgeable about Epicureanism can pick up on. The best example of this occurs in the very first line of the poem, where Venus is referred to as the *voluptas* of humans and gods, pleasure being the central goal of the Epicurean life. In this way we can also see that although the poetry may bring along some unfortunate theological baggage, it can be dealt with metaphorically, and that the choice to write in verse is essentially Epicurean, since poetry is the more pleasurable medium.

Let us return to the controversial passage of I.44-49. The contrast between the traditional Roman view and the Epicurean position is made all the more salient by the fact that these lines, abjuring the involvement of the gods (affirmatively but not violently), follow right on the heels of Venus seductively

dicam uobis, uos porro dicite multis / milibus" (45-46). They are followed by Ovid, who at the beginning of Book I of his *Ars Amatoria* (also an at least ostensibly misogynistic work, addressed to males in a discourse where there really is no room for female agency) denies that he has had a vision of the Muses (*nec mihi sunt visae Clio Cliusque sorores*) (l. 27), and although he invokes Venus (*coeptis, mater Amoris, ades*) (l.30), he declares that "*usus opus movet hoc*" (l. 29). Another instance following along the same lines in *DRN* occurs in a backhanded reference to the Delphic oracle at I.738-739, when Lucretius asserts that Empedocles "delivered oracles more holy and much more reliable than those that the Pythia pronounces" (*responsa dedere / sanctius et multo certa ratione magis quam / Pythia . . . profatur*) – also an indictment of *religio*. Finally, Lucretius even retroactively denigrates the Muses of the past, calling Homer and the other ancient inventors of the arts (*repertores . . . leporum*, III.1036) the "companions" of the Heliconian maidens (*Heliaconiadum comites*, III.1037), again putting the poet and feminine divinity on equal terms. These examples merely show that Lucretius is not the only one who twists generic convention (rather than avoiding it entirely) when the usual practice is inconvenient to him, although the reason for the inconvenience vary.

calming Mars, and Lucretius' plea that she quell his country's military upheaval. But we must also look on the other side of the passage in question. Immediately following, Lucretius seems to retreat apologetically:

As for what follows, Memmius, lend open ears and an alert mind, released from cares, to true philosophy. My gifts have been arranged for you with steadfast zeal; be sure that you do not contemptuously discard them without having first understood them. (I.50-53)

These lines are clearly a response to what Lucretius expects is a negative reaction from the reader to the blasphemous Epicurean sentiment of the previous few lines. He urges the reader to attend, proleptically insisting on the benefits that will follow by referring to the reader's mind as already "released from cares." He even guilt-trips the reader by emphasizing how much effort he has put into crafting his "gifts," begging the reader not to reject too quickly what he has not yet understood. So, the forthright affirmation of Epicurean doctrine regarding the absence of the gods is immediately followed by what amounts to a fervent apology, although he does not retreat from the content of his previous assertion.

Without the previous passage (I.44-49) to prompt the negative reaction to which these lines (I.50-53) respond, these lines are stripped of much of their meaning; they seem out of place and without anything to which to respond, since what lies before the deistic affirmation is the totally inoffensive description

of Venus mollifying Mars and a few words of praise for Memmius. This is conclusive evidence, in my view, that I.44-49 should be retained rather than deleted, and moreover, the fact that lines 50-53 seem to directly respond to the anticipated reaction against lines 44-49 militates against the option of positing a lacuna in between the two sections. A lacuna prior to the lines in question is a possibility, but unmotivated by the evidence – there is another reason to think that the provocation in lines 44-49 is deliberate.

Throughout the rest of the proem of *DRN* (that is, until line 160, when he embarks upon atomic theory, the main content of Book I), Lucretius displays a pattern whereby he alternates between showing his true colors with increasing zeal, and apologizing, forcefully at first but then with diminishing vim. After the apologetic lines 50-53, Lucretius gives us a taste of his first topic in the form of a brief explanation of his program, described in reverse order (heavens, gods, atoms):

For I will proceed to explain to you the working of the heaven above and the nature of the gods, and will unfold the primary elements of things from which nature creates, increases, and sustains all things, and into which she again resolves them when they perish. In expounding our philosophy I often call these elements 'matter' or 'generative particles of things' or 'seeds of things'; and, since they are the ultimate constituents of all things, another term I often use is 'ultimate particles.' (I.54-61)

Regarding where this excerpt falls on the spectrum of cultivating the favor of the audience or being uncompromising, this passage can be attached to the apology that precedes it.²² He mentions the nature of the gods briefly, putting off any explanation thereof, choosing instead to focus on issues of atomic terminology, which, although they may not exactly be endearing to the reader, do distract from any blasphemy which might have caused offense. It is conciliatory in that it is inoffensive.

Unfortunately, Lucretius would seem to nullify any pacifying effect the previous twelve lines may have had by following them up by launching into some uncompromisingly triumphant and adulatory praise of Epicurus and a vibrant description of his achievement of conquering superstition (*religio*):

When all could see that human life lay groveling
ignominiously in the dust, crushed beneath the
grinding weight of superstition [*religio*], which from
the celestial regions displayed its face, lowering over
mortals with hideous scowl, the first who dared to lift
mortal eyes to challenge it, the first to venture to
confront it boldly, was a Greek. This man neither the
reputation of the gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven's
menacing rumbles could daunt; rather all the more
they roused the ardor of his courage and made him
long to be the first to burst the bolts and bars of
nature's gates. And so his mind's might and vigor
prevailed, and on he marched far beyond the blazing

²² Smith (2001) arranges the paragraphs thusly in his prose translation.

battlements of the world, in thought and understanding journeying all the through the measureless universe; and from this expedition he returns to us in triumph with his spoils. [...] So now the situation is reversed: superstition [*religio*] is flung down and trampled underfoot; we are raised to heaven by his victory. (I.62-79)

Religio, here translated as *superstition*, can be understood to mean any belief that the gods intervene in our world, as well as any rituals that accompany that belief – the bulk of traditional Roman religion falls under this term, used here in an extremely derogatory manner. This is not the way to win over a skeptical reader.

At this point Lucretius takes a step back, acknowledging the reader's reluctance in the next sentence: "In this connection, I fear that you may imagine that you are starting on the principles of an irreligious [*impia*] philosophy and setting out on a path of wickedness" (I.80-82). But after this little bit of hedging, he plunges back into attack mode: "But in fact more often it is that very superstition [*religio*] that has perpetrated wicked and irreligious [*impia*]²³ deeds"

²³ This word, "irreligious," which translates the Latin word *impia* rather than any word etymologically related to *religio*, is a careful choice by Smith, since he translates *religio* as "superstition." The important thing to keep in mind when translating these words is not to use the same root for both *religio* and *impia* (i.e. "religion" and "irreligious"), since in that case it would be obvious that the reader is in fact setting out on an irreligious path, when he has just read about Epicurus crushing religion into the dust. This of course reflects Lucretius' decision to differentiate the terms. Lucretius later makes clear the difference between *religio*/superstition and true piety, and that his philosophy is the opposite of impious when he asserts that "piety does not consist in veiling one's head and turning with ostentatious frequency to a stone, or in visiting

(I.82-83). What follows is a lengthy editorializing narration of the deplorable sacrifice of Iphigenia preceding the Trojan War (I.84-100), which Lucretius concludes with the famous line, *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* ("Such heinous acts could superstition prompt.") (I.101).

It would seem that Lucretius is already fully in Epicurean mode, laying down his diatribe against the traditional understanding of the gods. But the pattern of alternating offense and defense continues, as he warns his readers against being swayed by "the fearsome pronouncements of the fable mongers" (I.102-103), having already admonished the reader regarding his own misgivings. Then he goes back on the offensive:

Consider how numerous are the fantasies they can invent, capable of confounding *your* calculated plan of life and clouding all *your* fortunes with fear. And with reason; for if people realized that there was a limit set to their tribulations, they would somehow find strength to defy irrational beliefs and the threats of the fable-mongers. (I.104-109) [emphasis added]

This appeal, which seems, rather prematurely and presumptuously, to assume that the reader²⁴ has already been convinced by arguments not yet

every altar, or in prostrating oneself on the ground with outstretched palms before the shrines of the gods, or in saturating the sacrificial slabs with the blood of four-footed beasts, or in linking vows to vows, but rather in possessing the ability to contemplate all things with a tranquil mind." *DRN* V.1198-1203 (see *Index*). So far are the ills of superstition from the peace of mind that comes from true understanding.

²⁴ Ostensibly, Lucretius' second person is Memmius himself. Indeed, Leonard and Smith (1942: 213) remark on the *iam* in line 104 in the passage above, "i.e., even "now" after Memmius has

presented, is ironic considering that Lucretius has in the preceding lines asserted that “the time may come when you yourself . . . will attempt to defect from us.”²⁵ By speaking with such presumption, before he has had a chance to convince the reader of anything, he may in fact be hastening that defection. Note also that *fable-mongers* translates *vates* (I.102 and 109). Before Vergil rehabilitated this term, it had a very negative sense, connoting something like a spiritual charlatan. But the people to whom Lucretius here refers, with the irrational beliefs and threats, are the respected religious authorities of Rome, such as the appointed priests of various gods or nearby oracles.²⁶ Lucretius’ combative tone here seems more

joined the cause of Epicurus” – another bit of presumption from Lucretius. But it is important to understand that while Lucretius does undoubtedly mean Memmius to be his addressee, the second person may also be understood to be any Roman reader, especially since there are long sections of third-person discourse separating these direct addresses from the nearest explicit namings of Memmius himself, the most closely preceding instance of which occurs all the way back at line 50; and although Lucretius does seem to be directly addressing Memmius in line 140, he is not named again until line 410. There is nothing in these particular lines (I.80-82, 101-109) that prevents them from addressing the general reader of *De Rerum Natura*.

