

On the Tension between Philosophy and Religion in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*

This paper explores how Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* navigates the challenge which Cicero presents in his *De Natura Deorum* regarding the Roman adoption of Epicurean philosophy. In *dND*, Cotta is unable to reconcile the Epicurean belief that the gods are inactive with the important Roman religious practice of worshipping (*colendus*) the gods (1.115). He further claims that religion (*religio*) cannot exist without worship (*cultus*) (1.117). There exists a similar tension in the proem of *dRN* wherein Lucretius appears to represent Venus as defying the Epicurean belief that the gods are inactive (1.2-20). This paper ultimately argues that Lucretius aims to utilize the tension between Epicurean philosophy and Roman religion for the sake of engaging his Roman audience with what they are familiar. Doing so, he advocates for a way of life which he believes is able to resolve the fear of the tempestuous Roman political climate during the first century BCE.

Lucretius' *dRN* begins with an invocation to the goddess, Venus. While this display is typical of the genre, Lucretius' portrayal of the goddess—specifically, the abilities which she possesses—is confusing for readers who know of his philosophy to-come. Given his conception of Venus in the proem as an inspiration of life (1.2-4) and passion (1.18-20), it later seems paradoxical that Lucretius maintains the Epicurean belief that the gods are inactive (5.1183-1203). This is—as previously stated—one of the primary arguments which Cicero leverages against the Epicureans in *dND* (1.115). This paper claims that Lucretius' depiction of Venus—and importantly, her relationship with Mars—is meant to engage his audience with a traditional conception of Roman religion with which they would have been familiar. Lucretius, however,

appropriates this conception of religion in order to advocate for the adopting Epicurean philosophy.

Furthermore, this is not the only way in which Lucretius accomplishes this task. For example, Cicero identifies piety (*pietas*) as an important aspect of worshiping the gods in *dND* (1.116). However, Lucretius appropriates this term, arguing that *pietas* instead concerns “the ability to contemplate all things with a tranquil mind” (1197-1204). Thus, this paper explores the many ways in which Lucretius appropriates important conceptions of Roman religion—these conceptions being supported by Cicero’s claims in *dND*—in order to both engage his Roman audience and advocate for Epicurean philosophy.

Therefore, this paper contributes to the scholarly discussion of the relationship between philosophy and religion by elucidating how Lucretius utilizes the tension between these practices in *dRN* and supporting these claims with evidence of their conception in Cicero’s *dND*. This paper additionally examines the relevance of Lucretius’ philosophy for Romans faced with the political turbulence of the first century BCE. Finally, this paper attempts to present a nuanced understanding of both Roman religion and philosophy—an argument which I felt detracted from the focus of this abstract—by engaging with the academic literature regarding these practices and doing so in light of their presentation in both Cicero’s *dND* and Lucretius’ *dRN*.

Bibliography

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