

DE MALORUM NATURA: *Lucretius and the Nature of Evil*

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THIS PAPER SEEKS TO EXPLORE THE NATURE OF EVIL IN RESPECT TO THE ETHICS OF EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY PRESENTED IN LUCRETIUS' DE RERUM NATURA. DRAWING ON ATOMIC PHYSICS AND ITS COMPLETE CORPOREAL PHYSICALITY, EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY PRODUCES AN ETHICAL SYSTEM IN WHICH THE HIGHEST GOOD IS DEFINED IN TERMS OF MAXIMUM PLEASURE BOTH IN THE BODY AND IN THE MIND. EVIL, THEREFORE, MUST BE ANYTHING THAT DETRACTS FROM THAT STATE OF PLEASURE. IT MAY BE FURTHER CATEGORIZED AS EITHER NATURAL OR HUMAN EVIL. HOWEVER, IT IS THE EVILS INDUCED BY THE MISUNDERSTOOD NATURE OF BOTH THE GODS AND DEATH THAT ARE THE MOST HARMFUL TO A PEACEFUL STATE OF MIND. IT IS LUCRETIUS' GOAL TO ROOT OUT THESE EVILS AND, IN DOING SO, ESTABLISH THE PEACE OF THE GODS IN THE MIND OF THE HUMAN.

“If pleasure, that lack of pain both physical and mental, defines the nature of good, then what, we might ask, is evil?”

I. INTRODUCTION

Of the three divisions of Hellenistic philosophy—physics, ethics, and logic—the study of ethics deals most closely with the foundations of human nature and asks, among others, the fundamental question: what is the nature of good and evil? Lucretius’ Epicurean philosophy emphasizes the physics, and it is from the basic atomic physics that arise, in large part, the ethics of the system. The complete corporeal physicality of atomic physics, in which even the mind and soul are composed of material atoms, has interesting implications for an Epicurean ethics. Matter is always in a state of composition and decomposition, such that no compounded substance is eternal, including both the mind (*animus*) and spirit (*anima*) of a human. The mortal nature of being precludes any ethical considerations of an afterlife; the ethics, therefore, are concerned only with the good of the present. Furthermore, the inherent physical nature of everything, including the mind and spirit, focuses the ethics on actions and reactions to physical stimuli on the body and on the mind. Hence, “the highest good in life is pleasure, defined as freedom from pain in the body (*aponia*), and freedom from anxiety and disturbance in the mind, a state called *ataraxia*.”ⁱ If pleasure, that lack of pain both physical and mental, defines the nature of good, then what, we might ask, is evil? This is a question not so easily answered, for nowhere does Lucretius embark on a definitive discourse on the nature of evil. Rather, we must cull his understanding of its nature from the entirety of the *De Rerum Natura*.

It is without a doubt that evil exists in the world of Lucretius. One important leg of Lucretius’ proof in Book V that the gods did not create the world asserts that the world is too flawed to have been crafted by the hands of perfect



deities. His poetic discourse on the deficiencies of the created world culminates in a description of the pitiful lot into which a human child is born, “as is fair for him to whom so many evils remain to pass in life” (*ut aequumst / cui tantum in vita restet transire malorum*).ⁱⁱ John Godwin has even said that this passage “is a splendid piece of reasoning on the famous ‘problem of evil’ whereby the world, for all its undoubted beauty, is simply too faulty to be the result of divine intelligence.”ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, though this passage establishes that evil exists, it does not elucidate what evil is; for this, we must look further.

It is important, first, to establish a linguistic approach to the treatment of evil by Lucretius. It seems clear that the principal word used by Lucretius for “evil” is *malus*, with its adjectival and substantival forms; indeed, it is used almost twice as often as all of its nearest synonyms combined.^{iv} Yet, Lucretius uses the word *malus* only thirty-one times in the entire poem; for such a common word with such a wide range of uses, this seems surprisingly sparse in a work of more than 7400 lines and almost 50,000 words. It will soon become clear, however, that although the word is sometimes used with no more than poetic flourish, most often it is carefully chosen in order to craft and strengthen Lucretius’ ethics on the nature of evil.