²⁵ *tutemet a nobis quovis tempore . . . / . . . desciscere quaeres* (I.102-103).

²⁶ Another reason Lucretius might have worried about reader response was the possibility of censorship. Luckily traditional Roman religion was so dominating at that time in Rome that the intellectual musings of a poet may not have seemed so threatening to religious conservatives; otherwise, Lucretius might have gone the way of Socrates and *DRN* might be lost. In this connection, we must also remember that, in order to make it to us today, Lucretius’ poem had to survive hundreds of years of absolute Christian rule in Europe. We cannot know for certain what possessed the monks of the Church to preserve and copy this virulently pagan work, and there is no way that Lucretius could have foreseen what a hostile environment his poem would have to endure in the future, but in any case, it seems likely that the beauty of his poetry balanced out the extremity of his ideas and the polemicism of his rhetoric, and that if *De Rerum Natura* had been a work of prose, we would probably not have it extant today. In this way, we can understand that the poetic nature of *DRN* is genius not only because of the skill it took to compose such a work, but because the fact that the work was such a beautiful opus of poetry is what allowed the genius of his ideas and of his art to be carried down to us today.

likely to drive away readers than to reassure them that they are right to stick with him (we will discuss why in a moment).

To summarize the rest of the opening section of *DRN* before the main content of Book I, Lucretius at this point takes the opportunity to explain some of people's false beliefs as handed down by the great poets of the past (I.110-126). He lists some of the cosmic phenomena which he intends to elucidate (I.127-135), mentions again the challenge of putting Greek philosophy into poetry in the inadequate Latin language (I.136-139), and ensures that Memmius knows how much time and effort has gone into the poem's composition (I.140-145). Finally, before embarking upon the main substance of the first book, Lucretius includes a significant passage which serves as a conclusion to the opening as well as a transition into atomic theory:

This terrifying darkness that enshrouds the mind must be dispelled not by the sun's rays and the dazzling darts of day, but by study of the superficial aspect and underlying principle of nature. The first stage of this study will have this rule as its basis: nothing ever springs miraculously out of nothing. *The fact is that all mortals are in the grip of fear, because they observe many things happening on earth and in the sky and, being at a complete loss for an explanation of their cause, suppose that a supernatural power is responsible for them.* Therefore, as soon as we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing, we shall have a clearer view of the object of our search, namely the explanation of the source of all created things and of

the way in which all things happen independently of
the gods. (I.146-159) [emphasis added]

Finally, Lucretius seems to be getting somewhere reasonable. After all the vehement and inflammatory statements he has been making, pronouncing his conclusions before he has had a chance to argue towards them, this passage constitutes a first step in that direction, laying out in very basic terms how atomic theory will demonstrate that the phenomena which serve as people's motivation for positing the gods can be explained naturally, eliminating by Occam's razor the explanatory power of the gods and the need to posit their presence in this world. The sentence italicized in the passage above can serve as a starting point for the discussion Lucretius wants to have. A Roman reading these lines might well be able to see the wisdom that, in fact, people are terrified by the workings of nature they cannot explain. Only at the end of the proem, after all of Lucretius' proleptic conclusions, does his demonstration actually begin.

Now we have examined the entire rhetorical structure of the opening of *De Rerum Natura* (lines 1-159). We have seen that while Lucretius is clearly aware of the need to appeal to his audience, and he takes great pains to do so, not least of which is his decision to write his entire work in verse, he includes several strongly worded passages hostile to the assumed perspective of his Roman readers, seemingly undercutting his goal of persuasion and forcing him to

apologize for each such instance with a buffering passage of conciliation. We see a back and forth between accommodation and provocation. It seems that Lucretius can't help himself, that he is already starting to get into the arguments that he should really be saving for later, that he may be turning his readers away. Why does Lucretius work against himself so? Indeed, not only is there an internal rhetorical antagonism, but to someone who takes Lucretius' opening statements about Venus at face value, Lucretius even seems conflicted about his actual beliefs.

The parts of *De Rerum Natura* which seem to conflict with Epicurean tenets, sometimes flagrantly, have been known in the history of the scholarship as the "Anti-Lucretius" within Lucretius.²⁷ The proponents of the Anti-Lucretius have posited that while Lucretius was undeniably an Epicurean devotee, his traditional Roman sentiments show through at certain moments. We have seen how Lucretius spends the first twenty lines on a pleasant hymn to Venus, continues into his unusual invocation where he hints that something different is at work by asking her to be his "associate," then describing a scene where Venus calms Mars, a scene which Lucretius can justify because, although his audience

²⁷ The idea was originated by Patin (1868) and remained popular for nearly a century (see Tyrell [1893: 77]; Farrington [1946: 181]; Sinker [1947: xviii-xxii]), until falling out of favor at the end of the last century (see Kenney [1982: 217] and especially the introduction of Gale [1994], which discusses the history and evolution of this position, including several other of its 20th century proponents). More recently, it has even been argued that the inconsistent passages, including the proem, are the additions of a later interpolator (Deufert [1996: 255ff.]).

might be taking it literally, he himself means it metaphorically. Then we can imagine Lucretius not being able to hold back any longer and inserting a gentle but firm Epicurean assertion in I.44-49,²⁸ out of excessive zeal or the will to deliberately provoke the reader or both, only to backpedal and apologize in the following lines (50-61). Only, he then goes on to triumphantly celebrate the *aristeia* of Epicurus over crushing religion, in uncompromising terms (62-79), only to follow with another retreat, expressing concern about the reader's reaction (80-82), and the pattern continues, as we have seen.

This does seem a bit schizophrenic. Are the Anti-Lucretians on to something? Not really; although Lucretius is of two minds about something, it is not his beliefs. Rather, he is torn between his will to reveal what he regards as the uplifting, true tenets of Epicureanism and his understanding that his audience may not see it that way at first and so must be eased into it. Perhaps Lucretius felt that if the reader didn't have some sense of what the potential benefits of this philosophy might be, that he would not slog through two whole books on atomic

²⁸ Despite all the controversy regarding these lines, Lucretius is clearly holding back here. He might have used a more strongly worded statement, perhaps along the lines of this passage from near the end of Book II: "Once you obtain a firm grasp of these facts, you see that nature is her own mistress and is exempt from the oppression of arrogant despots, accomplishing everything by herself spontaneously and independently and free from the jurisdiction of the gods" (*Quae bene cognita si teneas, natura videtur / libera continuo, dominis privata superbis, / ipsa sua per se sponte omnia dis agere expers*, I.1090-1092). But this certainly would have offended many readers from continuing; whereas, including it later on, after he's hooked everyone he could have hooked, he has no problem with, and indeed relishes it.

theory. Lucretius is aware that tedium can harm his ability to impart his message as much as the religious authorities can, and the poetic medium can only do so much. This provides one possible explanation as to why we see this stark back-and-forth between what seem to be contradicting viewpoints: Lucretius' zeal bursts forth, and then his political side covers it over, repeatedly, until the point is reached where anyone who would stop reading on account of offended sensibilities will have already stopped, and undiluted Epicurean views take over. Therefore it can be thought of as a schizophrenia of priorities (truth versus appeal) rather than of Lucretius' actual beliefs.

In sum, I would like to endorse a more nuanced view of the inconsistencies in Lucretius, one which disavows the conflicted-about-his-actual-beliefs Anti-Lucretius and embraces what O'Hara has termed the "not-quite-yet-thoroughly-Lucretius."²⁹ He does not elaborate significantly on what he means by that;³⁰ this report is intended to do just that. It is a Lucretius who has multiple motivations, chief among them the often conflicting priorities of the true

²⁹ O'Hara (2006: 64)

³⁰ O'Hara understands that the inconsistencies in the poem "are related to his poetic or rhetorical technique," but he goes on to say that "Lucretius either works with contradictions within Epicureanism or uses inconsistency as deliberate poetic device" (p. 65). I take issue with that statement, which conveniently fits into his larger thesis about how Roman epic poets "use inconsistency" for their varied purposes – rather, inconsistency is just the inevitable result of persuading an audience to an endpoint which differs vastly from the only place you can start them from: where they currently are. However, readers may have found the contrast between the poetry and the philosophy intriguing, so one could say that this may have functioned as an incidental persuasive strategy.

expression of Epicureanism and the ensuring that those ideas will be received as well as possible. It should be noted that the “Anti-Lucretius” does not last very long into the poem; hence, the not-*quite-yet*-thoroughly Lucretius. Lucretius was clearly a poet, but it was a decision designed as much as it was an artistic one to write his work as poetry. Understanding this can bring us some insight into these passages of Lucretius that have troubled his readers for so long.

