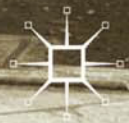
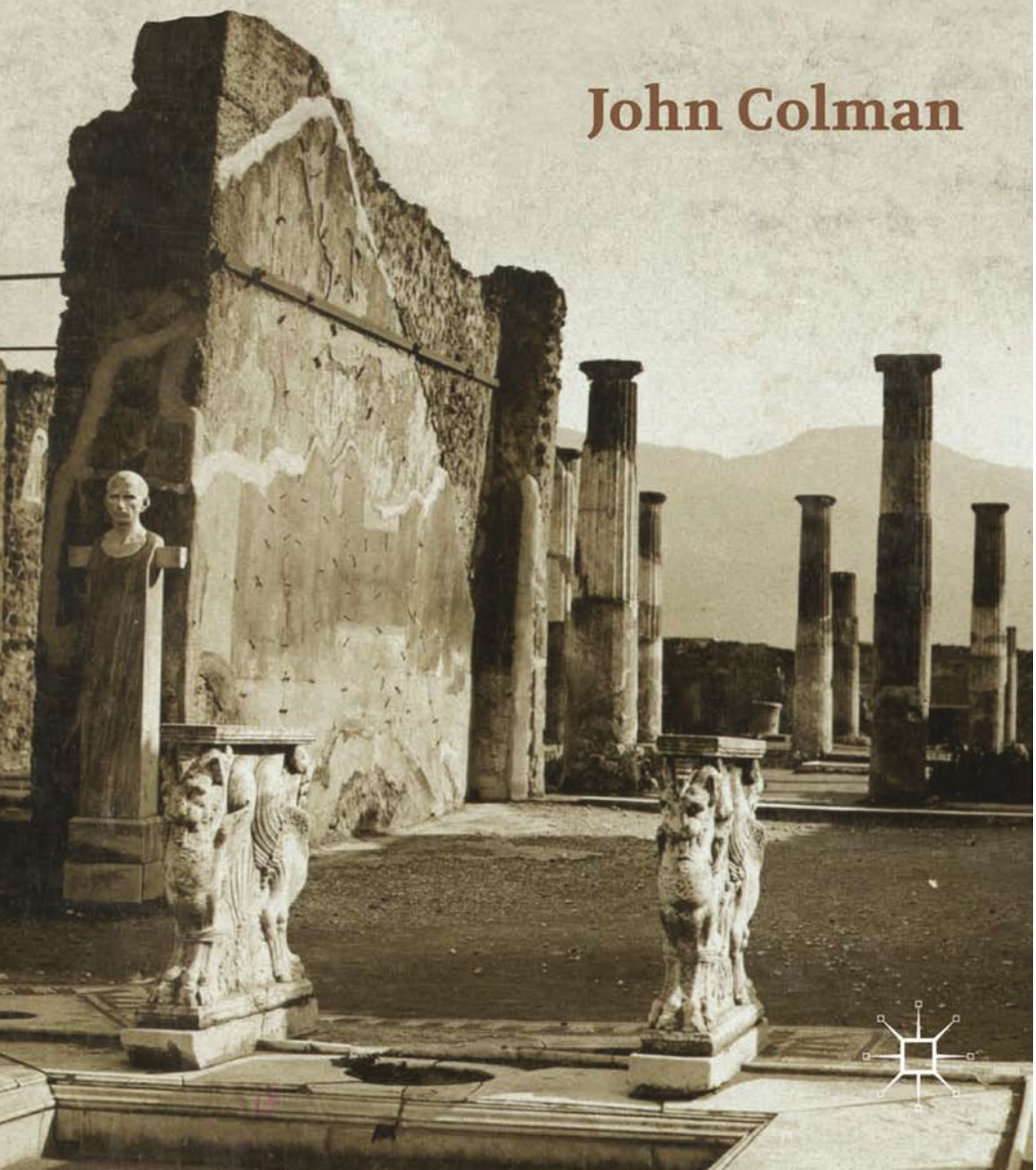




RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

# Lucretius as Theorist of Political Life

John Colman



LUCRETIUS AS THEORIST OF  
POLITICAL LIFE

# RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

SERIES EDITORS: THOMAS L. PANGLE AND TIMOTHY BURNS

Postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives has provoked a searching reexamination of the works of past political philosophers. The reexamination seeks to recover the ancient or classical grounding for civic reason and to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The series responds to this ferment by making available outstanding new scholarship in the history of political philosophy, scholarship that is inspired by the rediscovery of the diverse rhetorical strategies employed by political philosophers. The series features interpretive studies attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which censorship and didactic concern impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. *Recovering Political Philosophy* emphasizes the close reading of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life. The editors encourage manuscripts from both established and emerging scholars who focus on the careful study of texts, either through analysis of a single work or through thematic study of a problem or question in a number of works.

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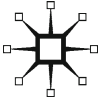
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By John Colman

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POLITICAL LIFE

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*For Beth*

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## NOTE FROM THE SERIES EDITORS

**P**algrave's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series was founded with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives. This invigorating challenge has provoked a searching reexamination of classic texts, not only of political philosophers, but also of poets, artists, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series publishes studies that endeavor to take up this reexamination and thereby help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as studies that clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The interpretative studies in the series are particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which both censorial persecution and didactic concerns have impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life.

Recent works on *De Rerum Natura* have focused on the significant effect that the recovery of Lucretius's poem had upon modern Enlightenment thinkers. John Colman examines instead the poem in the light of the poet's own intention, in the poet's original context. Colman highlights Lucretius's claim to be the first to write a genuinely philosophic poem and to find thereby a place for philosophy in Rome. Colman thus illuminates the enormous cultural problem that Lucretius confronted and attempted to solve or to mitigate by his poetic presentation of science: Rome and its culture was hostile to philosophy and philosophic science. But why? At the center of Lucretius's presentation of his materialist physics,—Colman shows—is a teaching on the deep psychological reasons

for this hostility, combined with an attempt to diminish the hostility and its sources. Lucretius focuses on the question of what the discovery of nature and natural necessity means for the status and significance of human freedom and of political life in its passionate attachment to freedom. The Lucretian philosophic study of humanity's fear of death, and erotic response to that fear, reveals the character of the gulf that separates the philosophic life from the life moved by political ambition and civic attachments. Lucretius's conception of the philosophic life, in its relation to civic culture, distinguishes his understanding profoundly—Colman concludes—from the much more politically and technologically ambitious or hopeful project of Lucretius's modern appropriators.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Whatever is good in this book is credited to brilliant teachers. To Christopher Kelly, Christopher Bruell, Robert Faulkner, and Waller Newell, I hope the words found here are a small recompense for all your generosity and the learning you tried—hopefully with some success—to impart to me. A great debt of gratitude is owed to the editors of this series, Thomas Pangle and Timothy Burns, for allowing me to be a part of their project. My thinking on Lucretius, and much besides, has benefitted from many a late night symposia with my colleague Marc D. Guerra. To my parents, no words can capture what is owed. Finally, for Beth, without you “the village” would be too small.

## INTRODUCTION

### DESIGNING AND TURBULENT EPICUREANS

In his *Thoughts on French Affairs*, Edmund Burke draws attention to the “old Epicureans” to highlight the radicalism of French revolutionary thinking. The atheism of the French revolutionaries, Burke remarks, represents a departure from the atheism of old. Unlike the “old Epicureans” who, Burke says, were “an unenterprising race,” Enlightenment atheists—whom Burke implicitly identifies as adopting a new Epicureanism—have “grown active, designing, turbulent, and seditious.”<sup>1</sup> The quest of the French revolutionaries, those “pettifoggers run mad in Paris,” for “abstract and unlimited perfection of power” does not comprehend that a sound constitution is an “elaborate contrivance of a fabric fitted to unite private and public liberty with public force, with order, with peace, with justice, and above all, with institutions formed for bestowing permanence and stability through ages.”<sup>2</sup> The fanaticism of revolutionary fervor to “go beyond the barrier” of sound constitutional equilibrium of liberty and order is the necessary outgrowth of theoretical abstraction unhinged from the practicalities of political life. Ultimately for Burke, an “untempered spirit of madness, blindness, immorality, and impiety” defines the revolutionary project.<sup>3</sup> The radicalism of the new atheists is a consequence of the two predominant principles of the revolutionary ethos: the fundamental equality of all men and the sovereignty of the people. The revolution’s vigor and rapid spread across the continent are due to the fact that this ethos is “flattering to the natural propensities of the unthinking multitude, and to the speculations of all those who think, without thinking very profoundly.” The fury of the new atheists makes them “sworn enemies to Kings, Nobility and Priesthood.” Burke does not explain why the old Epicureans were less enterprising, but his suggestion appears to be that they were not egalitarians, “adventurers in philosophy,” or “furious,” “extravagant Republicans.” The old

Epicureans' lack of boldness and ambition may then be attributed to the fact that, unlike their modern cousins, they had no political or "ideological" project they wished to advance.