In many modern metaphysics, a distinction is made between evils that occur in nature independent of human influence and evils that occur as a direct result of human influence and action. While Lucretius does, at least implicitly, draw this distinction, the difference does not affect the nature of evil *per se* in his ethics, i.e. a natural evil is in itself just as harmful as a human evil. Lucretius does, however, recognize that, while we cannot necessarily exercise control over natural evils, we can always exercise control over human evils because they originate from our own actions. Natural evils may at times be avoided by human action, but their causation is quite independent of human action. Human evils constitute graver evils in the ethics of Epicurean philosophy because human action, especially when armed with the tools of that philosophy, not only can more readily avoid them but can, and is the only agent that does, cause them. Furthermore, he understands that some human evils are more difficult, though never impossible, to resist because there are natural tendencies in humans that incline us to commit human evils; we must, therefore, work even harder to overcome them.

II. NATURAL EVILS

First, we must understand that there are definite, natural evils for Lucretius. Bearing in mind that the good is defined in terms of an absence of pain, it follows that natural evils are those things which cause pain, i.e. disease, cold, and

hunger: “for the body suffers more in connection to these deficiencies, and the mind suffers many evils because of their infection” (*corpus enim magis his vitii adfne laborat, / et mala multa animus contage fungitur eius*).^v In Book VI, Lucretius will specifically focus on the natural evil of disease, played out most spectacularly in his description of the plague of Athens. His discourse on disease follows earlier sections in which he explains many natural phenomena.

Beginning at line 639, Lucretius explains the nature of volcanoes; at one point in the passage, he uses the fever of disease as a metaphor for the fire of volcanoes. “Disease” (*morbis*) is both *malus* and “immeasurable” (*immensus*), and the earth is so full of it that its “power is able to increase” (*vis queat procrecere*).^{vi} While the imagery of a fever is certainly not unique to this description of volcanoes, it is interesting that Lucretius should use such provocative adjectives. Furthermore, he characterizes only the disease as *malus* and not the volcano; this would suggest that this description of disease is not only a metaphor for volcanoes but also a comment on the nature of disease in its own right, a topic he will take up in full just a few hundred lines later.

This characterization of disease as a natural evil becomes even stronger in the last verses of the poem in which Lucretius describes the plague of Athens. In the course of only twenty-nine lines (1150-1177/78),^{vii} he uses *malus* three times to describe the evil symptoms of the plague: the victim’s tongue is weakened by evils, anxious anguish and complaints are mixed in with unbearable evils, and there is no rest from the evil.^{viii} Hence, it becomes clear that disease, along with other naturally occurring pains, is a natural evil in Lucretian ethics.

III. THE EVILS OF LOVE

Now we shall deal with the much more complex realm of human nature and, likewise, human evils. Let us first take as an example Lucretius’ treatment of sexual desire and love in Book IV. After an involved discussion of the nature of dreams, Lucretius uses the concept of images affecting the senses to transition to a discussion of the nature of sex-

ual arousal and the ejaculation of semen.^{ix} In frank and even slightly technical terms, he describes how images of an external body, the “messengers of a striking face and of a beautiful color” (*nuntia preaclari vultus pulchrique coloris*)^x excite those parts of the body in which the semen atoms naturally congregate, causing them “to pour forth” (*profundare*).^{xi} When he describes, however, the action of the will (*voluntas*) “to cast forth” (*eicere*) the semen, he notes that it is sent “to where dread desire strains itself” (*quo se contendit dira libido*),^{xii} and that “the body seeks that [place] in which the mind is wounded by love” (*idque petit corpus, mens unde est saucia amore*).^{xiii} The problem, according to Lucretius, is when the purely natural urge to ejaculate is eclipsed by “the drop of sweet Venus” that “has dripped into [our] heart[s]” and has been followed by “frigid care” (*Veneris dulcedinis in cor / stillavit gutta et successit frigida cura*).^{xiv} In successive passages he will describe the various problems caused by the emotional connection of “love”: the madness of the lover’s absence; the insatiability of pent-up desires; the delusions created by the lovesick to hide reality.^{xv} Lucretius several times explicitly names these problems *malus*.^{xvi} Indeed, all of these problems caused by the entanglements of love detract from the *ataraxia* that is so central to Lucretian ethics.

*“To understand the nature of human action in the mind,
we must first understand the physical composition of the
human soul . . .”*

How, then, are we to overcome the evils of love? As he tells us, we are “to flee the images” (*fugitare...simulacra*), “to drive away the fodder of love and turn our minds to something else,” (*pabula amoris / absterrere...atque alio convertere mentem*), and “to cast out, not retain, the collected liquid [of semen] into whatever body” (*iacere umorem collectum in corpora quaeque / nec retinere*).^{xvii} Furthermore, even if we reject the wounding blows of love straightaway by fulfilling

our (natural) lustful desires with a prostitute, we do not lose the “enjoyment of Venus” (*Veneris fructum*); rather, we receive the pleasure of sexual fulfillment without the “punishment” (*poena*) of love.