III. "Oh My Goddess!"

In the next section of this report, we will take a look at a few passages that illustrate other ways Lucretius exhibits and utilizes flexibility in his treatment of divinity. We begin with an important passage that combines some of the issues heretofore addressed, including the problem of tedium, Lucretius' utilization of generic features, and the rhetorical nature of his alternation between anti-religious polemic and subsequent hedging and apology therefor. In Book II, after hundreds of lines about atomic theory, Lucretius artificially introduces a vivid visual description of Cybele (with the excuse that she has something to do with the earth – a tenuous connection) and of a parade celebrating her (II.600-645 – see text in the *Index*). This colorful scene breaks the stream of technical discussion of physics, providing an artistic rest for the intellectually wearied. This passage is only partly ecphrastic, however, also drawing on aetiological tradition, proffering some interesting possible explanations for why the priests of the goddess are eunuchs (II.614-617) and why they engage in their characteristic crazed dance (II.633-643).

Yet despite the artistry Lucretius clearly worked into his depiction, he is quick to distance himself from any notions of the goddess represented in the picture he has just painted, saying right afterwards, "But although these ideas are conceived and expressed in a fine and impressive manner, they are far

divorced from the true explanation”;³¹ and immediately following this statement is a repetition of the controversial lines we have seen before, I.44-49. He elaborates for a moment on how this applies to “Mother Earth” (II.652-654), and then he makes an interesting statement:

In this connection, if people choose to call the sea Neptune and corn Ceres, and prefer to misapply the name of Bacchus rather than use the proper term for liquor of grapes, let us concede that they may designate the earth as Mother of the gods, on condition that they really and truly refrain from tainting their minds with the stain of superstition.³²

This important passage is where Lucretius excuses himself and gives himself license for all the instances where he has spoken of the Olympian deities as though they were real, including the section on Venus and Mars at the beginning of the poem; for while he does not understand the gods in that way, he must seem to in order to be an effective proselytizer. We know that Lucretius means this advice not only as advice to others but also as a precept which he himself follows because he himself perpetrates the very examples he gives, the

³¹ DRN II.644-645

quae bene et eximie quamvis disposta ferantur
longe sunt tamen a vera ratione repulsa.

³² DRN II.655-660

hic si quis mare “Neptunum” “Cererem” que vocare
constituet fruges et Bacchi nomine abuti
mavolt quam laticis proprium proferre vocamen
concedamus ut hic terrarum dictitet orbem
esse deum matrem, dum vera re tamen ipse
religione animum turpi contingere parcat.

metaphorical usages of Neptune and Bacchus.³³ The advice that Lucretius gives remains relevant today, since modern atheists say things like “oh my God” all the time out of habit, just as the Epicureans surely did with their own gods (or else Lucretius would not have addressed the issue). For this reason, I call this passage and the principle that it describes “It’s OK to OMG,” a term I will use throughout this report. This guideline, allowing for religious metaphor as long as the user understand it to be nothing more than metaphor, is central to understanding the ways that Lucretius deals with divinity throughout the poem.

The Artifice of *religio*

The passage about Magna Mater contains further insights about Lucretius’ attitudes regarding the gods. Consider the following description of the parade’s ornamentation:

All around the statue rolls the thunderous percussion of taut timbrels; concave cymbals clash, raucous-voiced trumpets snarl, and the Phrygian rhythm of the hollow pipe goads on the devotees, who brandish before them weapons that symbolize their violent frenzy, to terrorize the ungrateful minds and irreverent hearts of the populace with the power of the goddess. And so, as soon as her silent figure is

³³ Neptune in II.472, Bacchus in III.221.

processioned into great cities to bless mortals with
mute benediction, the people strew her path all
through the streets with bronze and silver, enriching
her with liberal offerings, and shade the Mother and
her escort with showers of snowy rose-blossoms.³⁴

Lucretius describes the statue as *tacita* and *muta* (surrounding the word *mortalis*) in line 625, contrasting with all the human noise surrounding it, all of which conveys Lucretius' skepticism of the actual presence of any divinity in such a display, as well as his belief that the trappings of *religio* are simple human fabrication. Furthermore, the ritualistic accoutrements serve as symbols for what Lucretius considers one of main causes of *religio*: fear.³⁵ The noise and weapons are meant precisely to inflict fear, and the people respond by capitulating with the value and decoration of bronze, silver, and rose-blossoms. These human creations also represent one of the main sins of *religio*: the debasement and misunderstanding of the true nature of the gods. Lucretius in Book V discusses how vile he thinks are those who defile the gods "with mortal speech" (*mortali sermone*, V. 121). But it is not just with speech that the fable-mongers and soothsayers denigrate the gods' true nature, but also with visual representation and superstitious ritual behaviors. Lucretius makes clear that our representations of the gods cannot have any real connection to the gods when he asks, "Do you

³⁴ DRN II.618-628. Note the alliteration in the first two lines and the dactylic rhythm of the third, all expressing what is going on in the description. See *Index* for the Latin.

³⁵ See V.1119ff and I.151-154, *inter alia*.

not see the shrines and statues of the gods succumbing to the stress and strain of age, their sanctity being powerless to extend the limits of destiny or defy the laws of nature?"³⁶ Along the same lines, he elsewhere seeks to demolish the notion that lightning is the work of Jupiter by asking (among many other pointed and astute rhetorical questions), "Why does he shatter the sacred shrines of deities and his own splendid seats with destructive thunderbolts? Why does he smash finely fashioned statues of the gods and deface his own images with violent wounds?"³⁷ His sarcasm here (amplified by the slew of rhetorical questions surrounding this excerpt) is more than enough to convey the fact that he does not believe, of course, that "Jupiter" exists.

Another important passage in this vein of the illustration of the moral (and factual) wrongness of *religio* occurs in Book II (lines 352-366). At this moment in the poem, Lucretius is ostensibly making a technical point about why he thinks there are different genera of atoms or molecules, but he takes the opportunity to go out of his way (in the same digressive manner as with the Cybele parade) to make an entirely separate point about the harm that *religio*

³⁶ DRN V.308-310.

non delubra deum simulacraque fessa fatisci
nec sanctum numen fati protollere finis
posse neque adversus naturae foedera niti [cernis]?

³⁷ DRN VI.417-420.

postremo cur sancta deum delubra suasque
discutit infesto praeclaras fulmine sedes
et bene facta deum frangit simulacra suisque
demit imaginibus violento vulnere honorem?

causes by painting a pitiful picture of a mourning cow who has lost her calf as a victim of religious sacrifice.

For example, often before a god's ornamented shrine a calf falls victim beside the incense-smoking altars, and with its last breath spurts a hot stream of blood from its breast. Meanwhile the bereaved mother ranges through green glades searching the ground for the imprint of those cloven hoofs. With her eyes she explores every place in hope that she will be able to spy somewhere the young one she has lost. Now she halts and fills the leafy grove with her plaintive calls. Time after time, she returns to the cowshed, her heart transfixed with longing for her calf. Tender willow shoots, and grass freshened by dew, and those familiar streams brimming their banks as they slide by, fail to soothe her mind and remove the pain of anguish; and the sight of other calves in the luxuriant pastures is equally powerless to divert her thoughts into a new channel and disburden her of care. So deeply does she feel the loss of something that she knows as her very own. (DRN II.352-366 – See *Index*)

This scene can be thought of as the latter complement to Lucretius' initial (and most salient) foray into this topic, at I.84ff, the passage describing the sacrifice of Iphianassa at Aulis; while that scene so desperately depicted the sad struggle of an innocent girl prior to sacrifice, this digression focuses on the aftermath – and the sadness is intensified by the extreme innocence of not only

the sacrificed calf but of the mother cow herself.³⁸ In the sacrifice of Iphianassa, Lucretius included some the accoutrements of the ritual, including the ribbon (*infula*, I.87) that was wrapped around her head.³⁹ In this passage we also see a bit of that, the “ornamented shrine of the gods” (*deum delubra decora*, II.352) and the “incense-bearing altars” (*turicremas aras*, II.353).⁴⁰ And while his focus in both passages is the suffering of the individual,⁴¹ there is still a clear contrast between

³⁸ As is plain from this passage, after reading which one cannot help but wonder if Lucretius had seen for himself the mourning of a cow bereaved over the loss of her youngster, Lucretius was very fond of cows. Considering their equanimity to be an ideal for the Epicurean to aspire to, at III.303ff he explains how cows are affected very little by either fear or anger, and that they therefore represent a happy medium between deer and lions. Hilariously, he subtly suggests that “education *may* give certain people equal refinement [to that of cows]” [emphasis added] (*doctrina politos / constituat pariter quosdam*, III.306-307). Thus, they make the perfect foil to the insecure violence and pretense of *religio*.

³⁹ Granted, this was for her supposed wedding, but it takes on a significance of its own as she was given as a virgin, not to Achilles, but to Artemis. Smith (2001: 5) even notes it as “the mark of a sacrificial victim.”