Burke's assessment of the lack of ambition and boldness of ancient Epicureanism stands in contrast with recent scholarship that has traced Lucretius's influence upon the French philosophes, more daring elements within renaissance humanism, the English and Scottish enlightenment, German materialists, and much else within the more radical wing of early modern philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Given Burke's characterization of the ancient Epicureans, one may wonder if the use made of Lucretius by his early modern followers was in keeping with his understanding of his own teaching. One wonders if, far from drawing simply and honestly from Lucretius's account of the nature of things the more enterprising moderns used his poem as a way to give their radical project a patina of classical respectability. Burke's reflections ought then to give one pause and consider whether the appropriators of Lucretius remained true to his original teaching or if they have falsely attached to Lucretius a revolutionary intention alien from his own.

Much of the scholarship chronicling Lucretius's influence on modern political and scientific philosophy has concentrated on how particular aspects of Lucretius's materialism, his account of the mortality of the soul, or how his critique of religion was an inspiration for the modern project. None, however, has sufficiently asked whether Lucretius's poem taken as a whole could be seen as endorsing what his modern appropriators were advocating. Although the radical and revolutionary project of many of his appropriators has been wonderfully demonstrated, this has not led to a reconsideration of Lucretius's own intention. There has been little consideration of what Lucretius himself would have made of the radical project of early modern political philosophy. Burke's reflections on ancient Epicureanism, by contrast, provocatively suggest that Lucretius differs from his modern cousins in important ways.

Despite the influence that Lucretius and Epicureanism more generally may have had on the radical enlightenment, the similarities between them in fact pales in comparison to the great divide that separates classical philosophy—of which Lucretius and Epicureanism were a part—from its more enterprising modern relatives. Burke's reflections suggest that the radical enlightenment thinking is a corruption of classical Epicureanism, or is an Epicureanism transformed. Its leaders appear to have eschewed the life praised by Lucretius, one removed from the machinations of political life that attempts to live quietly behind the "well-walled temples of the wise." One striking difference between ancient and modern Epicureans is that the ancient Epicurean merely desires to cultivate his garden, to

find a quiet place for philosophy to exist within—if not somewhat apart from—the city, while the early modern Epicureans seek not to cultivate a garden but, as Descartes would have it, to become masters and owners of nature.<sup>5</sup> Such a project demanded that the Epicurean become ambitious or, as Burke remarks, “designing and seditious.”

On such a reckoning the use of Lucretius was undertaken for an explicitly different end and moved by an intention not identical with Lucretius’s own. To see Lucretius independently of his modern appropriators, it is necessary to disentangle him from the project of those whom Burke calls the “new epicureans.” The only way to do so properly is to begin with a clear understanding of Lucretius’s original intent and teaching. Burke’s reflection advises that one should be careful not to confuse ancient and modern Epicureanism or confound Lucretius with those who used his thought to advance a radical and revolutionary project. There may be a need then to rescue Lucretius from the political, scientific, and—in some cases—even theological aspirations of his appropriators. Without attention to Lucretius independent of modern thought, we may close ourselves off from learning from Lucretius a powerful alternative to the modern account of the human condition, man’s place in the nature of things, and how man ought to live. The current book therefore does not have as its aim to explicate the ways in which Lucretius’s poem influenced early modern political and scientific philosophy. I will briefly here in the introduction try to outline the ambitions of the modern project and how it enlisted Lucretius as an ally in its radical project, and will return to the moderns in the concluding chapter to argue how the conscription of Lucretius was in fact a corruption of Lucretius. The overarching purpose of the present book is, however, to unearth Lucretius’s teaching by way of a close reading of his poem with a view to uncovering his intention.

Lucretius’s most obvious intention for writing his poem is his expressed desire to win the friendship of a political ambitious man named Memmius. Lucretius appears to hope that that friendship will begin to draw Memmius away from political life toward the philosophic life. The obstacle to winning Memmius’s friendship is that the affairs of Rome demand Memmius’s undivided attention and his civic duties leave him little or no opportunity to begin the study of the nature of things. Of greater concern to Lucretius himself is that, even should Memmius find the time to begin his studies, he may be led by the threats of the poets and the priests to think that in following Lucretius, he has embarked on a life of “impiety” and “crime” (I, 80–82).<sup>6</sup> The city, according to these accusations, regards the investigation into the nature of things as unlawfully heterodox and indeed seditious. For these reasons, Lucretius’s intention must go beyond simply winning Memmius’s friendship. Later Lucretius

claims that part of his motivation was to be the first to write a genuinely philosophic poem and to be first to have transcribed the truth about the nature of things into Latin. Lucretius's ultimate claim is nothing less than being the first to bring philosophy to Rome (V, 335–336). It is because of this ambition that Lucretius's poem begins with his account of the political and theological situation in which philosophy finds itself. The hermeneutic of what follows is that the poem as a whole ought to be read with this intention in mind and understood in light of the challenges that politics and religion pose to that intention.

If we briefly turn to Lucretius's modern appropriators, we see that part of the attraction to Lucretius may have been that they saw in him an ally in their own contest against political and religious authority. Lucretius's political and theological situation is in important respects similar, but of course not identical, to that in which his modern admirers found themselves. Burke's "adventurers in philosophy," among whom one might number Pierre Bayle, Paul Henri-Thiry Baron d'Holbach, and Helvétius, were all in some fashion inspired by Lucretius. Helvétius's radically materialist *De L'Esprit* begins with an epigraph from Lucretius. Drawn from the poem of Book I, it reads: "We must see correctly from where comes the nature of the mind and by what reason and power all is done on earth."<sup>7</sup> Helvétius's epigraph points to how his work will provide an account of the material composition of the soul that aims to advance the cause of free inquiry against the tyranny of ecclesiastical supervision. In the preface to *De L'Esprit*, Helvétius begins with humble reassurances that his intentions are pure and advanced out of love of mankind. Despite Helvétius's materialism, he claims that none of the ideas contained in his work are out of conformity with prevailing religious truths. Helvétius's humanitarian project cannot, however, be easily launched, since many cannot write "without trembling" because of "the discouragement given to men of genius from the imputations frequently filled with calumny." Some "base and cowardly" men appear to wish to keep others from the study of nature and consider it "odious and licentious." Such curbs on scientific inquiry "presage the return of the age of ignorance."<sup>8</sup> Although some of his ideas may be bumptious and brash, he asks his readers to withhold their condemnation since sometimes it is only by the "boldest attempts that the greatest truths can be discovered." In a time when certain men "forbid knowledge of certain truths," one must fear the prospective age when "it will no longer be permitted to mention any."<sup>9</sup> It is against such men and such a prospect that Helvétius offers his work.

One can find similar motivations in the radical enlightenment materialism of d'Holbach. D'Holbach characterizes his work as a means to initiate an entirely new way of governance and life. For this offense,



d'Holbach saw his *Système de la Nature* condemned in August of 1770 by the Parlement of Paris whose members accused it of expanding the system of Lucretius. The obstacle to d'Holbach's project is, as in Helvétius, the everpresent entanglement of religion and politics: "To error must be attributed those inveterate hatreds, those barbarous persecutions, those numerous massacres, those dreadful tragedies, of which, under pretext of serving the interests of heaven, the earth has been but too frequently made the theatre. It is error consecrated by religious enthusiasm, which produces that ignorance, that uncertainty in which man ever finds himself with regard to his most evident duties, his clearest rights, the most demonstrable truths. In short, man is almost everywhere a poor degraded captive, devoid of greatness of soul, of reason, or of virtue, whom his inhuman gaolers have never permitted to see the light of day."<sup>10</sup> The reeducation of man advanced through the renewed study of the nature of things would not only free men of their prejudices but also free philosophy from its capture by theology.<sup>11</sup> In *Le Bon Sens*, d'Holbach remarks that "theology, from the remotest antiquity to the present time, has had the exclusive privilege of directing philosophy," with the result that "many evasions have been used both in ancient and modern times in order to avoid engagement with the ministers of the gods." Such "ministers" have ever tyrannized over thought, and men of letters have been forced to write ambiguously to avoid persecution. Many, therefore, had a "double-doctrine, one public the other secret." Unfortunately the "key" to separating the two has been frequently lost and with it the philosopher's "true sentiments." D'Holbach therefore calls for greater boldness and an emulation of those ancients such as "Democritus, Epicurus and other Greeks" who "presumed to tear away the veil of prejudice and to deliver philosophy from theological shackles." Still, the doctrines of many moderns who have followed Epicurus, men such as "Hobbes, Spinoza, and Pierre Bayle," have found "few followers in a world still intoxicated with fables."<sup>12</sup> The suspicion that still surrounds the investigation into the nature of things leads d'Holbach at one point to defend his own project by enlisting the example of Lucretius to combat the prevailing idea that atheism is incompatible with virtue. The argument advanced is that whether men are given to virtue or vice is more, and perhaps exclusively, a result of their temperaments rather than of adherence to a philosophic system. It is not "the general opinions of the mind, which determine us to act, but the passions. Atheism is a system which will not make a good man wicked, neither will it make a wicked man good." The same can be said about the religious believer, as no religious system will lead evil men to good deeds. Presuming to echo the sentiments of Lucretius, d'Holbach asserts that in fact religion is often used to provide a cover of zealous

