

Love Your Animals and Kill Them, Too: The Marriage of Empedocles and Epicurus in Lucretius' Human-Animal Contract

De Rerum Natura 5.855-877, a passage which Richard Hutchins has called Lucretius' "animal contract" between humans and domesticated animals (Hutchins 2017), is a complicated passage which contradicts and undermines itself in several ways. In it, companion animals are simultaneously commodities to be exploited by humans and willing participants in a symbiotic relationship, humans are animals like all the rest and yet granted the power to save other species from extinction, and lines are blurred between predator and prey. The key to understanding this passage lies in the philosophical traditions from which Lucretius drew his ideas. Campbell 2008 has demonstrated how Lucretius' general position on animals and how they should be treated by humans combines the divergent doctrines of Empedocles and Epicurus, the two main philosophical sources for *De Rerum Natura*. In the Epicurean tradition, non-human animals are a lower form of being, not owed moral or ethical consideration by humans and not capable of forming contracts of mutual benefit, but nevertheless useful allies to humans in the eternal battle for survival (see Diog. Laert. 10.150 = Epicurus KD 32; Porph. *De Abst.* 1.7.1-1.12.7; Diog. Laert. 10.154 = Epicurus KD 39 and discussion in Campbell 2008, 19-20). On the other hand, Empedocles made no moral, ideological, or spiritual distinction between humans and other animals. He held that killing an animal was equivalent to murder, and he taught that humans and non-human animals lived together in perfect harmony during the "Golden Age" of prehistory (see Campbell 2008, 4-6; Empedocles Fr. 119 in Wright 1995).

This paper argues that the ambiguities and incongruities in Lucretius' human-animal contract stem from his attempt to reconcile the diametrically opposed Epicurean and Empedoclean perspectives on the identity, agency, and ethical standing of non-human animals. It

begins with a close-reading of the human-animal contract passage, highlighting the dissonant messages throughout. It then surveys the evidence for Epicurean and Empedoclean stances on non-human animals, focusing on the aspects of each tradition relevant to the Lucretius passage. Finally, it breaks down each incongruity or ambiguity in the focus passage as a blending of the two divergent philosophical traditions. The conclusion is that Lucretius' human-animal contract tells a story of both collaboration and domination, mutual happiness and one-sided exploitation, and that we can fully understand the contract only by reading it through an Epicurean and an Empedoclean lens simultaneously.

Works Cited

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