⁴⁰ These passages are also connected in their diction, not surprisingly, by blood (*sanguis*, I.85 and II.354) on altars (*arae*, I.95 and II.353), and by sacrifice (*mactare*, I.99 and II.353). Later on in Book III, Lucretius once again mentions sacrifices as he sums up his feelings on the fakeness, insecurity, and inefficacy of religion: “To be sure, people often claim that they dread illness or a life of infamy more than Tartarus and death, and that they know the mind to be composed of blood, or even of wind, if that happens to catch their fancy; they claim too that they have absolutely no need of our philosophy. But you may see from what follows that all these claims are a display of bravado to win applause rather than prompted by true conviction. For the same people, though banished from their homeland, driven far from the sight of other human beings, branded with the stigma of some foul crime, and afflicted, in a word, with every kind of tribulation, continue to live. Wherever they bring their troubles, they offer sacrifices to their ancestors, immolate black victims, dispatch oblations to the infernal deities, and in their bitter plight turn their minds much more zealously to superstition. The lesson is this: It is advisable to appraise people in doubt and danger and to discover how they behave in adversity; for then and only then is the truth elicited from the bottom of their hearts: the mask is ripped off; the reality remains” *DRN* III.40-58. See *Index* for the Latin.

⁴¹ One might be tempted to remark that there is an irony in the mother cow taking the death of her child so hard considering the Epicurean attitude about death, but such a sentiment would be misguided, since Lucretius correctly understands that it is not the death of her child that the mother cow mourns – perhaps he felt that animals could not grasp death, or if so, there is no

the human trappings of religious ritual and the natural peace of the realm of the animal. We see the “green glades” (*viridis saltus*) and “leafy groves” (*frondiferum nemus*) filled with “tender willow shoots” and “grass freshened by dew” (*tenerae salices atque herbae rore vigentes*), and the “familiar streams brimming their banks as they slide by” (*flumina summis labentia ripis*). All this peaceful imagery, contrasted so starkly against the suffering of the bereft mother, serves to highlight how far distant the honest nature of the animals is from the artifice of *religio*. Lucretius recognizes the embellishment of religious ritual and imagery as symptoms of human insecurity, and rightly regards the tranquil beauty and serenity of nature as a higher plane of existence. The fact that *religio* can bring the psychic anguish normally reserved for humans even to his beloved cows, the most equanimous of animals, only serves to accentuate the harm that can result from a human debasement of the true – secure – nature of the gods. *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*.

And yet, despite Lucretius’ adamant feelings about *religio*, he recognizes that an animated religious parade is as effective a respite from atomic theory as a pleasant description of a cow’s fields and streams. Moreover, keeping in mind that it’s OK to OMG, he demonstrates that he can criticize the false

reason why the mother would know that the child that had been taken away from it had been slaughtered; rather, she mourns only the continued absence of her lost child.

ornamentation of religion even at the same time as he uses this very decoration for aesthetic appeal in his poetry.

This is by no means the only instance where Lucretius both uses religion and tears it down at the same time. At V. 188ff., in discussing what should be the fate of those who denigrate the true nature of the gods “with mortal speech” (*mortali sermone*, V. 121), referring to people like the oracle of Apollo, whom he has just mentioned derogatorily (V. 112), Lucretius weirdly likens their proper punishment to those doled out to the Giants (the inverse of his praise for Epicurus – see my discussion below). Given the context, this is paradoxically appropriate as well as ironic, which makes this metaphor’s rhetorical effect all the more striking. And although Lucretius does not feel the need to make clear that in fact the Giants did not exist, and that they therefore did not pay any price for their fictional crimes, his very next sentence happens to affirm vehemently that the various celestial bodies “are so far from being divine, and are so unworthy to be enrolled among the gods, that they may be regarded as outstanding examples of the inanimate and insensible.”⁴² To reiterate:

Lucretius has no compunction against the irony of advancing an anti-theistic proposition using theistic metaphors or analogies for poetic, persuasive, and

⁴² *DRN* V.121-125.

quae procul usque adeo divino a numine distent
inque deum numero quae sint indigna videri,
notitiam potius praebere ut posse putentur
quid sit vitali motu sensuque remotum.

rhetorical effect. By doing this, Lucretius goes far beyond what he allows himself with “It’s OK to OMG.” As Smith put it, “Lucr. . . . exploits mythology for his poetic *and philosophical* purposes.”⁴³ We will explore some possible reasons for why he does this later in this report., but first, let us take a look at the most prevalent way that this occurs, in Lucretius’ representation of the enlightened human as divine.

Divine Mind

For Lucretius, divinity is also an allegory for the aspirations of Epicureanism. The idea that the Epicurean has attained something of the godly realm is perhaps most apparent at the beginning of Book II, which commences with the famous scene of the secure man on the shore beholding ships in troubled waters out at sea:

It is comforting, when winds are whipping up the waters of the vast sea, to watch from land the severe trials of another person: not that anyone’s distress is a cause of agreeable pleasure; but it is comforting to see from what troubles you yourself are exempt. It is comforting also to witness mighty clashes of warriors embattled on the plains, when you have no share in the danger. But nothing is more blissful than to occupy the heights effectively fortified by the

⁴³ Smith (2001:10) [emphasis added].

teaching of the wise, tranquil sanctuaries from which you can look down upon others and see them wandering everywhere in their random search for the way of life, competing for intellectual eminence, disputing about rank, and striving night and day with prodigious effort to scale the summit of wealth and to secure power. O minds of mortals, blighted by your blindness! Amid what deep darkness⁴⁴ and daunting dangers life's little day is passed! To think that you should fail to see that nature importunately demands only that the body may be rid of pain, and that the mind, divorced from anxiety and fear, may enjoy a feeling of contentment.⁴⁵

This language about being exempt from troubles echoes strongly Lucretius' descriptions of the gods' state of being. In Lucretius' conception, since the gods are not present and do not intervene in this world, the most useful way to talk about them is as an ideal for the actualized Epicurean, free from care; accordingly, numinous language can be used to describe human approximations of this perfect existence. The main figure that Lucretius depicts in this way is of course Epicurus himself. It is worth noting, however, that the first person Lucretius speaks of in this way is actually Empedocles, in line I.730:

Why, the verses molded by his divine genius give so magisterial an exposition of his splendid discoveries

⁴⁴ *DRN* overflows with light/darkness imagery of this sort. Examples include I.143-149; I.1114-1117; III.1-2; V.10-12.

⁴⁵ *DRN* II.1-19.

that it seems scarcely credible that he was born of mortal stock.⁴⁶

Obviously, Empedocles was not an Epicurean, but just as the Christians seemingly regarded the greatest of the Latin poets (like Vergil) as saints despite their paganism, Lucretius here appreciates the great strides in understanding that Empedocles made, without judging too harshly where Empedocles went wrong, since he was on the right track, and he did not have the benefit of having lived, to use Christian language, after the messiah, Epicurus. And just as the Christians would later declare their hero to be divine, Lucretius proclaims of Epicurus, “a god he was, a god.”⁴⁷ Of course, this is not meant literally, as can be clearly seen by Lucretius’ other mentions of Epicurus as mortal.⁴⁸ In fact, although his praise for Epicurus is lavish from the start, we can even see a progression in the sorts of deifying language Lucretius uses to describe Epicurus as the poem advances.

⁴⁶ DRN I.731-733.

carmina quin etiam divini pectoris eius
vociferantur et exponunt praeclara reperta,
ut vix humana videatur stripe creatus.

Leonard and Smith (1942: 273) comment on *sanctum* in the previous line (I.730): “i.e., Empedocles was a “holy man.” This passage concludes several lines of high praise for Empedocles (I.716ff). As mentioned previously, for Lucretius’ artistic (and intellectual) debt to Empedocles, see Ch. 1 of Sedley (1998).

⁴⁷ *deus ille fuit, deus* (DRN V.8).

⁴⁸ DRN I.66; III.1042-1044, e.g.

In the first passage describing Epicurus' accomplishment (I.64-79), Lucretius paints him more as a military leader, and although he "journeys all throughout the measureless universe," there is no wording indicating divinity. It would perhaps seem out of place in a passage describing the conquest of superstition, but we have seen that Lucretius has no problem using god-metaphor to advance a point seeks to tear down that to which the metaphor refers, but the same point could be made for the work as a whole; so, I do not think it insignificant that he refrains from using divine language to describe Epicurus here at the beginning of the poem.

But, as the poem goes on, the depiction of Epicurus becomes increasingly godlike, as the poet has more opportunities to demonstrate his miraculous discoveries. Book III begins with an address to Epicurus strikingly similar to Lucretius' address to Venus at the very beginning of the poem, depicting him as a nurturing father to complement Venus, the creative mother.⁴⁹ Besides comparing Lucretius to a deity (albeit a metaphorical one), Lucretius also credits to Epicurus' "divine mind" the revelation of the true *rerum natura*.⁵⁰ He also describes Epicurus' "sayings" (though not the man himself) as "golden and ever most worthy of eternal life."⁵¹ This language of worthiness is echoed later on,

⁴⁹ See Smith (1966: 80-81).

⁵⁰ *divina mente* (DRN III.16).

⁵¹ *dicta / aurea perpetua semper dignissima vita* (DRN III.12-13).

when Lucretius allows Epicurus to graduate from military hero and father figure to a god. After four books of elucidating the path that Epicurus trailblazed, and after explicitly calling him a god (V.8), Lucretius asserts that his discoveries are “justification for deifying the author” and declares him “worthy of a place among the gods . . . since it was his wont to present many precepts in a good and godlike manner about the immortal gods themselves and to reveal the whole nature of things in his discourse” (even calling attention to the “meta” nature of comparison, which is *not* oxymoronic – even seemingly – because in this case he is talking about the Epicurean conception of the gods, not actually or ostensibly the popular conception of them).