devotion for unscrupulous and heinous deeds. Such a cover is not available to the avowed atheist.<sup>13</sup> D'Holbach goes further to suggest that in fact atheism gives man over to "reason, philosophy, natural piety . . . and everything that can serve to conduct him to virtue." Philosophers are therefore not "dangerous citizens" as is clear from the fact that "Epicurus never disturbed Greece; the poem of Lucretius caused no civil war in Rome; Bodin was not the author of the league; the writings of Spinoza have not excited the same troubles in Holland . . . Hobbes did not cause blood to flow in England."<sup>14</sup> Those who would argue that religious belief may be erroneous but provides a salutary restraint on the ignorant are propagating the fiction that the truth is dangerous and fail to see that it is men's prejudices that are the most genuine threat to peace. D'Holbach suggests that this truth was first advanced by Lucretius.<sup>15</sup>

Baron d'Holbach took inspiration from Pierre Bayle, whose *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was a model for the French encyclopedists. Bayle was renowned for his courage in seeking the liberation of philosophy from its ecclesiastical masters by advocating that religious toleration be extended to heretics and even atheists. In his *Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14:23 "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full,"* Bayle seeks to defend the philosophic life by arguing that "natural reason" is our only guide in deciding religious controversies. Rather than have reason constrained to bend its discoveries to church dogma, the profession of miracles, or metaphysics, Bayle argues that all religious sects must, to prove the superiority of their beliefs, "come to pay their homage at last at the footstool of the throne of reason, and acknowledge . . . that reason, speaking to us by the axioms of natural light . . . is the supreme tribunal and final judge without appeal of whatever is proposed to the human mind." The ultimate conclusion to this is that no one should ever suggest that "theology is queen and philosophy the handmaid."<sup>16</sup> The words and deeds of "divines themselves," in their "tortures of wit and invention," must try to "demonstrate" the truth of their dogmas and thereby "plainly recognize the supremacy of philosophy and the indispensable obligation they are under in making court to it."<sup>17</sup>

Once philosophy is made queen and all dogmas—especially those that relate to morality—are made to stand trial at the bar of reason, one will find that there are no longer grounds to fear that atheism is related to wickedness. In his entry on Lucretius in the *Dictionary*, Bayle suggests that the "good morals" of a man such as Lucretius are proof positive that "atheism is not necessarily joined with bad morals."<sup>18</sup> In his *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, Bayle goes a step further—again using Lucretius—and argues that not only is atheism no indication of

immorality but also that an entire society of atheists could be a moral one.<sup>19</sup> According to Bayle, the preeminent example of men living morally upright lives in the absence of God are the Epicureans. Though Epicurus denied divine providence and the immortality of the soul, the Epicureans nevertheless “performed many laudable and decent actions” and “sacrificed utility and pleasure to virtue.” When confronted with the accusation that without providence and fear of divine retribution there would be no reason for worship of gods, the Epicurean responds that the “excellence of their nature was a great enough reason to venerate them.” To move from the limited theology of the Epicureans as supportive of a decent life to atheism as similarly supportive, Bayle begins by suggesting that the limited nonprovidential theology of the Epicureans may have been more a matter of “policy” than sincerity. Their example is enough to persuade him that “reason without the knowledge of God can sometimes persuade a man that there are decent things which it is fine and laudable to do, not on account of the utility of doing so, but because this is in conformity with reason.”<sup>20</sup> Bayle however goes on to contend that by properly channeling men’s desire for worldly glory and praise, laws and mores could restrain men and therefore be a viable substitute for fear of divine retribution. Perhaps to provide evidence that such a claim is not as radical or revolutionary as it may appear, Bayle draws upon Lucretius’s account of the development of political life which—he claims—makes use of such an argument.<sup>21</sup>

Bayle seeks to defend philosophy from its accusers by claiming that one must not too readily discredit a philosophic system based upon the character of its adherents. Although one may indeed find vicious men attached to any given philosophy, it is not the case that the philosophy is itself the cause of such viciousness. Bayle again uses the case of the Epicureans to advance his argument. The Epicureans despite, or perhaps because, they “denied providence and the immortality of the soul, lived in as exemplary a way as any ancient philosophers.” Though some have dishonored the sect with their vices, “they were people debauched through habit and temperament who were glad to cover their filthy passions with so fine a pretext as that of saying they were following the maxims of one of the greatest philosophers in the world... [to] conceal themselves with the cloak of philosophy.” In addition, although it may have become customary to pejoratively label lascivious atheists “Epicureans,” such persons “have not become debauched because they embraced the doctrine of Epicurus; but they embraced the doctrine of Epicurus, misunderstood, because they were debauched.”<sup>22</sup> To those who might try to indict Epicurus by the fact that such debauched persons are attracted to his doctrine to begin with, Bayle later points out that Lucretius—aware

of such a possibility—took measures to disabuse those who may wish to cover their indecency with the cloak of philosophy. Though he was a follower of Epicurus, that “glorious religion tamer,” Lucretius was sure to remind his readers “so as not to startle the world, that one should not imagine that he has it in mind to favor crime.”<sup>23</sup>

Although Lucretius’s intention to find a place for philosophy in Rome is confronted by the accusations leveled against philosophy by the poets and priests, nowhere does Lucretius make anything like the defense of philosophy offered by d’Holbach, Helvétius, or Bayle. Far from arguing that atheism is compatible with sound morality, Lucretius attempts to convince Memmius—and by extension the city—that the philosophic life is in fact the most genuinely pious life. Confronted by a similar, but in no way identical, theological-political problem d’Holbach, Helvétius, and Bayle adopted a bolder strategy in confronting the theological challenges posed to philosophy. The difference between Lucretius and his early modern appropriators would therefore appear to be their respective reactions and strategies in confronting the problem posed by the intermingling of religion and politics in human affairs. Lucretius, ancient Epicureanism, and (I would contend) all of classical political philosophy, holds that the theological-political problem that philosophy finds itself in is irremediable. The “active, designing, turbulent, and seditious” moderns refuse to accept that such may be the case. The aim of this book is first to explain Lucretius’s account of the political, religious, and theological situation that philosophy finds itself in (and may always find itself in) and then to provide an account—through a close reading of the poem—of why this is so and what Lucretius argues must be philosophy’s proper reaction to that situation if it is to remain honest to the philosophic life properly understood.

We begin where Lucretius begins in the proem to Book I with an eye to uncovering the depth of the challenge that both the city presents to philosophy and the philosophic life presents to the city. Lucretius’s discussion of the discoveries of the “man from Greece” is presented as a rebellion against the political and religious authority that guards “the gates to nature.” What comes to light is then the inherent tension between the philosophic life and the political life. The very origin of the investigation into the nature of things is seen as a challenge to the city’s account of its divine foundation and privileged place in the nature of things. The life devoted to the investigation into the nature of things is one that seeks, as far as is possible, quiet contemplative withdrawal from the demands of civic life and more importantly independence of mind from the foundational and governing ideas that sustain it. Philosophy must justify this sought after independence and is compelled to defend itself before the city.

Given the tension between philosophy and the city, the discoveries of the investigation into nature as detailed in the first two books of Lucretius' s poem are the means by which philosophy begins to justify its way of life. Lucretius's materialist physics is not simply or primarily an exposition of the principles and movements of nature; it is more properly the first step in the exposition of man's place in the nature of things and second, a preparation for man's confrontation with the truth about nature. [Chapter 2](#) therefore details the nature of nature and what it means for human life, particularly the status of history, freedom, and the city. Lucretius's materialist physics has as its driving purpose exposing the fundamental limits the nature of things imposes upon all things, not least of which is man. That such is the case can be seen by the fact that both books outlining the materialist physics culminate in man's troubling confrontation with the nature of the eternal and infinite.

