

A Perfect End to the Suffering: Lucretius' Plague as the *DRN*'s Moral Conclusion

Lucretius fluently concludes the *De Rerum Natura* with the Plague of Athens. He uses that disaster as an *exemplum* to reiterate and then apply his most important moral doctrines, making it the *DRN*'s thematic conclusion by focusing the entire passage on the fear of death. Then, by reinterpreting Lucretius' moral assumptions about death, one can solve two apparent contradictions which have been noted within the plague narrative.

Of the plague passage's two problems, the first is to determine how *dolor* could conquer *religio* (6.1277), which Lucretius has posited as authoritative enough to compel Agamemnon to slaughter his daughter. This happens when the temples fill with corpses because the guards (*aedituentes*) allowed the dying to enter, thus offending the gods. The second problem occurs when, although *religio* has supposedly been conquered, people quarrel (*rixantes*) in the street over the pyres needed to honor the dead.

Kate Stoddard noted the second of these two problems and suggested that Lucretius contradicts his earlier positions due to a desire to minimally alter Thucydides' plague narrative while conforming it to his Epicurean moral doctrine (Stoddard 1996, 125). This approach assumes that Lucretius wanted to deviate as little as possible from Thucydides, but my approach assumes that Lucretius changed whatever he saw fit to make his own distinct account, one that is consistent to the *DRN*.

To solve these apparent contradictions, first one must resolve *dolor* into its component parts. These are grief, death, and disease (*luctus, mors, and morbus*, 6.1251). They explain why desperate victims wanted entry to the temples, and why the guards out of grief and pity let them inside. Since these ills all manifest as pain, it is clear why Lucretius says *dolor*. The underlying

force (that conquers *religio*), however, is *metus mortis*, for fear of death makes these ills painful (through *cura*, 3.81-2).

To understand why people quarrel in the street over funeral rites when supposedly the *religio* requiring that these rites be upheld has been conquered, one must evaluate the mechanics of *metus mortis*. Lucretius uses this term broadly, but it can be analyzed into two distinct meanings. The first one is fear of dying, which the people who enter the temples praying for a miracle, disregarding *religio* exhibit. Then there are those who fear punishment after death. These include both the people quarreling in the streets over pyres and funerary rites and the exiles from book three who sacrifice to their ancestors assiduously because of their *metus acheruntis* (3.37). These characters clearly do not presume that their piety will bring them eternal life, but rather that they will not be punished after death. They therefore believe in an afterlife. Like the exiles sacrificing excessively, the people fighting in the streets are unhappy because they fear death. Lucretius does not, then, contradict his own doctrine but simply uses very specific terms to express the fear of death.

Lucretius shapes the plague narrative to reaffirm his most important moral doctrines and apply them to the people's behavior. Those who fight over pyres do so because they believe in an afterlife where they may be punished or rewarded. Lucretius is implicitly reiterating his lesson that corpses care not for rites nor should the living worry about them, for there is no afterlife. He also reminds the reader that *cura* causes all suffering because the fear of death gives birth to all evil. By adding to the Thucydidean plague the ideas behind *cor maestum*, *anxius angor*, and *animi mens*, Lucretius adds moral weight to the plague narrative. These three concepts point to how *cura* creates suffering. *Cura* itself, of course, results from *metus mortis* because the fear of death is what disturbs the mind both in book three (3.59ff.) and here (6.1183).

Lucretius applies these themes in praising *optimus quisque* for aiding his sick relatives. This man is praised because he knew he would die but willingly chose to help. Death is nothing to him. His noble actions reveal the goodness that flows from a happy, fearless person who has accepted mortality. Likewise Lucretius condemns those who deserted their sick relatives due to an excessive desire for life. Those who fear death commit evil actions; death is thus the root of evil.

Lucretius' plague is one thematically coherent whole. It concludes the *DRN* as well as he could hope. It gives him the opportunity to transition smoothly from the natural phenomena of book six into a platform for summarizing his moral doctrine through illustration. Applied to people, Lucretius creates a memorable scene of the suffering and evil resulting from fearing death, and the noble behavior that results when one scorns such groundless fear.

Bibliography

Stoddard, Kate. 1996. "Thucydides, Lucretius, and the end of the *De Rerum Natura*." *Maia* 48.2: 107-128.