This language of worthiness also comes up in another passage, which makes clear that the Epicurean aspiration is a godlike existence. In III.310ff, Lucretius explains that although we are human and we come with inherent dispositions and personalities (he supports nature, not nurture), nevertheless with assiduous care and learning we can get a handle on our instincts so that “there is nothing to prevent us from living a life worthy of the gods.”⁵²

Lucretius does not so much walk a fine line in his depictions of Epicurus and his followers as partaking in the divine as he does wander back and forth across a fuzzy middle space, at one end of which is the pure Epicurean idea of

⁵² *ut nihil inpediat dignam dis degere vitam* (DRN III.322).

the gods and their mental perfection as an ideal to which simply to aspire. He moves from there into notions of humans or their ideas being “worthy” in some way of the gods, and finally metaphorically becoming gods themselves. It even sometimes seems that Lucretius confuses his actual conception of the gods and his metaphorical ideal that the Epicurean can hope to attain. Early on in Book III, Lucretius describes what wonders become clear to the Epicurean, including the gods in all their glory:

Plainly visible are the gods in their majesty, and their calm realms which, buffeted by no wind, sprinkled by no storm cloud’s showed, sullied with no white fall of snow crystallized by biting frost, are ever pavilioned by a cloudless ether that smiles with widespread flood of radiance.⁵³ All the needs of the gods are supplied by nature, and nothing at any time detracts from their peace of mind. (*DRN* III.18-24 – see *Index*)

Leaving aside what exactly the nature of “nature” is in the godly realm (it is free of bad weather, apparently, a dream to which we can all relate), it nevertheless seems strange to say that “all the needs of the gods are supplied by nature,” since in the Epicurean conception, the gods have no needs. It may be

⁵³ cf. *DRN* I.9, where, in the context of describing the effects of Venus on the sky, *diffuso lumine* appears in the same metrical position. This description of the realm of the gods closely parallels Homer’s description of Olympus at *Odyssey* VI.42-46, which Murray (1919) translated “Neither is it shaken by winds nor ever wet with rain, nor does snow fall upon it, but the air is outspread clear and cloudless, and over it hovers a radiant whiteness. Therein the blessed gods are glad all their days.” This is an ideal description for Lucretius to borrow from Homer, not because of its poetic beauty, but because it is entirely compatible with Epicurean beliefs.

that in his discussion of what becomes visible to the realized Epicurean, Lucretius conflates the gods he sees with the Epicurean himself, who does have needs, but all of which are “supplied by nature.”

It can be dangerous to meander across this spectrum of literal and figurative divinity-language; it would be wrong to begin to think of one’s understanding of the immortal and pure nature of the gods as reflecting back upon oneself too much, because then it would be easy to fall into the trap that the Epicurean wants to avoid of desiring immortality out of a fear of death. There is a similar problem in Buddhism. Enlightenment is achieved when one becomes free of grasping and rejecting, but if one is attached to the idea of reaching *nirvana*, or sees it as a goal, then one is grasping. This dilemma applies to all Epicureans, but to Lucretius especially, since he is writing a monument which will outlast his life. In declaring Epicurus “worthy of a place among the gods” for his discoveries, which are “justification for [Epicurus’] deification,” Lucretius knowingly engages in some of the behaviors which the Epicurean is supposed to repudiate – the fanciful immortalizing of that which cannot be immortal, in a very traditional-religion-sounding way. Furthermore, Lucretius, who is composing a monument that will outlast his life, no doubt has pretensions for his own glory. Lucretius praises Epicurus not only because of what he understood, but because he brought that knowledge to humanity – which is what Lucretius

himself is trying to do. He is not shy about bragging of his accomplishment of “illuminating the obscure discoveries of the Greeks in Latin verse.”⁵⁴ So there is an inherent difficulty in Lucretius’ endeavor. His motivations, the pure ones of simply wanting to most effectively spread the Epicurean gospel, and the insidious, perhaps subconscious anti-Epicurean motives of gaining *kleos* for himself, are inextricable. The reason for this is that the actions required for each are the same. When Lucretius chooses to write in beautiful verse about metaphorical Venus, this not only makes his messaging better (because it will reach more people in a more acceptable way), it also naturally establishes his reputation and fame, placing him more solidly in the canon of great poets. In this way, we can imagine a Lucretius who struggled not only with his method, as described in the first part of this report, but even with his motivations, although, whatever they were, the result would ultimately be the same.

In conclusion, Lucretius, although he is dogmatic about his beliefs, is flexible in how he talks about divinity. This flexibility has advantages for the poet’s ability to persuade, but it creates pitfalls that can be detrimental to the integrity of his message.

⁵⁴ *DRN* I.136-137.

nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta
difficile inlustrare Latinis versibus esse

Note that Lucretius refers to the Greeks, plural, acknowledging that the pursuit of truth is a group effort.

IV. Modern Parallels

Lucretius' brand of religious skepticism was near the beginning of a long line of doubters. In a way, Epicureans were the atheists of their day. But Lucretius anticipated future skeptics not only in the content of his reasoning, but also in the matters of tone and approach that we have been considering. In the last part of this report, we will investigate some of the ways in which the issues at work in *De Rerum Natura* still apply today in atheistic discourse, and explore how this comparison can enrich our understanding of Lucretius' possible motivations for writing about divinity in the way that he did.

The modern atheist movement, commonly known as the New Atheism, has many parallels with the proselytizing quasi-deistic program of Lucretius.⁵⁵ Generally, New Atheists are distinguished from the skeptics of the past not simply by their willingness to make their views known and convince others of the same, but more by their affirmations that, contrary to the popular justification for religion that it provides people with comfort and awe, it is a lack of religion that allows a person to see the world as it truly is with all due

⁵⁵ This has not gone unacknowledged by the New Atheists themselves. Lucretius' reception among modern secularists has been very warm, and although most of the leaders of the movement are scientists, Christopher Hitchens, the journalist and eminent man of letters, actually begins his lengthy atheist reader *The Portable Atheist* with selections from *De Rerum Natura* (Hitchens [2007]). Moreover, he also praises Lucretius as "the most attractive and the most charming of the founders of anti-religion" in his manifesto of anti-theism entitled *God is Not Great* (Hitchens [2009: 158]).

wonderment and, as it were, behold from land the tribulations of the religious in their metaphorical sinking ship, besieged by unnecessary fears and imagined godly demands—in other words, that atheism is not only the factually correct position, but that it is morally preferable to and more comforting than religious superstition. As is plainly seen from Lucretius, however, these sentiments are hardly “New” at all.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, we find that just as Lucretius struggled with the question of whether to take an aggressive approach or a conciliatory one, this very question is currently the central debate within the modern atheist movement. The most famous instance of this dilemma is the situation of the most eminent of the New Atheists, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who has been criticized by other atheists for being too forthright with his views and not diplomatic enough.⁵⁶ In fact, in his atheistic work *The God Delusion*, one finds exactly the same rhetorical schizophrenia as in Lucretius. Like Lucretius, Dawkins also begins with conciliation. The title of his first chapter is “A Deeply Religious Non-Believer”⁵⁷ (a quote from Albert Einstein).⁵⁸ Dawkins starts out

⁵⁶ The controversy over tone within the atheist movement reached a peak with the Bad Astronomer Phil Plait’s talk on the subject (“Don’t Be a Dick”) at The Amazing Meeting 8 in July 2010, in which he accused the more outspoken atheist activists, including Dawkins, of hubris.

⁵⁷ Dawkins (2008: 31).

⁵⁸ “I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. . . This is a somewhat new kind of religion.” As quoted in Hitchens (2007: 157); originally from p. 218 of *The Expanded Quotable Einstein*.

using this familiar term, “religious,” in order not to alienate his readers⁵⁹ right off the bat; but of course, just like Lucretius and his Olympian metaphors in the proem of *DRN*, he does not use the term in the traditional sense. So on the one hand, he realizes that an outspoken and uncompromising style at the very beginning might not be the right way to go about it politically, and there are many passages of a conciliatory tone,⁶⁰ but like Lucretius, it does not take long for him to get so passionate about what he understands to be the truth that he comes across as strident and shrill. The passage most widely accused of being such is the first sentence of Chapter 2 (“The God Hypothesis”), which asserts,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction; jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal,

⁵⁹ The matter of who the intended audience is, exactly, is a central question in the larger debate. The so-called accommodationists say that religious people are turned off by attacks on their faith; the so-called confrontationalists insist that they are targeting those in the middle ground (sometimes called the “fence-sitters”), who are open-minded and/or questioning – and the youth, whose ideas about religion are perhaps not as solidified. These latter groups nevertheless include lots of people who have it in their minds that religion is generally a good thing, which explains why Dawkins tries to start in a place where he seems to share this assumption (while perhaps not actually doing so). Without presuming to know too much about who Lucretius’ intended audience was, we can, however, surmise that they were more educated Romans, among whom there certainly would have been those who had questions about the traditional Roman religion, but who nevertheless had inherited positive attitudes about Venus, etc; so this same reasoning may apply to Lucretius as well.

