

Eat, Sing, Philosophize: Salutory Foods and Poetry in Plato and Lucretius

With his famous “honey on the cup” analogy (*De Rerum Natura* 1.931-50, repeated partially at 4.1-25), Lucretius makes his most direct statement about the connection between his epic poetry and his Epicurean philosophy. Lucretius uses poetry to sweeten a tough philosophical message, just as when a doctor sweetens bitter medicine by applying honey to the rim of the cup. Lucretius’ honey analogy asserts the utility and effectiveness of poetry for philosophical expression and education, an assertion that directly confronts objections to poetry made by philosophers, notably Plato. In light of Plato’s infamous denigration of poetry, it is intriguing that he himself has an analogy that shares significant features with Lucretius’ “honey” analogy. *Laws* 2.659e-660a argues that poetry can be used to inculcate healthy ideas, in the same manner as pleasurable food containing healthful nourishment can strengthen the sick. I argue that the striking resemblance of Lucretius’ “honey” analogy to an idea in Plato is critical to understanding Lucretius’ philosophical and poetic program, in which he appropriates poetry for a philosophical purpose and demonstrates its utility for philosophy.

Lucretius’ philosophical poem directly combats the notion that poetry has no role in philosophical inquiry. Plato professes this attitude most famously in the *Republic*. In the *Laws*, however, Plato admits poetry’s potential for instilling philosophical values. He says that those who care for the sick supply healthful nutrients to patients through pleasurable food and drink, so that those patients become accustomed to the nutritional elements because of the pleasantness of the food. Similarly, messages that teaching what is temperate and good can be conveyed via pleasant songs and poetry. Lucretius adopts a similar comparison with his “honey” analogy. Lucretius’ doctor ensures the health of sick children by coating a cup of absinth with honey, and this is what Lucretius does with his poetry: he ensures that the philosophical message gets

through by coating it with poetry to make it more palatable. Though differences abound, these two analogies are fundamentally connected by their correlation of poetry to a health-care context. Furthermore, pleasant consumables, and the poetry to which they are compared, are used to deceive the patients in both analogies. The need for deception and poetry's ability to achieve such deception for the purpose of improved "philosophical health" are further elements shared by both analogies (cf. Clay 2003, 186). In Plato's *Laws*, the utility of pleasant poetry is acknowledged, but poetry not considered an integral part of moral and philosophical instruction. I argue, that for Lucretius, this utility is essential to philosophical instruction and his philosophical poem provides proof.

Though Lucretius' "honey" analogy may not allude directly to Plato (cf. Gale 1994, 49), the connection to Plato's analogy illuminates Lucretius' philosophical and poetic endeavor. Lucretius' "honey" analogy particularly, and his *De Rerum Natura* generally, argue that poetry can be utilized effectively for instructing philosophy. Lucretius supports this assertion by blending the philosophical and poetic traditions and uniting them for the purpose of instructing students in Epicureanism. The "honey" analogy and the programmatic statement that surrounds it are replete with allusions to the Muses and the sweetness and pleasure of the poetic tradition, e.g. *obscura de rem tam lucida pango / carmina, musaeo contingens cuncta lepore* (*DRN* 1.933-4). The "honey" analogy's association with Plato's analogy evokes the philosophical tradition and binds it with the poetic tradition. In this way, echoes of Plato found in Lucretius emphasize his poetic and philosophical project.

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