The immutable limits inherent in the nature of things are next applied to the soul in Books III and IV, which end respectively in accounts of fear of death and the psychic mania of love. To live well, man must overcome both the fear of his inevitable personal extinction and the hopes that manifest themselves in erotic love. The philosophic life lived in accord with the fundamental limits of nature is then presented as the only and sufficient path to overcome such fears and hopes. The chapter reveals that the philosophic disposition is one of resignation, a life lived learning how to die and to be liberated from tyrannical eros. The power that such fears and hopes have over the majority of men's souls, however, suggests that the philosophic life is not available to all.

The conclusion of Lucretius's account of the challenge death and love present to living in accord with the truth about nature reveals that the life moved by political ambition is the furthest removed from the philosophic life. [Chapter 4](#) thus considers the character of Lucretius's addressee, the politically ambitious Memmius, and the nature of political life more generally. Political life is irremediably erotic and driven by a refusal to accept the fundamental facts about the nature of things, if it is not in fact in open rebellion against such truths. Memmius for his part is of dubious intellectual gifts and not a likely candidate for the philosophic life. Lucretius's depiction of Memmius, and by extension political life, therefore, begins to explain the limited power that philosophy can bring to bear in reforming political life. Ultimately, Lucretius's account of politics and political life indicates that there can be no final resolution to the tension between philosophy and the city. The philosophic life must seek to accommodate itself insofar as possible to the imperatives of civic and religious life.

The erotic nature of political life and the irremediable tension between philosophy and the city lead into a consideration of the human and

political significance of religion. The proem to Book I had suggested that the discoveries of the man from Greece “trample religion under foot.” Later, however, in his account of the origin of religion Lucretius situates its full development in “great nations” and “great cities” and reveals that religion is inseparable from the evolution of political life. Religion is inextricably tied to man’s intransigent fear of death and an eroticism that keeps him from the truth about the nature of things. [Chapter 5](#) takes up Lucretius’s somewhat scattered remarks about religion and the role it plays in political life. These scattered remarks disclose that political life is necessarily dependent upon religious belief and, therefore, that any defense of philosophy must ironically present itself as most genuinely pious.

Considering the necessary place of religion in political life and the intractability of man’s naturally fearful, erotic disposition to the world, one can begin to appreciate Burke’s remark that ancient Epicureans were an “unenterprising race.” In the conclusion we, therefore, return to the early modern appropriators of Lucretius and argue that, in becoming politically ambitious, they have transformed Lucretius’s teaching about the best life and therewith eroticized philosophy. Although the similarities between Lucretius and his early modern cousins are important, the failure to appreciate the latter’s transformation of Lucretius’s intention promotes a basic misunderstanding of the very purpose of Lucretius’s poem. More importantly by failing to see Lucretius independently of the more enterprising moderns, we risk losing a compelling alternative to the modern account of the best life and what man’s political and philosophic disposition ought to be in light of his place in the nature of things.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROEM TO BOOK I: PHILOSOPHY AND THE CITY

The proem to Book I establishes how the philosophic life stands in relation to the life of the poem's addressee Memmius, a man who lives in accord with the fundamental duties and responsibilities of a citizen of Rome. Most importantly for Lucretius's intention, Memmius's mind is formed by the governing and foundational myths of the city authored and advanced by its poets and priests. Given Lucretius's intention, the proem has as its overarching aim to limn the depth and breadth of the chasm that separates the philosophic life from the political and religious life of the city. In so doing, it begins to reveal the tension between the competing demands of philosophic and political life. An indication of this tension is that over the course of the poem, Lucretius explains that his primary allegiance is to Athens, not Rome (VI, 1–8). Athens is initially personified by the nameless "man from Greece," and synonymous with the "dark discoveries of the Greeks" and the philosophic life (I, 137). The proem therefore begins to set the stage for Lucretius's justification for choosing Athens over Rome and a preparation for the defense of the philosophic life that constitutes the heart of the poem. The materialist physics of the first two books should therefore be regarded as the preliminary means by which Lucretius justifies his way of life.

The poem's movement from Rome to Athens is initiated in the proem to Book I.<sup>1</sup> That movement is to take the reader from the life of the city, defined and formed by the understanding of the nature of things given to it by its poets and priests (I, 102 *vatum*), to the life of philosophy and the discoveries of the Greeks (I, 137). The purpose here is to follow that movement and appreciate the difficulties that present themselves to those who wish to make it. Lucretius reveals the extent to which the city stands

opposed, perhaps necessarily, to philosophy and what is required to be liberated from the city's false horizon.

### The Invocation to Venus—I, 1–28

Of the many curious things about Lucretius's poem, none is as curious as the proem to Book I's opening praise of Venus. Some have remarked on the fact that the praise of Venus as governor of the nature of things contradicts the fundamental tenets of Lucretius's materialist account of generation and destruction. The contradiction leads some to argue that the invocation can be squared with the materialist physics as Lucretius did not conceive of Venus as an anthropomorphic deity but the personification of nature's creative force. Others suggest that the invocation is a tribute to his addressee Memmius whose family was attached to the worship of the cult of Venus.<sup>2</sup> Such explanations are plausible and are to be preferred to those that explain the contradiction, or try to explain it away, as a consequence of Lucretius's failure to edit the poem.

A more compelling account can be found in Pierre Bayle's entry on Lucretius in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Bayle argues there that the invocation ought to be understood as an attempt on Lucretius's part to accommodate himself to poetic and political custom. This accommodation to custom, according to Bayle's presentation, may be understood in two ways. First, it may be that Lucretius is accommodating himself to poetic customs, as a kind of "poetical flight," insofar as poets have traditionally invoked the muses and Lucretius did not wish his poem to be "destitute of an ornament of this kind."<sup>3</sup> The second explanation that Bayle provides is more controversial. He suggests that the praise of Venus was a necessary accommodation to custom given the radical and potentially subversive substance of the rest of the poem. Bayle remarks that the invocation was not an act of religion, but "policy."<sup>4</sup> To substantiate his claim, Bayle draws upon the history of the tension between the natural philosophers and priests of Athens. A case in point was the persecution of Anaxagoras for atheism, which Bayle contrasts with Athenian toleration of Epicurus. In this regard Bayle refers to Augustine's perplexity as to why Anaxagoras was found guilty of atheism while Epicurus not only flourished but also "enjoyed a glorious reputation" at Athens. Bayle suggests that Epicurus may have been spared the persecution meted out to Anaxagoras because he was willing and able to "gratify their [the Athenians'] private passions under the cloak of piety."<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Bayle proposes that Epicurus may have "politically conformed to public worship."<sup>6</sup> The Athenians, he suggests, were satisfied with such exterior conformity to custom as they had "double weights and double measures"



when it came to the public profession of civil religion. Such “political” conformity must have satisfied the Athenians that Epicurus was not a threat to the health of the city. The only other possibility, one that Bayle seems to reject, is that the Athenians “so subtle and ingenious in other respects were very stupid in points of religion.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Bayle, Lucretius is no mere poet but a philosopher and as such would have undoubtedly appreciated the contradiction that the invocation presents to his physics. The contradiction between the truth about the nature of things and the dominant religious account of the whole led Lucretius to “adapt his style of speaking, and to the opinions, which he accounted vulgar errors.” To deny that Lucretius was so accommodating leaves one with little choice but to engage in “ridiculous caviling” and accuse him of being guilty of “gross contradiction.”<sup>8</sup> Bayle here echoes the sentiments of Montaigne that even the boldest of ancient philosophic sects wrote some things, particularly “their religions,” for the needs of society because they did not wish to “bare popular opinions to the bone, so as not to breed disorder in people’s obedience to the laws and customs of their country.”<sup>9</sup> The confusion created by the invocation and the materialist physics may have been intentional on Lucretius’s part, since the Romans were “no less jealous of religion” and “no less severe with impious men, than the people of Athens.”<sup>10</sup>

Cicero would appear to confirm Bayle’s judgment when he remarks that “philosophy is content with few judges, and of set purpose on her side avoids the multitude and is in her turn an object of suspicion and dislike to them, with the result that anyone who should be disposed to revile all philosophy could count on popular support.” For this reason Cicero claims that he hides his “private opinions.”<sup>11</sup> This may also explain why Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations* takes the Epicureans to task for having presented their account to all comers, even to those of “little learning.” Part of Cicero’s critique of the Epicureans is, therefore, their imprudence in speaking to all men in the same fashion. Cicero’s excoriation of the Epicureans comes but shortly after he had expressed the fact that the multitude regarded philosophy with suspicion. This critique of the Epicureans is especially interesting in light of what he has to say about Lucretius’s poem in a letter to his brother. He commends Lucretius’s poem there as both of great genius and very artful.<sup>12</sup>

Bayle’s account has the benefit of consistently explaining what appear to be contradictions in the proem to Book I. One ought, however, to go one step further than Bayle. While the invocation is an attempted accommodation to the religious opinions of the Romans, it also serves as the foil and backdrop for the theological-political problem that is the central difficulty addressed in the proem as a whole. In dedicating the poem to

Venus, Lucretius may have adopted the strategy that it is best when introducing difficult and novel teachings to begin with what people want to hear, which is what they are accustomed to hearing. Only then can one begin to introduce what they might not want to hear, or what is perhaps even prohibited from being said. The invocation can then be understood as beginning to draw the sharp division and tension between the way of life of the city and the way of life of philosophy.