⁶⁰ Of course, Dawkins makes no effort to obscure his actual beliefs on the central question of the existence of supernatural beings (though there may be some initial dissembling, or at least studied ignoring, regarding his views about the origin of morals, etc.) – The debate is essentially one about *tone*, which can nevertheless be greatly altered by the use of religious metaphor, even if the instances of it are more transparently metaphorical in Dawkins than in Lucretius.

genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal,
sodomasochistic capriciously malevolent bully.⁶¹

Dawkins is highly aware of the controversy regarding his approach – he wrote an additional preface to the paperback edition devoted entirely to defending his approach, in which he defends the above sentence by saying that “my intention was closer to robust but humorous broadside than shrill polemic.”⁶² Here may be a place where Lucretius and the moderns differ. It seems unlikely that Lucretius would have made a similar excuse for his more forthright passages.

Another example of an ancient-modern symmetry occurs in the realm of the atheistic physicists. Albert Einstein was the most notable early one of these, and although he was a confirmed disbeliever in religion⁶³ (religious deceivers’

⁶¹ (Dawkins 2008: 51) This beginning of Dawkins’ second chapter coincides nicely with the opening of Lucretius’ second book, the passage about looking with equanimity upon a ship at sea in trouble, to which I alluded above, for which Lucretius has been criticized because of perceived cruelty (Bailey 1950: 142) Of course, not everyone feels that way (see Smith 2001: 35), but the fact that there have been both detractors and supporters of passages like these only shows that the debate concerning tone in the spreading of the anti-religious gospel is nothing new.

⁶² Dawkins (2008: 17).

⁶³ There has been a great deal of research and writing done on the subject of Einstein and religion – a good place to start is Lesikar’s website, “Einstein: Science and Religion.” Einstein’s views on religion were obviously complex, but here are a couple quotes which may shed some light on the matter (from Hitchens [2007: 155, 157]):

“It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.”

“I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings.”

attempts to claim him as one of their own notwithstanding), he nevertheless used metaphorical god-language when speaking about the fundamental nature of the universe, because it was something that his audience could appreciate and relate to. Most famously, he wrote in a letter to Max Born to the effect that he did not believe that God “plays dice with the Universe” (as it is usually translated/paraphrased). This constituted a rejection of the emerging theory of quantum mechanics, whose principles of randomness and probability conflicted with his own theories of relativity and classical mechanics in general. What better way to convey the sentiment? Aphorisms about complex scientific theories are greatly facilitated by numinous shorthand. He also vacillated about whether God was “malicious.”⁶⁴ With statements like these, Einstein provided the precedent for metaphorical god-talk in physics (other physicists like Isaac Newton had spoken of the laws of physics in terms of God before, but there were actual believers).

But of course, Einstein lived well before the New Atheism, and he never made advancing anti-religious views a part of his agenda. A more modern

The picture of divinity that arises from these quotes is not far from that to which Lucretius subscribed – all the better for a comparison of their metaphorical god-language. ⁶⁴ Einstein once said *Raffiniert ist der Herrgott, aber boshaft ist er nicht*, of which my preferred translation is “God is slick, but he ain’t mean.” The usual translation is something like “Subtle/sophisticated is the Lord, but malicious He is not.” By this he meant that while the laws of the universe were difficult to discern, they were not inelegant (and therefore not seemingly obfuscated by “God.” That is, that the reason nature’s laws are recondite is because of their sublime nature, not because they are purposefully being hidden. Later, however, when the evidence for quantum mechanics was persuasively coalescing, Einstein indicated that he was having second thoughts and that perhaps “God” was malicious. For more on this issue, see Clark (1973), Pais (1982), Sayen (1985), Stern (2005).

example that parallels Lucretius more closely is that of Stephen Hawking. Professor Hawking is a celebrated English cosmologist and theoretical physicist who until 2009 held the Lucasian Professorship of Mathematics at Cambridge University (the same chair held by Isaac Newton). Besides his groundbreaking work involving black holes, Hawking has also undertaken to educate the public about the modern theories of physics in a set of bestsellers including *A Brief History of Time* and, most recently, *The Grand Design*. The former book, first published in 1988, ended with the statement that if a unified theory of physics should be discovered, it would allow us to “know the mind of God.”⁶⁵

Since then, however, the New Atheism has arisen, and Hawking has done his best to clarify his position, taking the posture of the scrupulous scientist: that there is a natural explanation for the things that people sometimes attribute to god(s), which makes god(s) superfluous in the cosmological narrative. Lucretius has exactly this same idea at the heart of his program, although his main concern is to dispel people’s fear. Hawking too has as a goal the dispelling of the mental ills caused by superstition. In a recent interview on Larry King Live, when asked why he thought understanding the grand design was important, among his brief answers was that “it puts our other worries in perspective.”⁶⁶ But, for the most

⁶⁵ Hawking (1988: 256).

⁶⁶ 2010 CNN interview.

part, he wisely (from a political standpoint) chooses to stick to his expertise, science, without venturing into philosophy.

Nevertheless, Hawking too has to contend with the matter of how direct/conciliatory to be. His answer to the problem is to avoid asserting that god does not exist, and instead to simply explain why god has no role to play in cosmogony. Even staying within this attitude, however, his answers can come across as far divergent in their tone. When asked directly by Larry King if he believed in god, Hawking first conceded that “god may exist, but science can explain the universe without the need for a creator.” That sounds relatively humble, and Larry King responded to this seeming openness, remarking to himself, “so he may exist...” But when pressed about the value of theology, Hawking simply stated, “The scientific account is complete. Theology is unnecessary,” a statement far more likely to be perceived as arrogant. Larry King was stunned for a moment, then chuckled uncomfortably, “Pretty directly put!”

Following the interview (and the publishing of his book generally), there was a great deal of indignation at Hawking’s audacity on religious blogs and online news sites.⁶⁷ In Hawking’s defense, since composing sentences is an

⁶⁷ e.g. Mohler (2010). Another provocative statement Hawking has made recently, when asked about the conflict between science and religion: “There is a fundamental difference between religion, which is based on authority, and science, which is based on observation and reason. Science will win because it works” (ABC News interview).

extremely laborious task for him on account of his near-total paralysis, we cannot blame him for speaking succinctly.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, this shows that polemic need not be intentional to offend religious sensibilities; sometimes nothing more than the blunt application of Occam's sharp razor can lacerate. So the job of the scientist-communicator is made more difficult.

The sensitivity of the question of what kind of terminology to use is made clear by religious responses to Hawking's work. Ray Comfort, a prominent American evangelical Christian, took Hawking to task for his most recent book and called him out on what he perceived to be contradictions in terms:

Hawking has violated the unspoken rules of atheism. He isn't supposed to use words like 'create' or even 'made.' They necessitate a Creator and a Maker. . . .Nor should an atheist speak of gravity as being a 'law,' because that also denotes the axiom of a Law-giver. Laws don't happen by themselves.⁶⁹

Comfort's misunderstanding of what a scientific "law" is aside, this comment nevertheless highlights the difficulty physicists face when speaking about human-independent scientific realities which occur outside of the framework of things human minds can relate to or understand – a fact which

⁶⁸ He does seem to be deliberately provocative, however, when he casually mentions in the second paragraph (mirroring the position of the controversial lines *DRN* I.44-49) of *The Grand Design* that "philosophy is dead," although this attack is aimed at philosophers rather than religionists (Hawking 2010: 5).

⁶⁹ Ramos (2010).

may help to explain why physicists (and biologists, for that matter) use terms like “design,” even in the title of their books, even when the book’s agenda is to show a designer to be unnecessary. Since human minds operate with certain assumptions about time, it is difficult for Hawking to explain that there was nothing “before” the Big Bang because time itself did not exist. And since human minds operate with assumptions about agency, it is hard to talk about complex things coming into being without referring (at least metaphorically) to a designer.⁷⁰ It is easy to see how a similar quandary must have faced Lucretius. With the forces of nature and natural phenomena commonly understood to be manifestations of gods, he had no choice but to confer with this paradigm in his campaign to destroy it. The fact that Lucretius attempts to use this to his aesthetic and therefore political advantage simply shows Lucretius’ resourcefulness.

Hawking, who may have been constrained to using language of “creation” or “design” is not, however, compelled to write about metaphorical gods. And as mentioned above, since the arrival of the New Atheism, Hawking

⁷⁰ The religious mind is also not used to the scientific system of epistemology. Mohler (2010) chides Hawking for not staying on the scientific side of things and treading into the domain of religion, when in fact, Hawking never “says that god did not create the universe,” as one Christian news site’s (Boyd [2010]) headline erroneously proclaimed; he simply explains how current theories provide no evidence for a supernatural creator, a simple scientific point. They do not understand that the claim that God created the universe is a material claim about reality that is subject to scientific investigation, which may or (as is the case) may not find any evidence therefor, and they do not understand that Hawking *is* staying on his side of the fence.

has changed his approach. The first edition of *A Brief History of Time*, which ended with the comment about knowing the mind of God, nevertheless contained a preface written by Carl Sagan,⁷¹ who, anticipating future trends, noted that “this is also a book about God . . . or perhaps about the absence of God . . . a universe with . . . nothing for a Creator to do,” while noting that “the word God fills these pages.”⁷² In *The Grand Design*, Hawking himself is explicit about this book being about the absence of god(s), comparing in multiple places⁷³ the many gods that world cultures have dreamed up to explain what they did not understand, and devoting an entire chapter to explaining the superfluity of a Creator.⁷⁴

It is, in fact, one of Hawking’s central aims in *The Grand Design* to treat the weak and strong anthropic principles and explain why there is no theoretical motivation for god(s). The latter of these goals, as already noted, is quite in line

⁷¹ Carl Sagan had an interesting approach of his own when it came to the issue of how to communicate about religion: He was fierce and uncompromising in his writing, and while he never dissimulated about his views on television, he chose instead to focus on the positive aspects of the scientific outlook (a different kind of passion), without attacking religion too much (although his TV series *Cosmos* was littered with objective-sounding anthropological references to the idea of human-created gods). The inheritor of this approach is the British physicist Brian Cox. This approach, which depends on the scientist remaining defined as a scientist primarily and not as a New Atheist, smartly distinguishes between the audiences that different media are likely to have. This strategy, unfortunately, was not available to Lucretius. Hawking’s own approach is one of consistency across media, but instead of attacking religion like Lucretius, he simply adopts a fastidiously scientific lens, which only accepts ideas supported by evidence and disregards others as unsupported.