These “evils” that are produced by emotional attachment (and, for that matter, detachment) are human evils, for they arise from deliberate human action (*voluntas*). Although the sexual urge to ejaculate is entirely natural, it is from this sexual urge, when corrupted by “incorrect” notions of its nature, that the human evil arises. Hence, we see that natural physical compositions can induce the conditions for, though not perforce necessitate, human evils.

IV. HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN EVIL

Furthermore, the systematic physical composition of the human creates general characteristics that may be inclined to commit human evils. To understand the nature of human action in the mind (*animus*), we must first understand the physical composition of the human soul (*anima*), a topic with which Lucretius deals at length in Book III. The soul is composed of four types of atoms. First, we have the three “natures” of the soul as observed from the soul as they leave the body of a dying person: wind or breath (*aura*),

heat or warmth (*vapor*), and, always commingled with the heat, air (*aer*).^{xviii} None of these three can cause sensation and therefore thoughts in the mind, so there must be a fourth type of atom, nameless, which is the cause of sensations (*sensifeorum motum*).^{xix} From these causation atoms arise sensations that pass first to the heat, then to the wind, next to the air atoms, and finally to atoms of the body in general;^{xx} in this way the soul serves as, in modern parl-

ance, the central nervous system.

Next, we examine the mind (*animus*) and see within it three natures: heat (*calor*), cold wind (*frigida aura*), and peaceful air (*pacatus aer*).^{xxi} These natures are not the same as the atoms which compose the soul; there is, however, a clear connection between them, and it seems that it is the sensation received by each type of atom that gives rise in the mind to the corresponding nature. It is these three natures that, in turn, give rise to human behavioral types. The heat is assumed by the mind “when in anger it becomes hot and a sharper flame shines from the eyes” (*in ira / cum fervescit et ex oculis micat acrius ardor*).^{xxii} Likewise, the cold wind, the “companion of fear” (*comites formidinis*), “gives rise to a shivering in the limbs” (*ciet horrorem membris*).^{xxiii} Finally, the peaceful air exists “when the heart is peaceful and the face serene” (*pectore tranquilo...vultuque sereno*).^{xxiv} The nature of each human is determined by the corresponding proportions of soul atoms within him: a preponderance of *vapor* soul atoms will create within him a nature more disposed to *calor* and hence to *ira*, and likewise with wind and air and with fear and tranquility, respectively. As we will see, it is these natural dispositions that give rise to the human evils of inordinate anger or fear.

Although an education (*doctrina*) can leave some people polished (*politos*), there will always remain some vestiges of man’s original nature. The key line, however, follows, in which Lucretius deems these dispositions, and the resultant anger, fear, or forbearance, as *mala*^{xxv} explaining that “it must not be thought possible for these evils to be pulled out, roots and all” (*nec radicitus evelli mala posse putandumst*).^{xxvi} *Radicitus*, the word meaning “root and all,” is used only one other time by Lucretius, at line 877 of the same book; in that context, Lucretius describes the man who proclaims to believe in the doctrine that the soul dies with the body, though his belief is false and empty, for there is still beneath his breast a prod (*subesse...cordi stimulum*)^{xxvii} that pushes him to fear death: this man does not pull *himself* out of life root and all (*nec radicitus e vita se tollit et eicit*). The parallel between the two lines is striking:

the first two words are identical; the third word and the third and fourth word very nearly match, both in sense and in spelling with the “e” and “v;” and the scansion, with the exception of the fourth foot, is identical. Furthermore, it is unusual for the second foot in both lines to coincide with the word ending. It seems clear that Lucretius meant for there to be a substantive connection between the two lines.

The underlying connection seems to be the failure of the man on the one hand to root out the evil that is his propensity to deviate to either anger or fear from a calm disposition, and on the other hand to root out his fear of death.^{xxviii} Both the disposition to anger and fear, and the fear of death are reactions and emotions that detract from the Epicurean *ataraxia*. Hence, we have the central Lucretian project:

*hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessest
non radii solis neque lucida tela diei
discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque*

*It is necessary, therefore, that neither the rays of the sun
nor the clear darts of day shatter this terror and the shadows
of the mind, but that the outward appearance and
theory of nature do so.*^{xxix}

These lines from Book I, repeated to close the introduction of Book III, clearly state Lucretius’ primary end in presenting his philosophy: he must dispel the fear and darkness of the mind, which interfere with the ultimate good of pleasure; this can only be accomplished through a thorough grounding in the (atomic) physics of nature. The first of our “failures,” a natural disposition to anger or fear, is “rooted out” by an education in Epicurean philosophy by which one comes to understand the true, imperturbable nature of the gods and thereafter is able to emulate them. The second “failure,” the fear of death, is “rooted out” by the principal program of that education: dispelling the superstitions and misunderstandings of religion that bind man to a terrifying life after death, a life which in reality does not exist, for neither mind nor soul survive the death of the body.

