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On the Nature of Things

Lucretius

Study Guide on Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* (Part I: Books 1–3)

Why has Lucretius composed this work in verse? What relation does he see between his poetry and the teachings he is presenting?

- Consider his account of the cup of wormwood (1.932–48¹). Why does Lucretius think he is justified in using images?
- Is it proper for the philosopher to present doctrine in a poem? That is, can poetry support or convey philosophical teaching?
- Is Lucretius successful in using his poetic technique to support his philosophical teaching? Is this manner of writing consistent with his account of the world, or is there some tension between them?

What is at the core of Lucretius' account of "the nature of things"? How many first principles are there? Consider each of the following:

- Atoms and void:
 - Atoms are called the "first beginnings" (1.60).
 - "The universe is made up of two things / Which exist in themselves: atoms, and void / Where the atoms take position and move and scatter" (1.419 ff.).
- The "swerve":
 - "[Without the swerve] nature never could have made a thing" (2.225).
 - Is the "swerve" a first principle? Why does Lucretius introduce it? Is its introduction warranted, or is it *ad hoc*—introduced solely to save his account from obvious error?
 - The swerve is supposed to account for human freedom (2.257). Does it?
- Unification:
 - Consider how atoms are joined together: "All things are bound by the same principle" (2.719). What status do the properties of atoms have in Lucretius' model?

¹ Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things (De rerum natura)*. Translated by Anthony Esolen. London: The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd., 1995. (All section numbers refer to this edition.)



Lucretius gives “the Master,” Epicurus, much praise: “When before our eyes man’s life lay groveling, prostrate, / Crushed to the dust under the burden of Religion . . . First to smash open the tight-barred gates of Nature” (1.62–71). What makes Epicurus heroic in Lucretius’ mind? What heroic deeds did he perform?

What does Lucretius think of his own project? What does he believe he is doing?

- “I admit these are dark and difficult matters, but / A prophet’s great hope for praise lashes my heart” (1.920–1).
- “I teach great things, stride forth / To free the soul from the stranglehold of religion” (1.929–30)

Why does the poem begin with praise of Venus, in which she is called “nourishing,” “delight,” and “Mother”? Why does Lucretius emphasize desire and begetting new life? What role does desire play in Lucretius’ account?

What is man’s end, according to Lucretius? Consider: “[O]ur nature yelps after this alone: that the body / Be free of pain, the mind enjoy the sense / Of pleasure, far removed from care or fear!” (2.17–19).

What is meant by *soul* in this work, and what account does Lucretius give of it? (See Book III.)

“Death, then, is nothing to us, no concern, / Once we grant that the soul will also die” (3.827 ff.). What exactly is Lucretius’ argument for the mortality of the soul?

How does Lucretius handle the possibility of doubt?

Is there a natural progression in these first three books? Recall:

- Book I contains the birth of atomic theory, an explanation of atoms and void.
- Book II describes the growth of compounds from atoms.
- Book III explains the formation of organisms.

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.



Study Guide on Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* (Part II: Books 4–6)

In the image of wormwood and honey in 4.24–25, Lucretius states, “until you grasp the entire / Nature of things, and see its usefulness. . . .”

- Compare that with the first use of this image, in Book I: “until you grasp the entire / Nature of things—the structure of the world” (1.947–48).
- Do these passages encapsulate a distinction between the two parts of the work? Is one ordered to speculative, the other to practical knowledge?

What is Lucretius' position on religion, and what motivates it?

- What precisely, according to Lucretius, is wrong with religion?
- Does his criticism point to a problem with religion *as* religion?
- Does moral indignation factor into Lucretius' view? Consider: “Too often Religion / Herself gives birth to evil and blasphemous deeds . . .” (1.82–101).

Is Lucretius' understanding of the “nature of things” compatible with his reason for teaching it? Can he consistently urge his readers to change their minds and behavior?

Consider the foundation of Lucretius' philosophy. What does he take up as the starting point and source of our knowledge?

- Among other things, consider the following passages:
 - “Truth's criterion first proceeds from the senses” (4.476-77).
 - “What is more worthy of trust / Than our senses, by which we mark the true and false” (1.699–700).
- Are Lucretius' teachings throughout this work consistent with that principle? Is everything he defends as true directly observable or deducible from our sensory experience, or do certain things rely on other foundations?

Why does Lucretius discuss “images” in Book IV? Why is it “crucial” that these semblances exist (4.49)?

How is Venus portrayed in Book IV? (See especially 4.1049–51.) Compare and contrast this with her portrayal in Book I.



What is Lucretius' argument against the gods having made the world? Consider his pronouncements on the imperfection of the world (5.198 ff.), the ridiculousness of stories about the gods (5.396 ff.), and the spread of the idea of gods (5.1158 ff.).

What is Lucretius' concept of piety (5.1200-01)?

What does Lucretius teach about the origins of justice and law (5.1010 ff.)?

Aristotle states that philosophy begins in wonder, yet throughout the text, Lucretius seems to discount wonder. Is there any room for wonder in Lucretius' account? Is wonder essential to philosophy? Consider:

- A description of how wonder diminishes (2.1025 ff.).
- "Hardly a cause for wonder" (4.287).
- "But if they wonder anyway how all things / Can come to happen . . . They slide back into their old religions" (6.60-63).
- "You will leave off wondering at so much" (6.655).

To what extent does Lucretius' account make sense of our experience of such things as sensation, intellect, will, and love?

Why is there a discussion of lightning, cyclones, earthquakes, etc.? Why might Lucretius be eager to provide a natural explanation for these phenomena (6.767 ff.)?

Why does the poem end with the plague of Athens?

- Recall the image of the honey and wormwood (repeated at 4.11–25). In the scene of the plague, what is the "wormwood"?
- What is the "honey"? Does it include the poetic images?
 - If so, is the plague of Athens sweet, in some sense?
 - Or are the images now bitter?
- Compare the final image with the opening image of Book II (1–13). What, if anything, does Lucretius hope has changed in our perception by the time we perceive the final image?

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