

“Swine from the herd of Epicurus”:
The Enlightenment's Reception of Lucretius and *De Rerum Natura*

Epicurean philosophy has endured vehement criticism from its very beginnings. As soon as Epicurus established the Garden near Athens, his school came under verbal attack by Platonists who felt threatened by its popularity and the rapid expansion of its ideas. Stoics later joined the debate under Chrysippus' leadership, and in the first centuries of the Common Era, the newly-dominant Christian faith fought hard to end the Epicurean influence.

Despite all of these critical efforts, Epicureanism endured the centuries, experiencing both revivals and renewed attacks. The French scientist and priest Pierre Gassendi led one revival in the 17th century, using Epicurean ideas in his long struggle against Descartes. In doing so, he also tried to reconcile Epicurus' atomistic models with Church doctrine. Another French clergyman, Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, later took up the defense of Descartes against Gassendi and simultaneously renewed the Christian critique of Epicureanism. He focused particularly on Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and worked throughout his life writing a poetic rebuttal, *Anti-Lucretius*, modeled after *De Rerum Natura* itself. Polignac directly challenged Gassendi's support for Epicureanism by using not only traditional critiques, but also contemporary science and philosophy of the early modern era. *Anti-Lucretius* thus constituted a new and unique development in the long-running criticism of Epicureanism, one that was particularly indicative of the transitional role that the Enlightenment played between the Classical and Modern worlds.

Polignac composed his poem in meticulous dactylic hexameter, following the Classical didactic tradition of Hesiod, Lucretius, and Vergil. While he updated the argument against Epicurus with Enlightenment thought, his language and poetic style are firmly set in the 1st century BCE. Polignac answered Lucretius in his own language, and illustrated his arguments with references to Classical and mythological standards. To respond to Lucretius' famous example of the sacrifice of Iphigenia (*DRN* 1.84-101), Polignac presented his own interpretation of the myth, with very different conclusions concerning the role of *Religio* (*AL* 1.834-849). While the story proved for Lucretius “*tantum Religio potuit suadere malorum,*” Polignac blamed Iphigenia's death not on *dei reverentia*, but *caeca superstitio*, and above all, the pursuit of *damnosa Voluptas* with which Paris had brought about the whole conflict. In another instance, Polignac warned his student, Quintius, to be wary of Lucretius' charming poetry, admitting that his own could not match it in beauty and sweetness. Where Lucretius' compares his verse to the honey doctors use to sweeten the medicine cup (*DRN* 1.936-942), Polignac compares it rather to the sweetness of Circe's cup, wisely declined by the careful Ulysses (*AL* 1.70-71).

Common ideas appear in the variety of critiques used throughout history against the Epicureans. Detractors accused them of hedonism and atheism. Some took issue with their physics and cosmology, and others considered them lawless, without the personal restraint or responsibility required to live in any society. While Polignac continued to use all of the traditional arguments, he brought a particularly modern perspective to the debate, based on Cartesian ideas of reason and existence, and referencing the latest achievements of scientists and philosophers like Anton van Leeuwenhoek, Johannes Kepler, Benedict Spinoza, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. Polignac made the debate over Epicureanism a debate of the Enlightenment, invoking the heliocentric model to disprove the atoms swerve and fall (4.218-223), comparing Epicurean hedonism to Hobbesian social contract theory (1.595), and renewing the debate between Descartes and Gassendi throughout the poem.

This paper will also consider the body of scholarship regarding *Anti-Lucretius*. There has been a surprising lack of modern scholarly attention given to the poem in recent years, with the notable exception of a forty-year-old article by Ernest Ament. This lack of scholarship is all the more striking given the apparently wide distribution of *Anti-Lucretius* in the 18th and 19th centuries, including multiple Latin editions, as well as translations in French, Italian, and Dutch, and at least three partial translations in English. The English translations, in particular, have drawn little comment from

scholars, and Ament was unaware of them when he published in 1970 (29). In contrast to the current silence on *Anti-Lucretius*, the poem was well-known even while Polignac was still composing it, and it elicited commentary and critique from Voltaire, Newton, and others. After Polignac's death and publication of *Anti-Lucretius*, scientific, religious, and biographical commentators made frequent reference to it. A new examination of Polignac and his poem will add to our understanding of Lucretius' reception and the relevancy of Epicureanism in the discussions and debates among the thinkers of the Enlightenment which occurred even as science and philosophy were beginning to distance themselves from the Classical era.

Bibliography

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