

On the Nature of Laughter in Lucretius

This paper investigates the laughter appearing in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and draws connections to Epicurean philosophy. Gellar-Goad's *Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matter: Lucretius' De Rerum Natura and Satire* (2020) productively explores the genre of Roman verse satire as well as the satiric mode in Lucretius' didactic epic, but several occasions of laughter in the poem seem to operate beyond considerations of genre and mode. This paper submits that, by treating laughter as an intrinsic human behavior and by aligning it with natural and environmental phenomena, the Lucretian speaker presents laughter as a by-product of a world in which the teachings of Epicurus are heeded.

In Book 2.973-990, the Lucretian speaker depicts laughter alongside speech and wisdom as quintessential human behaviors. He argues for the lack of sensation of atoms through a counterfactual: if atoms could sense, then they would laugh, they would know how to discuss the nature of things (*de rerum mixtura dicere callent*, 2.978), and they would engage in the same enquiry with which the reader is occupied. Gellar-Goad (2020: 151-152) proposes that the laughter points up the Lucretian speaker's critique of the "fallacious reasoning that gives atoms the qualities of the creatures they compose." Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of laughter with intellectual critique (*et sapere et doctis rationem reddere dictis*, 2.987) privileges laughing as a conspicuously human activity.

Laughter is presented elsewhere in *De Rerum Natura* as an attribute of water (1.8, 2.559, 5.1005), air, and general natural ambience (4.83, 5.1395). In the cultural anthropology of Book 5, when Lucretius outlines an atomistic account of the history of the physical world and the origins of terrestrial life and human civilization, the laughter of the weather (*tempestas ridebat*, 5.1395)

precipitates jokes, conversation, and sweet laughter (*tum ioca, tum sermo, tum dulces esse cachinni / consuerant*, 5.1397-1398) among early humans. The Lucretian speaker proceeds to assert that those primitive humans possessed everything they needed to thrive besides a knowledge “of the boundaries of possession and altogether how far true pleasure grows” (*quae sit habendi / finis et omnino quoad crescat vera voluptas*, 5.1432-1433). That laughter occurs (and recurs) naturally in the world and is mirrored in human interactions casts the behavior as a metric for human concord and contentment. When it is situated amid a philosophical system that acclaims the financial and emotion benefits of friendship (see, e.g., Christensen 2020: 297), laughter’s value seems all the more assured.

Epicurus announces the primacy of laughter in *Sententiae Vaticanae* 41: “It is necessary at the same time to laugh and philosophize and govern one’s house and use one’s other resources and in no way to cease putting forth the sayings of true philosophy”—*γελᾶν ἅμα δεῖ καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ οἰκονομεῖν καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς οἰκειώμασι χρῆσθαι καὶ μηδαμῆ λήγειν τὰς ἐκ τῆς ὀρθῆς φιλοσοφίας φωνὰς ἀφιέντας*. In describing laughter as an activity both enjoyed by contented humans and reflected in the natural world, the Lucretian speaker finds room for (good) humor amid the nature of things.

Bibliography

- Christensen, A. (2020) “Epicureans on Friendship, Politics, and Community,” in K. Arenson (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, 295-306, New York: Routledge
- Gellar-Goad, T.H.M. (2020) *Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matter: Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura and Satire*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.