The dedication to Venus is also a dedication to Rome inasmuch as Venus is tied to Aeneas and therewith to the founding of Rome. Venus is *Aeneadum genetrix*, progenitor of the Aeneads (I, 1). Venus is not merely the mother of the descendants of Aeneas but also the joy of all life: divine, human, and beastly (I, 1–5). Every living thing as such owes its existence to her. Venus, as both the mother of the Aeneads and the sole governor of the nature of things, establishes a conjunction or harmony between Rome and nature. Rome and the ways of Rome are in harmony with the governor of the nature of things. The founding of Rome was a consequence of divine will and she sanctifies the life of Rome and the ways of Rome. To be Roman is to have a direct line of descent from the governor of the nature of things. The invocation of Venus as mother of the Aeneads suggests that the governor of the nature of things is close to human concerns, and cares for Rome in particular. The nature of things is organized with circumspection and care, and her city—Rome—is a home divinely created for man and his flourishing. The invocation thus establishes a harmony between the ways of the heavens and the ways of man. Venus's association with Rome is the foundation of the view that man lives in a walled universe protected and guarded by divine beneficence. The goodness of Rome and the authority of the ways of Rome are established by its divine origins. Venus's union with Rome establishes the union of the universal and the particular. The dedication to Venus establishes that, according to the city, there is a harmony between the "*ratione caeli*" and the "*ratione vitae*."<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the invocation blurs—if not denies—the distinction between nature and convention.

### The Seduction of Mars—I, 29–43

As Venus "alone governs" the nature of things and nothing comes into being without her, Lucretius wishes for her to be his partner in writing his poem. Venus's particular fondness for Memmius "has endowed him with all gifts" and leads her to will that he excel at all times. Memmius is a favorite son and Venus's universal providence is linked with her particular providential care for Memmius. It is her love of both Rome and Memmius that leads Lucretius to call upon her for assistance in writing

his poem. Lucretius has two requests to make of her. He asks the source of all beauty to grant his poem an everlasting, “ever-living” charm (I, 28). Why the poem has need of charm is neither immediately clear nor is it quite clear why the poem would require “eternal” charm if Lucretius wishes merely to address Memmius. Despite Venus’s endowment of Memmius with exceptional gifts, he may not be enticed to follow the poem to the end without some pleasant incentives. One may surmise that he needs Venus’s charm because what he has to relate to Memmius, the truth about the nature of things, is not intrinsically pleasant or beautiful. The content of the poem, the truth about the nature of things, may not then be as beautiful as Venus herself. This is later confirmed when we are told that Lucretius wishes to reveal the “dark” discoveries of the Greeks (I, 137). That Lucretius’s subject is dark and Venus alone is responsible for bringing all things into the “shining borders of light” (I, 22), presents a disjunction of sorts between the governor of the nature of things and what Lucretius has to reveal about the nature of things. Not everything that is true is pleasing or beautiful. There must then be a realm of the nature of things over which Venus does not hold sway.

The manner by which Lucretius requests that Venus imbue his poem with charm thus begins to raise questions as to her sole governorship. Such suspicions are furthered, if not in fact confirmed, by Lucretius’s second request of Venus. At present the savage works of war grip Rome; Mars, not Venus, currently rules the affairs of the Romans. Lucretius therefore asks Venus to seduce Mars since she alone can bring peace to men by inflicting an “ever-living” wound of love on Mars (I, 34). The fact that an “ever-living” wound is needed is curious: an “ever-living” wound would presumably mean eternal peace. The success of Lucretius’s endeavor to find a place for philosophy in Rome would require not a temporary respite, but eternal peace. Although the Romans may wish that their affairs were at peace and in harmony with the ways of Venus, there is no such harmony at this time. The seduction of Mars is necessary so that Memmius can find the peace and leisure necessary to read what Lucretius has composed for him. The granting of eternal charm to Lucretius’s poem is not sufficient. If Mars is not seduced by Venus, no amount of charm will matter.

Dedication to Venus and the affairs of Rome keeps Memmius from reading what Lucretius has composed and hence from the study of the nature of things (I, 41–43). That Mars currently rules Roman affairs suggests that the ways of Venus and nature, and the affairs of Rome are at this moment out of harmony and in need of being brought back into harmony once again. Venus’s love for Memmius and for the descendants of Aeneas would perhaps give her incentive to fulfill Lucretius’s plea for

the seduction of Mars. The second request, however, raises the question of why she has allowed Rome's affairs to fall outside her governance and into the hands of Mars. That Lucretius must ask for her help suggests additionally that, without his request, she may not intervene to satisfy the Romans' craving for peace. In any case, the disordered status of the affairs of Rome must mean that Venus is not now the sole governor of the nature of things: there are clearly things that Mars controls.

These issues aside, Memmius cannot abandon Rome in such troubled times and there is no possibility of both attending to the commonweal and pursuing the study of the nature of things. Moreover, Lucretius does not ask Memmius to abandon the city in its time of trouble to pursue what Lucretius has to teach. As for Lucretius, without peace he cannot do his part with "untroubled mind" (I, 43). Teaching Memmius about the nature of things and composing his poem would appear to refer to "his part." Whatever this part may be, it is clearly the case that Rome's troubles were not of such an order that Lucretius abandoned his poem or the investigation into the nature of things. His mind is not so troubled about the affairs of Rome that he could not continue with the poem's composition. Lucretius's choice is clearly not to imitate the life of Memmius. The choice to carry on implies a rejection of the way of life of Memmius, who—at least here—is a model Roman. Service to the commonweal is best for the favorite of Venus but it would not appear to be best for Lucretius. The rejection of that way of life also implies a rejection of dedication to Venus and by extension the descendants of Aeneas. Although Lucretius calls upon her favors, he does not emulate her favorite son. The presumption is that Lucretius has discovered, in his investigations of the nature of things, a way of life that is to be preferred to the life of Memmius and dedication to Rome. Lucretius implies that he has discovered that the way of life of the city is not the model for a good life. To detail what Lucretius has discovered that makes him prefer the contemplative life over a life of public action is the purpose of much of what follows in the poem.

A glance at the proem to Book II makes clear that not only can Lucretius engage in his chosen way of life, or his "part," while the affairs of Rome are ruled by Mars, but also that the study of the nature of things may be furthered by Mars's governance. The distance between Lucretius's way of life and that of Venus's favorite son is most pronounced here: Lucretius now places himself in the well-walled temples of the wise, a lofty sanctuary removed from the trial and tribulations of political life (II, 1–13). The pleasures that attend to the contemplative life are seemingly dependent upon the reflection of the pains one is spared that afflict those who struggle in war and contend for precedence and power. The troubles of others

are not in themselves a “delectable joy” (II, 4), but they seem necessary to appreciate the ills that one is spared. It is, therefore, from the vantage point of the temples of the wise that one discovers what nature demands for living well. In the temples of the wise, one comes to recognize that a good life does not require a bed covering of “blushing purple,” or noble birth and the glory of royalty (II, 35). From the temples one can see how those assembled on the plains of Mars trouble their minds, the emptiness of their mingling with kings, and the false pleasures of the glowing light of “crimson raiment” (II, 52). The pleasures of the philosophic life within the well-walled temples of the wise must be rather austere, for Lucretius emphasizes the pains that one is thus spared. It is the observation of the ugly and pain-filled lives of those on the plains of Mars that most brings home the goodness of the life of philosophy. Lucretius’s condemnation of the strivings of political life further brings into question Memmius’s dedication to Rome and by extension Rome’s way of life. One might go so far as to say that a crucial part of the pleasure of the philosophic life is produced by observing the struggles of men such as Memmius. Yet, if the pleasures of the philosophic life—and the confirmation that such a life is most choiceworthy—are dependent upon the view from the temples of the wise, Lucretius’s desire for Venus to seduce Mars must be disingenuous.