V. THE FEAR OF DEATH

One might argue that a fear of death is, in fact, a natural fear, and that, just as man has the natural inclination to feel anger and fear discussed in Book III, so man has also a natural inclination to fear death; it could also be argued the religious superstitions “invented” by man are natural responses to the truly frightening prospect of quitting the mortal life on earth. Although he never explicitly answers such an objection, it seems clear that Lucretius would argue that the fear of death is not natural in the same way as the inclination towards anger or fear. There is a natural composition in the atoms of the mind that produces the inclination towards anger or fear. A fear of death, however, has no basis in the natural composition of the mind because the nature of death is inevitable and final; hence, there is no rationale for fearing death.

In accordance with these ethics, therefore, Lucretius begins to debunk organized religion. Just sixty-six lines into the poem, he begins to praise Epicurus, the “Greek man” (*Graius homo*), because it was under his feet that religion was trampled. Lucretius reviews the story of Iphigenia at Aulis as an example to demonstrate that “religion produces wicked and unholy deeds” (*religio parit scelerosa atque impia facta*).^{xxx} Lucretius deems the slaughter of the innocent girl in the name of “religion” a wicked and unholy crime and from this singular incident he derives perhaps the best single encapsulation of “evil” in his ethics: “such great evils religion is able to advise” (*tantum religio potest suadere malorum*).^{xxxi}

Furthermore, we must understand that the gods have not ordained this unholy religion, for their nature is such that they are, in fact, wholly removed from the affairs of our world, and therein lies their perfection, for they lead eternal lives absent the evil of pain that is in our world. They are free from grief and danger, powerful in their own means, and in need of nothing that concerns us; hence, there is nothing that we can do either to gain their favor or to incur their wrath.^{xxxii} Affected by no worldly weather, they live in their quiet dwelling-places with their every need supplied

by nature, such that there exists nothing that can take away from their “peace of mind” (*animi pax*).^{xxxiii} Yet, we falsely attribute to them the same “sharp angers” (*iras acerbas*)^{xxxiv} that so plague our own hearts. Hence, we learn in Book V what true piety is: not to take part in the petty rituals and superstitions of religion, “but rather to be able to behold all with a peaceful mind” (*sed mage pacata posse omnia mente tueri*).^{xxxv} This *mens pacata* is exactly the *animi pax* of the gods: true piety, true “religion” if you will, is to emulate the gods in attaining *ataraxia*.

“It is this fear that so thoroughly throws human life into chaos. . .”

Finally, in order to take up fully the Epicurean ethic, “this fear of Acheron [i.e. the Underworld] must be driven headlong out the door” (*metus ille foras praeceps Acheruntis agendus*).^{xxxvi} It is this fear that so thoroughly throws human life into chaos, staining everything “with the blackness of death” (*mortis nigore*), and, more important, leaving behind not a single “pleasure” (*voluptatem*).^{xxxvii} The great evils of this life spring from it, because, driven by the desire both to escape eternal punishment and to gain eternal glory after the death of the body, it drives men to blind ambition. It is this ambition that causes them “to trespass the bounds of justice” (*transcendere finis / iuris*) and to become “companions of crime and ministers of murder” (*socios scelerum atque ministros / noctes*); it is these “wounds of life” (*vulnera vitae*) that are nourished “by the fear of death” (*formidine mortis*). This leads to civil bloodshed in which men “pile killing upon killing” (*caedem caede accumulant*), and to the ultimate impious deeds in which men “cruelly rejoice in the sad death of their brother and even fear to eat at the tables of their relatives” (*crudeles gaudent in tristi funere fratris / et consanguineum mensas odere timentque*).^{xxxviii} These are the evils of the world, driven by a blind and

irrational belief in and fear of the life after death.