⁷² Hawking (1988: 5).

⁷³ e.g. Hawking (2010: 15, 123, 163).

⁷⁴ “The Apparent Miracle” pp. 149-166.

with Lucretius' agenda. Hawking's approach with regard to god-language within a work whose very purpose is to demonstrate that the gods have no explanatory power in theories of natural phenomena is a little bit different from Lucretius', though. Hawking's books are about the progress that physics is making towards a unified theory, answering all the big questions about the nature of the universe. In 1988, when Hawking wrote *A Brief History of Time*, there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether such a theory would ever be attained, and what such a theory might look like. There was, one might say, much mystery still in the universe, something that Albert Einstein considered of profound importance for humans and the scientific endeavor.⁷⁵ In these circumstances, Hawking conveyed the sense of mystery by referring to "the mind of God," even as Sagan noted that if such a theory were discovered, it would make the notion of a Creator obsolete. But now, twenty-two years later, much progress has been made, and Hawking is convinced that the correct solutions are finally being worked out, in what he considers to be "the only

⁷⁵ "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery--even if mixed with fear--that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms--it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man" (Einstein [1949: 5]).

possible unified theory,” known as M-theory.⁷⁶ With this new confidence, in *The Grand Design*, he dispenses with the sort of direct god-language that he used before.

So why, you may ask, might naturalists, past and present, use metaphorical god-language in the first place? We have already discussed how it can be politically useful, but that doesn’t seem to be the whole story. Another important reason is that for millennia, the discourse regarding the most fundamental and all-encompassing matters has been the domain of religion. Modern atheists run up against this when trying to talk about deep transcendent experiences such as the awe and wonder felt when contemplating the majesty of the universe, for which there is nevertheless not a better word than the loaded term “spirituality,” which carries with it unfortunate metaphysical connotations – but it is the only term we have to talk about these things.⁷⁷

It may be a similar situation with the matter of the gods, with Einstein and Hawking as with Lucretius. Divinity is a familiar and pithy shorthand for all that is beyond the human realm, and religious language comprises the main historical vocabulary for matters of universal magnitude. But just as Lucretius, though he

⁷⁶ 2010 CNN Interview.

⁷⁷ For an in-depth discussion about the issues surrounding atheists/scientific materialists/substance monists using this term and the rechristening (there it is again) of the “supernatural” as the “subnatural,” see Ann Druyan’s (the widow of Carl Sagan) 2006 interview on Point of Inquiry, the podcast of the Center for Inquiry.

complained of the paucity of the Latin language, was forced to coin new phrases to get across a meaning foreign to the Romans, so too does it behoove modern scientific naturalists to craft a new vocabulary that is free from connotations of religious superstition. Nevertheless, we can understand that what Lucretius did *not* do was coin an entirely new vocabulary to convey the tradition and transcendental sentiments at the heart of religion; but since he wanted to address these issues, in a traditionally religious medium, he was pushed in the direction of using metaphorical god-language. He took this necessity and turned it into opportunity by taking a contradiction and turning it into an effective and artistic (and effective *because* it was artistic) rhetorical tool.

The issues that Lucretius faced in writing accessibly about religion in his attempt to bring it down continue obtain in anti-theistic discourse today, and from those issues arise some of the same phenomena. Echoes of Lucretius are evident today not only in the content of the conversation, but also in its tone. And with the recent resurgence in nontheistic thinking, Lucretius and Epicurus may suddenly be more relevant to modernity than ever before.

V. Conclusion

When Lucretius decided to write his treatise on the Epicurean worldview, he had several decisions to make. His motives and goals were many, and often conflicting. He had to appeal to his audience, and he had to not scare them away, but he also had to stay true to his beliefs. Some of the choices he made helped one cause but hurt another. But Lucretius managed to create a system of flexibility in dealing with divinity that allowed him to maximize the number of choices he made that advanced multiple goals and satisfied multiple motives at once. This is the divine genius of *De Rerum Natura*.

Index Locorum Latinorum

Herein may be found the Latin passages for all translations longer than a few lines quoted in this report. Passages from *De Rerum Natura* are first, in the order they appear in the original poem, beginning with the opening 159 lines, nearly all of which are discussed, if not quoted directly, in this report. Other quoted Latin passages follow those from *DRN*, in the order of appearance in this report.

DRN I.1-158

Aeneadum genitrix, hominum divomque voluptas,
alma Venus, caeli subter labentia signa
quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis
concelebras, per te quoniam genus omne animantum
concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis: 5
te, dea, te fugiunt venti, te nubila caeli
adventumque tuum, tibi suavis daedala tellus
summittit flores, tibi rident aequora ponti
placatumque nitet diffuso lumine caelum.
nam simul ac species patefactast verna diei 10
et reserata viget genitabilis aura favoni,
ariae primum volucris te, diva, tuumque
significant initum percussae corda tua vi.
inde ferae pecudes persultant pabula laeta 15
et rapidos tranant amnis: ita capta lepore 14
te sequitur cupide quo quamque inducere pergis. 16
denique per maria ac montis fluviosque rapacis
frondiferasque domos avium camposque virentis
omnibus incutiens blandum per pectora amorem
efficis ut cupide generatim saecula propagent. 20
quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas
nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras
exoritur neque fit laetum neque amabile quicquam,

te sociam studeo scribendis versibus esse,
 quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor 25
 Memmiadae nostro, quem tu, dea, tempore in omni
 omnibus ornatum voluisti excellere rebus.
 quo magis aeternum da dictis, diva, leporem.
 effice ut interea fera moenera militiai
 per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant; 30
 nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuvare
 mortalis, quoniam belli fera moenera Mavors
 armipotens regit, in gremium qui saepe tuum se
 reiicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris,
 atque ita suspiciens tereti cervice reposta 35
 pascit amore avidos inhians in te, dea, visus
 eque tuo pendet resupini spiritus ore.
 hunc tu, diva, tuo recubantem corpore sancto
 circum fusa super, suavis ex ore loquellas
 funde petens placidam Romanis, incluta, pacem; 40
 nam neque nos agere hoc patriai tempore iniquo
 possumus aequo animo nec Memmi clara propago
 talibus in rebus communi desse saluti.
 omnis enim per se divum natura necessest
 immortalis aevo summa cum pace fruatur 45
 semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe;
 nam privata dolore omni, privata periculis,
 ipsa suis pollens opibus, nihil indiga nostri,
 nec bene promeritis capitur nec tangitur ira.
 Quod super est, vacuas auris animumque sagacem 50
 semotum a curis adhibe veram ad rationem,
 ne mea dona tibi studio disposta fideli,
 intellecta prius quam sint, contempta relinquant.
 nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque 55
 disserere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam,
 unde omnis natura creet res, auctet alatque,
 quove eadem rursum natura perempta resolvat,
 quae nos materiem et genitalia corpora rebus

reddunda in ratione vocare et semina rerum
appellare suemus et haec eadem usurpare 60
corpora prima, quod ex illis sunt omnia primis.

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret
in terris oppressa gravi sub religione,
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans, 65

primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra
est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra;
quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti
murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem
inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta 70
naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.

ergo vivida vis animi pervicit et extra
processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque,
unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri, 75
quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique
qua nam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.
quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim
opteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.

Illud in his rebus vereor, ne forte rearis 80
impia te rationis inire elementa viamque
indugredi sceleris. quod contra saepius illa
religio peperit scelerosa atque impia facta.

Aulide quo pacto Triviai virginis aram
Iphianassai turparunt sanguine foede 85
ductores Danaum delecti, prima virorum.

cui simul infula virgineos circum data comptus
ex utraque pari malarum parte profusast,
et maestum simul ante aras adstare parentem
sensit et hunc propter ferrum celare ministros 90
aspectuque suo lacrimas effundere civis,
muta metu terram genibus summissa petebat.
nec miserae prodesse in tali tempore quibat,

quod patrio princeps donarat nomine regem;
nam sublata virum manibus tremibundaque ad aras 95
deductast, non ut sollemni more sacrorum
perfecto posset claro comitari Hymenaeo,
sed casta inceste nubendi tempore in ipso
hostia concideret mactatu maesta parentis,
exitus ut classi felix faustusque daretur. 100
tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.