Lucretius’s claim that he cannot do “his part” with an “untroubled mind” as Rome’s affairs remain ruled by Mars is therefore in need of reexamination. Far from being troubled by the disordered state of Roman affairs, Lucretius derives a certain pleasure from them, and is seemingly in need of them. Peace is neither needed to compose the poem nor does it here appear necessary for the philosophic life. The account of the pleasures of philosophy presented in the proem to Book II would seem to account for a life lived beyond tragedy. The suffering of others seems to be productive of pleasure, or perhaps one should say the suffering of others allows one to pursue the contemplative life within the well-walled temples of the wise. It is perhaps this fact that best explains Lucretius’s wish that Venus grant his poem an eternal charm. If there is no end to war, if Mars cannot be simply and eternally seduced, the philosophic life removed from Rome’s affairs may forever be viewed with consternation by the city. The philosophic life in its detached observance of the suffering of others may therefore be one that has need of poetic charm when presented to the nonphilosophic.

If the philosophic life is in such tension with the way of life of the city, why not remain quiet? The proem to Book II, as has been noted by others, seems to embody the epicurean principle of *lathe biosas* to live secretly or unobtrusively.<sup>14</sup> That the epicurean injunction to refrain from

participation in political life is given expression in the proem to Book II is not without complications. That Lucretius wishes to convert Memmius to the life of philosophy may not be a direct intervention into political life, but the city may still regard such actions with suspicion. The attempt to turn those who are dedicated to the commonweal away from public life to philosophy would be reasonably viewed with concern by the city. Furthermore, dedication to the principle of “live secretly” would appear to conflict with publicly seeking to turn a political man away from the commonweal. There is the added complication that the very act of composing the poem argues against the idea that Lucretius remains fixed within the well-walled temples of the wise. Writing the poem in itself would seem to bring Lucretius down from the temples into the city. Full dedication to the injunction to live unobtrusively would demand that one refrain from publishing such a poem. The very existence of the poem is therefore a partial refutation of the possibility of living in accord with the injunction. Yet the choice to write and break with the injunction may be done more out of necessity than choice.

In times of political tumult, the ability to “live secretly” is particularly difficult. In times of peace, it may be possible to separate oneself from full dedication to the city without drawing the attention of the city. When the city is imperiled, the life within the well-walled temples of the wise betrays one’s lack of civic dedication. Yet, it is precisely in times of war that the life lived in the temples of the wise is able to confirm the goodness of the philosophic life. That those whom one observes from the sanctuaries of the wise are men such as Memmius, those seemingly dedicated to the commonweal, demands some justification for one’s lack of dedication to the affairs of the city. Whether or not the city and the men assembled on the plains of Mars are driven by misguided opinions of what is required by nature to live well, someone must defend the city. The city may reasonably regard those who remove themselves as not only lacking dedication to the city but also in fact living parasitically upon the security provided by the city. Although the way of life within the temples is said to be guarded by the teachings of the wise, the security of the sanctuaries certainly cannot be guaranteed by mere philosophic reflection. Lucretius must then provide a defense to the city of his removal from its affairs.

### **Lucretius’s Theology—I, 44–49**

Returning to the proem to Book I, we glimpse something of what such a defense entails. In a rather startling departure from the invocation to Venus, Lucretius announces that the true nature of the gods is that

they enjoy perfect peace far removed from the affairs of man (I, 44–49). Mighty by their own resources, they have no need of man and cannot be moved by man's services or touched by wrath. The true nature of the gods is incompatible with particular providence. Although Lucretius's brief presentation does not explicitly rule out that they might of their own accord intervene in men's affairs, it does raise the question of why they would choose to do so. Most importantly, one wonders whether the tranquility of the gods is a consequence of their distance from the affairs of man. Lucretius does not address this issue here nor does he explain how he has come to this theological insight. Although this baldly asserted theology does not exclude the possibility of the gods involving themselves in the affairs of man, it does suggest that such involvement might jeopardize their tranquility. One is therefore left to wonder what could possibly move them to such a sacrifice.

This sudden assertion of the true nature of the gods casts a shadow over the account of Venus and, with it, her association with the founding of Rome. If the gods do not intervene in human affairs then no city can truthfully claim to be of divine origin. This account of the true nature of the gods would also bring into question the status of Memmius as a favored son. If the gods are separated from the affairs of men, it would appear unlikely that they are in the business of choosing favorites and endowing some with extraordinary gifts. One may further surmise that given the nature of the gods, Memmius's dedication to the commonweal is without divine sanction and support. Without the divine foundations, what exactly is the status of the city? The association of Venus and Aeneas certainly provides if not a natural then a supernatural foundation to the city. In the absence of such foundations, the pursuit of the investigation into the nature of things rather than dedication to the city may appear most choiceworthy. Lucretius's choice not to follow the path of Memmius in active defense of the commonweal is then given some justification by the true nature of the gods. Continuing the investigation into the nature of things at the time of Rome's great troubles may be at odds with the way of life sanctioned by the city's poets and priests but it is perhaps in accord with the true nature of the gods. If Lucretius's theology does not sanction the investigation into the nature of things, it at least removes any impious obloquy attached to it.<sup>15</sup>

If we briefly return to the proem to Book II, we see that the nature of the gods asserted in the proem to Book I looks similar to that life Lucretius claims is most pleasant. There is an undeniable parallel between the life that is lived within the well-walled temples of the wise and the distance from men's affairs that characterizes the life of the gods in Lucretius's theology. Lucretius may never directly ask Memmius to

abandon his dedication to the commonweal because such a request could be interpreted as a profound act of civic irresponsibility and impiety.<sup>16</sup> The assertion of the true nature of the gods, however, has brought into question the divine support of Memmius's dedication to the city. If the true gods are separated from men's affairs, then the account of Venus and her union with the founding of Rome is similarly brought into question. The true nature of the gods has severed the concord that Lucretius suggested in Book I between dedication to Venus and the ways of the city. If the gods have no part in the affairs of man, then the troubles that plague man are not due to any divine action and cannot be remedied by man's propitiations. If the gods are separated from human affairs and cannot be moved by the propitiations of man, the question of how one ought to live is thrown back upon man. Lacking divine direction as to how one ought to live, the question becomes a real one. Since the union of divine and civic life has been broken, or brought into question, man must turn to nature for direction.

### **The Governance of Nature and the First Syllabus—I, 50–61**

Although there is no suggestion that Memmius has abandoned his service to the city for the contemplative life, what comes next seems to imply that he has. Although it does not do so explicitly, the rest of the poem presumes that the reader has chosen the investigation into the nature of things over the defense of the commonweal. Lucretius asks his reader to free his ears of preoccupation and detach his mind from care so as to apply himself to true reasoning (I, 50–51). Lucretius fears that the reader, without liberating himself from such cares, will discard with contempt what Lucretius has to teach before he has come to a full understanding (I, 52). We are told neither what precisely preoccupies his ears or, better yet, who occupies his ears nor what cares keep his mind from true reasoning. In addition, why he may contemptuously discard what he is about to be told is similarly left unexplained.

That such demands immediately follow the assertion of the true nature of the gods may provide some direction as to the character of the cares that keep him from true reasoning. If the truth about the gods is as Lucretius asserts, then the very foundation of the way of life of the city, the governorship of Venus, and ultimately the harmony between the ways of the gods and the ways of the city are rendered doubtful. That the true gods enjoy perfect peace separated from the affairs of man, or as a consequence of their unconcern for the affairs of man, suggests that their tranquility is a consequence of their independence from active governance. That they are mighty by their own resources suggests that



they are radically independent. Such independence may suggest in turn that the city is without divine support. Without such support, the way of life of the city must become questionable. These political implications of the asserted theology may keep Memmius from the investigation, and those who would defend the traditional understanding of the gods may be those who occupy his ears.

Lucretius promises to tell Memmius of the high system of the heavens and gods (*ratione caeli*), about the first things from which nature creates, increases, and nourishes all things, and into which nature reduces all things (I, 53–57). In this first of the proem's two syllabi (the second occurring at I, 127–135), Lucretius establishes that nature, not Venus, is the true governor of the nature of things. Nature is here not the equivalent of the first things but makes all things from seeds or first bodies. What is precisely understood here by nature is not explained. In addition, if "all" things are made of such first bodies, did the gods themselves come into being? Despite the "official" theological statement in the preceding verses, if indeed the gods came into being by nature, then they must by necessity be dissolved, by nature. In any case, if nature is the true governor then the gods are not the governors of things. To understand the true gods, one must understand the workings of the nature of things. If the best life were to prove to be one that emulates the divine or is obedient to it, such a life would be possible only by way of an investigation into the nature of things. Such an investigation must, however, begin with doubt about the city's account of the divine. The account of Venus that begins the proem to Book I is the city's account of such things. The account of Venus, in other words, serves as the city's answer to the fundamental questions about the nature of things. An investigation into the nature of things is therefore a questioning of the ways of Venus and, given her association with Rome, a questioning of the ways of Rome.