Although the terrifying punishments imagined by the Roman religion do not exist in a Tartarus that itself does not exist, yet they do exist here on earth in our present lives. Wretched Tantalus is not numbed by the empty fear of the great rock hanging above him; rather, it is we mortals who are oppressed by an empty fear of the gods and of a death that chance has inevitably fashioned for us all. Likewise, Tityos does not lie stretched out, his bowels eternally devoured by birds, but we each become Tityos when, lying in the folds of love, we are consumed by the winged Cupid and the anguish of lovesickness. Sisyphus, too, lives here in the present day as he seeks out political power, for he will never be satisfied in his quest and so is doomed ever to push the boulder of political ambition up the slope of empty power. Indeed, all of the dreadful punishments that falsely we fear to await us in the afterlife are, in fact, present here in our lives, and even when we do not feel the sting of the scourge or the burn of pitch upon our backs, yet we fear them with a guilty conscience because we do not understand that with death comes the end of these evils, not their increase.^{xxxix} So it is that Lucretius tells us in Book 6:

*quae nisi respuis ex animo longeque remittis
dis indigna putare alienaque pacis eorum,
delibata deum per te tibi numina sancta
saepe oberunt...*

*Unless you spit these things out of your mind and banish
far away thinking things unworthy of the gods and foreign
to their peace, the holy power of the gods, lessened by you,
will often harm you...^{xl}*

VI. CONCLUSION

Hence, we see that natural evils like disease and famine do exist, but the Epicurean will understand that these evils, as natural and often inevitable as death, are to be feared no more than the same. There exist also the natural evils of the human propensity to anger and to mistake the natural need to dispel a build-up of lust for a need to establish romantic

entanglements. These evils, however, are conquerable and lead only to problems of emotional attachment, detachment, and imbalance, and not to the grand scale of crimes we see committed on account of the fear of death. The worst kind of evil, however, is the human evil of living in the delusions established by religious superstition. Man misunderstands the true nature of the gods because this superstition teaches him that the gods involve themselves in the sordid affairs of man. Man fears death because he fears the punishment that this superstition teaches awaits him after death. These superstitions cause man to drive himself into the evil of pain because neither does he understand the true nature of pleasure nor does he understand that his pain is rooted in his very fear of future pain that, in reality, will never come. To overcome evil, therefore, is to overcome these mistaken natural needs, these fears and these superstitions, and to understand and implement these Epicurean doctrines.

ENDNOTES

i Englert (xv)

ii V.226-7.

iii Godwin (95)

iv Data from Johannes Paulson's *Index Lucretianus*:

foedus, -a, -um: used 4 times

improbus, -a, -um: used 2 times

scelus, -eris: used 5 times

turpis, -is, -e: used 8 times

v III.733-4.

vi VI.663-4.

vii Editors transpose line 1178 in the MSS to before line 1175, thus making line 1177 in the MSS line 1178 in the critical text.

viii VI.1150: *debilitata malis*; VI.1158-9: *intolerabilibusque malis erat anxius angor / assidue comes et gemitu commixta querela*;

VI.1177(8): *nec requies erat ulla mali*

ix Though Lucretius' discussion of sexuality is couched in terms of the male arousal and ejaculation of semen into the female, he does note in ll. 1192-1208, that intercourse and sexual pleasure are a shared experience (*communus*) between man and woman; therefore, his physics and ethics of sexuality, though only stated in male terms, hold true as well for the female.

x IV.1033.

xi IV.1035.

xii IV.1045-6.

xiii IV.1048.

xiv IV.1059-60.

xv IV.1061-2, 68-9; IV.1076-1140; IV.1141-91.

xvi IV.1119, 1141, 1159.

xvii IV.1063-6.

xviii III.232-4.

xix III.241-45.

xx III.246-51.

xxi III.288-93.

xxii III.288-9.

xxiii III.290-1.

xxiv III.293.

xxv These resultant actions are problematic, of course, only in excess: "this man runs off more quickly to sharp angers, that one is tested more quickly by a small fear, or that third man receives something more kindly than is right" (*proclivius hic iras decurrat ad acris, / ille metu citius paulo temptetur, at ille / tertius accipiat quaedam clementius aequo*) III.311-3.

xxvi III.310.

xxxvii III.873-4.

xxxviii The fear that results from the disposition of the mind of the cold wind is a separate concept from the fear of death. The fear of death is a specific, final, and ultimate fear; while the fear caused by the cold wind is simply the generic emotion of fear.

xxix I. 146-8

xxx I.83; original verb form *peperit*.

xxxi I.101; original verb form *potuit*.

xxxii I.44-49.

xxxiii III.18-24.

xxxiv V.1195.

xxxv V.1203.

xxxvi III.37.

xxxvii III.38-40.

xxxviii III.59-73.

xxxix III.980-1023.

xl VI. 68-71

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