

Lucretius on Reason, Hierarchy, and the Natural Order

According to one worldview prevalent in ancient sources, human society—like the natural world and the human soul—is intrinsically hierarchical. The structure of society mirrors the structure of the soul, with reason (the decision-making authority) controlling appetite (the plebs, slaves, and women). Social cohesion is maintained by hierarchical authority and law. Cicero represents this view at *De Re Publica* 1.60, where Scipio explains that *ratio* is the best part of the soul and should ‘rule’ the passions within a person like a king putting down a rebellion.

Proponents of this view looked to the heavens for evidence that this structure is natural and ideal at all levels of existence: what better proof than the hierarchical organization of the gods, with Jupiter as universal monarch and all other beings subordinate to him (see, e.g., *De Re Publica* 1.56)? Further, they claim, humans are entitled to extract profit from animals because the latter group lacks reason and does not belong to the world community of gods and men (e.g. Cic. *De Nat.* 2.154-9, *De Off.* 2.11, *De Fin.* 3.67).

In this paper I show how Lucretius refutes this hierarchical worldview by reassessing three interconnected areas of human life: the application of reason, the role of the gods in human affairs, and the relationship between humans and animals. He characterizes reason as a tool that humans can use to seek a pleasant life, rather than as the characteristic that defines what it means to be human or as a point of connection between humans and gods. There is no governance among the gods nor authority wielded by the gods over humans: Penwill demonstrates that one of Lucretius’ primary aims is to show that the gods are an *intrinsic part* of nature; they do not rule over it (1994:77; see, e.g, *DRN* 2.1090-2). There is no hierarchical arrangement between gods and humans. They simply experience noncontiguous spheres of influence.

There is no meaningful criterion in the *De Rerum Natura* for elevating humans as a species above animals, and Lucretius often presents human exploitation of animals as problematic. Because religion is unnecessary, sacrificing animals is also unnecessary, and humans committed a grave error when, on the battlefield, they tried to deploy animals with whom they have no prior social contract (5.1308-49). Human use of technology and weaponry (which were acquired through reason) makes violence against animals a moral issue: before humans applied reason in their dealings with the natural world, they had been on even moral grounds with other living creatures.

I will also show that Lucretius' critique of hierarchy as the organizing principle of the universe is not wholly destructive: we can find indications of an alternative, positive worldview and model for human society in his physical theory. I argue that Lucretius' seemingly apolitical statements about reason, the gods, and animals have serious political implications; previous scholars have examined his application of political terminology to the movements and arrangements of atomic particles. Cabisius, for example, points to Lucretius' use of words like *concilio*, *finis*, and *tumultus* as evidence of his emphasis on *change* and *variety* within systems regulated by social order and boundaries (1985:111-2). Connecting Lucretius' use of the term *foedus* with the Roman practice of settling political treaties—reciprocal agreements, not tyrannical commands—with neighboring states, Asmis concludes that these Lucretian limits on spheres of influence in nature do not *constrain*; rather, they *enable* humans to seek a happy life by making clear what powers are available and appropriate to different species and entities in the universe (2008:142).

By dismantling the concept of a hierarchical universe and replacing it with one that recognizes that being part of nature requires constant change and negotiation of boundaries (not

simply enforcing one's natural superiority), Lucretius threatens the rational basis for many of Rome's exploitative social and environmental practices. The structures of power in Rome relied on the labor of a large enslaved class, social stratification among its citizens, and ever-expanding operations for extracting resources from the natural environment. Structures of this sort are more easily maintained when participants at all levels believe that the system arose not from human agency, but from nature. In the end, I argue that Lucretius' particular critique of the hierarchical model of the universe does more to undermine the very foundations of the Roman social and political system than a general call for Epicurean abstention would have.

Bibliography

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