### **The Man from Greece—I, 62–79**

Lucretius does not explain how the Romans came to know that Venus was the governor of the nature of things or how she was instrumental in the founding of the city. Certainly no reliable sensory evidence can be provided for her having been the mother of Aeneas and his descendants. The investigation into the nature of things must presumably begin with dissatisfaction with the city's account of the truth about the nature of things. What comes next indicates how such dissatisfaction first manifests itself. Lucretius for the first time invokes the "man from Greece" who, moved by a desire for honor, was first to challenge the reigning religious opinions about the nature of things. His attempt to discover the truth

about the nature of things was confronted by fables told about the gods. It is then stories about the gods, presumably offered by poets and priests, that are the first barrier to any investigation. When all could see that human life lay prostrate and crushed beneath religious superstition, a man from Greece dared to lift his “mortal eyes” to the heavens (I, 62–65). The man from Greece in his courage and daring was not frightened by the “fables” about the gods or the menacing, divinely ascribed, roar of the heavens (I, 66–67).<sup>17</sup> The man from Greece and the philosophic life, in contrast to the city and its religion, argue for the primacy of seeing over hearing. This explains Lucretius’s earlier request that Memmius free his “ears” of preoccupations (I, 50). This demand will best guarantee that what Lucretius has to tell Memmius is not prematurely discarded with contempt. How men see is perhaps tied to what they hear. The opinions men have about natural phenomena are a product of the fables of the poets and priests. Men see such things as lightning not as they are presented to them by nature but as the poets and priests desire men to.

The man from Greece wished to be the first of all men to “break down the bars of the gates to nature” (I, 71).<sup>18</sup> This formulation suggests that the man from Greece was the first to discover nature: he breaks down the gates to nature and carries her off like a reluctant mistress.<sup>19</sup> That nature is held captive behind the gates suggests that it exists beyond the horizon of the city and its account of the nature of things. The fables of the gods that attempt to thwart the investigation are not then simply an alternative account of the nature of things but an attempt to deny access to nature herself. Nature can only be discovered by fighting against the fables proffered by the poets and the priests. Philosophy understood as the investigation into the nature of things is then, by its very nature, adversarial to civic religion. As the city is founded upon a religious account of its union with the divine governor, philosophy has to be understood as an attempt to free oneself from the most fundamental demands of the city.

Lucretius presents the struggle to liberate nature from the fables of the gods in decidedly militaristic terms. Daring against the oppression of religious superstition and its demands, shattering the gates to nature, and the “marching” across the immeasurable universe, he triumphs like a Roman general, his victory being knowledge of what can and cannot be. The man from Greece’s triumph is the discovery that the principle governing all things is a “deep-set boundary mark” (I, 77). The Roman boundary stone was a demarcation that had both political and religious significance. In Ovid we find the praise of and sacrifice to the God Terminus, “Thou doth set bounds to peoples, cities and vast kingdoms; without you every field would be a root of wrangling.”<sup>20</sup> The man from Greece has engaged in an enterprise that moves what is otherwise

understood to be sacred. His discoveries are now to determine what can and cannot be, not the city or its religious authority. The discoveries of the man from Greece are a challenge to the authority of religion, and by extension to that of the city to determine the boundaries of man's intellectual horizon. In the larger context of the praise of the man from Greece, his triumph is the discovery that nature rather than the city is to set the horizon by which man should live. The conclusion to the passage suggests that the man from Greece has turned the tables on religion; philosophy is victorious and religion is trampled under foot. His victory, the discovery of nature, is presumably such that philosophy is now free from religious supervision.

The man from Greece discovered that everything by nature has its powers limited. Nature here is therefore synonymous with limitations. To be is to be limited. Returning briefly to the proem to Book II, we see that the way of life of the city is in opposition to the fundamental limits imposed upon man by nature. The life lived within the well-walled temples of the wise is lived in accord with nature, that is, with nature's fundamental limits. It is the unwillingness to come to terms with the fundamental limits that leads to the pursuit of false pleasures and superstitious fears. The way of life of the city is here presented as contrary to the truth about the nature of things. Such false fears and hopes can only be remedied by way of the study of the nature of things.

### **Impiety and Crime—I, 80–101**

The depth of the challenge that philosophy poses to the way of life of the city is made obvious—returning again to the proem to Book I—by Lucretius's expression of grave concern that Memmius will believe that in following Lucretius, he has embarked on a life of impiety and crime (I, 80–81). It is not then the particular account of the nature of things that is impious but the philosophic life itself. The threat of the poets and priests suggests that Lucretius's declaration of victory over religion may be a little premature. Although the man from Greece may have won a personal victory of a sort, Rome continues to be governed by religion. The accusations against philosophy reveal that the Romans believe that the gods and the city must punish those who seek philosophic wisdom. The obverse of what Lucretius says is that obedience to religious observation is here associated with piety, law, and lawfulness. That the philosophic life is criminal and impious is a declaration on the part of the city that it has no need of philosophy. It can make such a declaration only if it already possesses the answer to the question of how one ought to live. Just as the proem established the union of Rome and Venus, we see here

that doubt about the foundational religious fables is regarded as an act of political rebellion.

Lucretius attempts to defuse this accusation by demonstrating that religion is “more often” a source of impious criminality (I, 83). (The caveat “more often” suggests that impiety is occasionally a source of crime.) Lucretius recounts Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia to appease the Goddess Diana. The choice of this story to highlight the frequent cruelty of religion is rather curious. While the story is of Greek origin, it does have Roman significance because it is tied to Rome’s founding. Agamemnon’s actions are an attempt to guarantee the Greek fleet’s safe passage on its way to Troy. The safe passage of the fleet will lead to the destruction of Troy, the flight of Aeneas from Troy, and ultimately to the founding of Rome. The story suggests that Diana was in fact appeased and was instrumental in the Greek victory over Troy. Would the founding of Rome have been possible without the sacrifice of Iphigenia? The founding of Rome cannot be simply separated from the actions of Agamemnon and the demands of Diana. In drawing upon this tale, Lucretius has cast aspersions on the purity of Rome’s founding. The fact that Diana is satisfied with the sacrifice suggests that the gods’ caring about the descendants of Rome, the children of Venus, is at best ambiguous. While Venus was said to be the joy of all gods, the demands of Diana in support of the Greek fleet put her at odds with Venus’s descendants.

Given the poem’s characterization of Venus, one could not imagine Venus making similar demands as did Diana. Lucretius’s recounting of the sacrifice reveals the often contradictory demands of the gods. Venus may drive all to greedily reproduce their kind but Diana calls for their sacrificial death. Given these contradictory demands, it is questionable whether one can look to the gods for direction as to how one ought to live. While each city may remain unconcerned with the gods of others, one whose allegiance has been shaken and who is no longer confined by the city’s particular religious fables must be struck by the contradictory demands. Familiarity with the nature of the various gods creates confusion as to what living in accord with the demands of the gods ultimately calls for. One could certainly not live a life without contradiction by following the ways of the gods. The confusion that results from any attempt to understand what these competing demands call for brings into doubt the authority of the poets and the priests. Alternatively, given the ambiguity of what the gods demand, the office of the priest is all the more essential. All attempts to subject these competing claims to rational scrutiny necessarily challenge the authority of priests. One can thus appreciate all the more why the rational investigation is held to be criminal and impious.

Although the story of the sacrifice reveals the potential for pious cruelty, it cannot be reasonably held to have addressed the charges it was ostensibly supposed to refute. Highlighting the actions of Agamemnon does not positively establish that philosophy is not guilty of impiety. From the perspective of the city, in and of themselves, the actions of a Greek king in the remote past do not justify the rebellion against religion initiated by the man from Greece and followed by Lucretius. The example, when read in the light of Lucretius's account of the true nature of the gods, absolves Diana of any blame in the affair. This would at least establish that Lucretius is not an advocate of such acts of cruelty and that while he may deny divine providence, he does so from a position of concern for justice. That he would not endorse the sacrificing of one's own daughter is, however, hardly a sufficient answer to the accusations brought against the philosophic life.