Tutemet a nobis iam quovis tempore vatum
terriquois victus dictis desciscere quaeres.
quippe etenim quam multa tibi iam fingere possunt
somnia, quae vitae rationes vertere possint 105
fortunasque tuas omnis turbare timore!
et merito; nam si certam finem esse viderent
aerumnarum homines, aliqua ratione valerent
religionibus atque minis obsistere vatum.
nunc ratio nulla est restandi, nulla facultas, 110
aeternas quoniam poenas in morte timendum.
ignoratur enim quae sit natura animai,
nata sit an contra nascentibus insinuetur
et simul intreat nobiscum morte dirempta
an tenebras Orci visat vastasque lacunas 115
an pecudes alias divinitus insinuet se,
Ennius ut noster cecinit, qui primus amoeno
detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam,
per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret;
etsi praeterea tamen esse Acherusia templa 120
Ennius aeternis exponit versibus edens,
quo neque permaneant animae neque corpora nostra,
sed quaedam simulacra modis pallentia miris;
unde sibi exortam semper florentis Homeri
commemoratur speciem lacrimas effundere salsas 125
coepisse et rerum naturam expandere dictis.
qua propter bene cum superis de rebus habenda
nobis est ratio, solis lunaeque meatus

qua fiant ratione, et qua vi quaeque gerantur
 in terris, tunc cum primis ratione sagaci 130
 unde anima atque animi constet natura videndum,
 et quae res nobis vigilantibus obvia mentes
 terrificet morbo adfectis somnoque sepultis,
 cernere uti videamur eos audireque coram,
 morte obita quorum tellus amplectitur ossa. 135

Nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta
 difficile inlustrare Latinis versibus esse,
 multa novis verbis praesertim cum sit agendum
 propter egestatem linguae et rerum novitatem;
 sed tua me virtus tamen et sperata voluptas 140
 suavis amicitiae quemvis efferre laborem
 suadet et inducit noctes vigilare serenas
 quaerentem dictis quibus et quo carmine demum
 clara tuae possim praepandere lumina menti,
 res quibus occultas penitus convisere possis. 145
 hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessest
 non radii solis neque lucida tela diei
 discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.

Principium cuius hinc nobis exordia sumet,
 nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus umquam. 150
 quippe ita formido mortalis continet omnis,
 quod multa in terris fieri caeloque tuentur,
 quorum operum causas nulla ratione videre
 possunt ac fieri divino numine rentur.
 quas ob res ubi viderimus nil posse creari 156
 de nihilo, tum quod sequimur iam rectius inde
 perspicuemus, et unde queat res quaeque creari
 et quo quaeque modo fiant opera sine divom.

DRN I.935-950

id quoque enim non ab nulla ratione videtur; 935
sed vel uti pueris absinthia taetra medentes
cum dare conantur, prius oras pocula circum
contingunt mellis dulci flavoque liquore,
ut puerorum aetas improvida ludificetur
labrorum tenus, interea perpotet amarum 940
absinthi laticem deceptaque non capiatur,
sed potius tali facto recreata valescat,
sic ego nunc, quoniam haec ratio plerumque videtur
tristior esse quibus non est tractata, retroque
volgus abhorret ab hac, volui tibi suaviloquenti 945
carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram
et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle

DRN II.1-19

Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis
e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suavest.
suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri 6
per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli; 5
sed nihil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere 7
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,
despicere unde queas alios passimque videre
errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae, 10
certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore
ad summas emergere opes rerumque potiri.
o miseras hominum mentes, o pectora caeca!
qualibus in tenebris vitae quantisque periclis 15
degitur hoc aevi quod cumquest! nonne videre

nihil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi ut qui
corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur
iucundo sensu cura semota metuque?

DRN II.352-366

nam saepe ante deum vitulus delubra decora
turicremas propter mactatus concidit aras
sanguinis expirans calidum de pectore flumen;
at mater viridis saltus orbata peragrans 355
novit humi pedibus vestigia pressa bisulcis,
omnia convisens oculis loca, si queat usquam
conspicere amissum fetum, completque querellis
frondiferum nemus adsistens et crebra revisit
ad stabulum desiderio perfixa iuveni, 360
nec tenerae salices atque herbae rore vigentes
fluminaque ulla queunt summis labentia ripis
oblectare animum subitamque avertere curam,
nec vitulorum aliae species per pabula laeta
derivare queunt animum curaque levare; 365
usque adeo quiddam proprium notumque requirit.

DRN II.600-643

Hanc veteres Graium docti cecinere poetae 600
sedibus in curru biiugos agitare leones,
aeris in spatio magnam pendere docentes
tellurem neque posse in terra sistere terram.
adiunxere feras, quia quamvis effera proles
officiis debet molliri victa parentum. 605
muralique caput summum cinxere corona,
eximiis munita locis quia sustinet urbes.
quo nunc insigni per magnas praedita terras

horrifice fertur divinae matris imago.
 hanc variae gentes antiquo more sacrorum 610
 Idaeam vocitant matrem Phrygiasque catervas
 dant comites, quia primum ex illis finibus edunt
 per terrarum orbis fruges coepisse creari.
 Gallos attribuunt, quia, numen qui violarint
 Matris et ingrati genitoribus inventi sint, 615
 significare volunt indignos esse putandos,
 vivam progeniem qui in oras luminis edant.
 tympana tenta tonant palmis et cymbala circum
 concava, raucisonoque minantur cornua cantu,
 et Phrygio stimulat numero cava tibia mentis, 620
 telaque praeportant, violenti signa furoris,
 ingratos animos atque impia pectora volgi
 conterrere metu quae possint numine divae.
 ergo cum primum magnas invecta per urbis
 munificat tacita mortalis muta salute, 625
 aere atque argento sternunt iter omne viarum
 largifica stipe ditantes ninguntque rosarum
 floribus umbrantes matrem comitumque catervam.
 hic armata manus, Curetas nomine Grai
 quos memorant, Phrygias inter si forte catervas 630
 ludunt in numerumque exultant sanguine laeti
 terrificas capitum quatientes numine cristas,
 Dictaeos referunt Curetas, qui Iovis illum
 vagitum in Creta quondam occultasse feruntur,
 cum pueri circum puerum pernice chorea 635
 [armat et in numerum pernice chorea]
 armati in numerum pulsarent aeribus aera,
 ne Saturnus eum malis mandaret adeptus
 aeternumque daret matri sub pectore volnus.
 propterea magnam armati matrem comitantur, 640
 aut quia significant divam praedicere ut armis
 ac virtute velint patriam defendere terram
 praesidioque parent decorique parentibus esse.

DRN III.18-24

apparet divum numen sedesque quietae,
quas neque concutiunt venti nec nubila nimbis
aspergunt neque nix acri concreta pruina 20
cana cadens violat semper[que] innubilis aether
integrit et large diffuso lumine ridet:
omnia suppeditat porro natura neque ulla
res animi pacem delibat tempore in ullo.

DRN III.40-58

nam quod saepe homines morbos magis esse timendos 40
infamemque ferunt vitam quam Tartara leti
et se scire animi naturam sanguinis esse,
aut etiam venti, si fert ita forte voluntas,
nec prosum quicquam nostrae rationis egere,
hinc licet advertas animum magis omnia laudis 45
iactari causa quam quod res ipsa probetur.
extorres idem patria longeque fugati
conspectu ex hominum, foedati crimine turpi,
omnibus aerumnis adfecti denique vivunt,
et quo cumque tamen miseri venere parentant 50
et nigras mactant pecudes et manibus divis
inferias mittunt multoque in rebus acerbis
acrius advertunt animos ad religionem.
quo magis in dubiis hominem spectare periclis
convenit adversisque in rebus noscere qui sit; 55
nam verae voces tum demum pectore ab imo
eliciuntur [et] eripitur persona: manet res.

DRN V.1198-1203

nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri
vertier ad lapidem atque omnis accedere ad aras
nec procumbere humi prostratum et pandere palmas 1200
ante deum delubra nec aras sanguine multo
spargere quadrupedum nec votis nectere vota,
sed mage pacata posse omnia mente tueri.

Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.1.2-5

Nec sum ignarus hoc a me praecipue quod hic liber inchoat opus studiosos eius desiderasse, ut inquisitione opinionum, quae diversissimae fuerunt, longe difficillimum, ita nescio an minimae legentibus futurum voluptati, quippe quod prope nudam praeceptorum traditionem desideret. In ceteris enim admiscere temptavimus aliquid nitoris, non iactandi ingenii gratia (namque in id eligi materia poterat uberius), sed ut hoc ipso adliceremus magis iuventutem ad cognitionem eorum quae necessaria studiis arbitrabamur, si ducti iucunditate aliqua lectionis libentius discerent ea quorum ne ieiuna atque arida traditio averteret animos et aures praesertim tam delicatas raderet verebatur. Qua ratione se Lucretius dicit praecepta philosophiae carmine esse complexum; namque hac, ut est notum, similitudine utitur:

ac veluti pueris absinthia taetra medentes
cum dare conantur, prius oras pocula circum
adspirant mellis dulci flavoque liquore

et quae secuntur. V. Sed nos veremur ne parum hic liber mellis et absinthii multum habere videatur, sitque salubrior studiis quam dulcior.

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