

Lucretius on Animal Sacrifice

This paper explores Lucretius' views on the practice of animal sacrifice, and demonstrates that his rejection of the practice constitutes a departure from the teachings of his master Epicurus. To this end, I will (I) establish Epicurus' view of animal sacrifice, and show that he encourages the practice on the grounds that it fosters friendship (*φιλία*) among participants. Next, I will (II) bring together the various passages in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (henceforth *DRN*) which discuss animal sacrifice, highlighting the correspondence between these passages and the fragments of Empedocles of Acragas. In doing so, I show that Lucretius' position on the practice of animal sacrifice is a synthesis of the positions of these two authors: Lucretius uses Empedocles' notion that bonds of friendship are shared among all creatures in order to demonstrate that animal sacrifice undercuts friendship bonds rather than strengthening them. Moreover, this paper will show that in his analysis of animal sacrifice, Lucretius betrays a practice that is so often ascribed to him: strict adherence to Epicurus' philosophical doctrines, and merely "poetic" imitation of the philosopher Empedocles (Sedley 1998, Gale 1997).

There is no room in Epicurus' cosmology for the proposition that animal sacrifice can influence the gods. We have record, however, of Epicurus performing various religious rites, including animal sacrifice (Phil. *De Piet.* 793-7; see also Obbink 1989). Despite its cosmological inefficacy, Epicurus saw animal sacrifice as having an appropriate place within Greek society. He seems to have outlined a method for productive participation in the rite, whereby the participant uses the sacrificial event as an opportunity to contemplate the proper nature of the gods. The participant recognizes that the sacrifice *per se* does not benefit him, but that his involvement in the ritual act strengthens the bonds between him and the community of

participants. According to this view, animal sacrifice is (i) cosmologically ineffectual, but (ii) strengthens bonds of friendship among humankind.

Lucretius depicts animal sacrifice on four occasions: in book one (84-101), we find the notorious sacrifice of Iphigenia, who is slain by her father Agamemnon to secure a favorable wind from the gods; in book two (352-66), Lucretius explores the psychology of a cow as her child is taken to be slain on an altar; in book three (48-54), wicked exiles turn to the practice of sacrifice out of lonely desperation; and in book four (1233-1241), Lucretius describes men without offspring who sacrifice to the gods in order that their wives may become pregnant. In each of these scenes, animal sacrifice is represented negatively. As in Epicurus, sacrifice is cosmologically ineffectual in Lucretius. Infertile men, for example, improve their fertility by altering their diet and modifying their sexual performance, not by sacrificing to the gods. But in each of the passages noted above, Lucretius also characterizes the sacrificial act as impious, not to be encouraged.

In these passages, Lucretius also associates the act of sacrifice with the dissolution of familial bonds. Epicurus nowhere discusses familial bonds. Indeed, he seems to have discouraged marriage and the rearing of children (Brennan 1996). In his development of this theme, Lucretius seems rather to be following Empedocles, who appeals to the doctrine of metempsychosis in his comparison of animal sacrifice with domestic slaughter, and the eating of the meat with the consumption of kindred flesh (φίλας σάρκας, B137). Whereas Epicurus uses the centrality of friendship as grounds for the promotion of animal sacrifice, Empedocles believes that it is centrality of friendship that speaks against the practice. To Empedocles, animal sacrifice destroys friendship bonds, *which are shared among all creatures*. In the fragments of

Empedocles, the destruction of friendship bonds are often vividly imagined as the destruction of families, since to this author, all souls are of the same kind.

In the end, Lucretius adopts a position on animal sacrifice that blends those of his two chief influences. He accepts Epicurus' argument that animal sacrifice does not bend the will of the gods. But he expands Epicurus' notion of friendship to include animals, and therefore accepts Empedocles' denunciation of animal sacrifice on the grounds that it negatively effects friendship bonds. And he borrows Empedocles' vivid imagery of family dissolution, even though he rejects metempsychosis, the doctrine that originally gave rise to it. To Lucretius, animal sacrifice is (i) cosmologically ineffectual, and (ii) subverts friendship bonds, *which are shared among all creatures*.

Bibliography

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