### Poets and Priests—I, 102–126

With reason, therefore, Lucretius fears that Memmius will eventually desert him having been overcome by the terrible utterances of the poets and priests (I, 102–111). Lucretius here invokes a stark choice between following the "*vitae rationes*" of philosophy and the stories of the poets and priests. The poets and priests threaten to overwhelm Memmius with "invented dreams," thus upsetting "the true principles of life." There is no way to resist the terrible dreams and utterances of the poets and priests unless one "sees" that there is a fundamental limit to all of life's tribulations. The dreams invented by the poets and priests are thus irresistible without a proper account of the nature of the soul, as their authority is dependent upon the belief in eternal torment after death. The authority of the poets and priests is dependent on the citizens privileging the ears over the eyes. Like the man from Greece, one must be led by the sensory evidence of the eyes and remain undeterred by fables. Again Lucretius contrasts what all can see for themselves with what they are told. The difficulty is that men cannot see the truth about nature while their ears are overburdened by such terrific utterances. Lucretius voices a rather pessimistic note that, as it is, "there is no means of resisting, no power" to overcome the terror of the threats. The stories of the poets and priests keep the eyes from seeing the truth and the assault on the ears maintains the fears and hopes that are an obstruction to the philosophic life.

What the majority of men believe about the nature of the soul is provided to them by the utterances of poets. Questions about whether the soul is born and hence dies with the body, or whether it migrates to the gloomy chasms of Orcus, are answered by the verses of men such

as Ennius. Ennius traveled through Acheron where he encountered the ghost of Homer, who set forth through “salty tears” the truth about the soul and the nature of things. Ennius’ evidence for this account, it goes without saying, is not amenable to being verified by one’s own eyes. Ennius must be placed among those who “invent” terrific utterances that keep the ears so occupied that the eyes cannot see. The strength of such invented dreams may be partly attested to by Lucretius’s characterization of Ennius’s verses as “everlasting” (I, 121). The power of such accounts is maintained by the fears men entertain about death. Their characterization as “everlasting” may indicate something about the weight of man’s fear of and hopes about death. The philosophic life would therefore appear to live beyond or free from such cares. It is certainly not a life that sheds “salty tears.”

The main problem with Ennius’s poetry is that its teachings on the soul, and the nature of the eternal, are a barrier to the philosophic life. Ennius’s account of the soul may articulate and strengthen man’s attachment to life that he needs to overcome if he is to live well. Ennius, and the poets more generally, may well understand such attachments, and Lucretius’s own choice to communicate poetically is moved by an understanding of such attachments. Poetry may therefore be the best instrument for eventual philosophic detachment. The teaching on poets and priests reveals that the primary difficulties that are presented to the philosophic life are not cosmological but are more closely related to the nature of the human soul. It is not that cosmology and the investigation into the soul are unrelated, or can be simply divorced from one another, but that what is most needed is a proper account of the soul.

### **The Second Syllabus: Lucretius’s Task—I, 127–135**

For this reason Lucretius appears to change the syllabus of the poem (I, 127–135). The first syllabus, we recall, stated that Lucretius will discourse on the highest way of heavens and the gods and on how nature creates and dissolves all things through first bodies (I, 50–61). That syllabus is not fulfilled in all parts. Lucretius will give an account of creation from and dissolution into first bodies, but will offer no systematic presentation of the gods as promised. The second syllabus maintains that an account will still be given of the heavenly motions, but what is most needed is an account of the nature of mind and soul and what it is that terrifies our minds when laboring under disease and in our dreams (I, 129–134). The promised treatment of the nature of the gods has now been replaced by a discussion of the nature of the soul. The change is a consequence of what has intervened between the first and second syllabi. In the intervening

discussion Lucretius had related the man from Greece's rebellion against the religious superstitions of the city, the fear that Memmius might believe his study of the nature of things to be the beginning of a life of impiety and crime, and finally, Memmius's eventual desertion of Lucretius given the terrible utterances about eternal damnation. Simply put, Lucretius has identified those things and people that preoccupy Memmius's ears and trouble his mind with cares and hence keep him from the study of the nature of things (see I, 50–51).

It may be more accurate to say that the account of the gods is not replaced by the account of the soul but is an alternative way of approaching the question of the gods. The investigation into the soul is an investigation of the origins of theology. At the center of the poem is the question of the cares that may drive Memmius to desert Lucretius. An account of the fear of death and love will sufficiently explain the source and pull of the theological threats of the poets and priests. One can say that the first syllabus is ultimately not in fact dropped. The path by which Memmius will be freed, if he can be freed, from the cares and preoccupations that stand in the way of his investigation in the nature of things is provided through an account of the soul. The beliefs that men entertain about the nature of the soul, and that they "seem" to see and hear the dead in dreams, are dealt with in Book IV. The cosmological teaching that the first syllabus said was most necessary is put off until Book V, after Lucretius has dealt with the nature of the soul. The confrontation with the fables of the poets and the priests is a confrontation over the nature of the eternal. The turn to the soul is a turn to man's attempts to deal with the question of the nature of the eternal. The cosmological teaching, and its implications for our world, can take place only after recognizing the difficulties that the nature of eternity presents to the soul moved by fear of and care for what is to become of it upon death.

### **Poverty of the Latin Tongue and Mind—I, 136–145**

The difficulties that stand in the way of man's liberation from these illusory cares is compounded by the poverty of the Latin tongue (I, 136–146). Lucretius, who wishes to impart the discoveries of the Greeks (Lucretius's use here of *Graiorum* must mean he wishes to impart more than the singular teachings of Epicurus), remarks that there is need to employ new words given the novelty of the subject matter. This raises the rather difficult question of what exactly the Latin tongue is incapable of expressing and why it is incapable of expressing it: the matters to be investigated are new to the minds of the Romans. The poverty of the language is thus indicative of a mental poverty. As the man from Greece had to break

down the doors that barred passage to the truth about nature, the city itself—its foundational religious fables—keeps the Romans from the truth about the nature of things. The distance that separates the common religious understanding and the truth is captured by the novelty of the matters to be presented and the poverty of the Latin tongue. Just as religious superstition stood between the man from Greece and the truth about nature, so Memmius must free himself from concerns and fears that bar his access to the truth about the nature of things. Luckily for Memmius, Lucretius's desire to win his friendship will lead him to spend "tranquil nights" seeking verses to "display clear lights" before his mind. The tranquility of Lucretius's nights is a rather striking departure from the troubles that apparently gripped his mind when asking for Venus's favors (I, 41). In any case, it is the verses that will open Memmius's mind and allow him to "see" the truth about the nature of things.

This problem is therefore twofold. First, there is the problem of the poverty of the Latin tongue, and second, there is the difficulty of introducing novel concepts by way of poetry. Why would Lucretius compound his difficulties by choosing to express the dark discoveries of the Greeks in verse? This is important not least because his supposed mentor, Epicurus, had less than positive regard for poetry and poetic expression. The earlier change of syllabi was partly explained as a consequence of the barriers to Memmius's undertaking the study of the nature of things. Such barriers require that Lucretius turn toward the human things prior to any investigation of the cosmological. This turn may partially explain the choice of verse rather than prose. Lucretius's strong rebuke of the poets and priests, his criticisms of Ennius and by extension Homer, are grounded in the fact that they contribute to attachments and fears that keep men from the truth about the nature of things. Poetry may in fact be a consequence or product of such attachments. This may mean that the poet sees into human things more deeply than can the natural philosopher.<sup>21</sup> Lucretius's choice of verse may indicate that one must employ poetry in freeing men of such attachments. The philosopher-poet may in this way be superior to the natural philosopher.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

If Lucretius should succeed in finding the right words and right verses to "display clear lights" before Memmius's mind, whereby he may see into the otherwise "hidden" nature of things, would he continue to be attached to things Roman? To have seen the truth about the nature of things would mean Memmius would have to live in accord with the truth about the nature of things. This, as the proem has made plain,



would involve a profound questioning of the ways of Rome and change in Memmius's way of life. The justification of such profound questioning, and of the philosophic life, is dependent upon the existence of nature itself that—as has been argued—is in some fashion denied by the fundamentally religious orientation of the city governed by the *vatum* (poets and priests). This raises a number of issues that Lucretius must go on to explain. The most important of these are: What is nature, and what is required if there is to be such a thing as nature? These questions are at the heart of the remainder of Book I and Book II. The answers to them are necessary to justify Lucretius's rebellion against the *vatum* and the choice of the philosophic life.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE DISCOVERY OF NATURE AND THE PROBLEM OF THE INFINITE AND ETERNAL

Lucretius wishes to reveal to Memmius the obscure discoveries of the Greeks but acknowledges that there may be some resistance on his part given the novelty of the teachings (I, 136–139, and II, 1023–1029 and 1040). Lucretius later attributes part of the difficulty with the introduction of novel teachings to a general wariness of looking upon the nature of things, and the heavens in particular (II, 1030–1039). One may infer from this resistance to novelty that a certain comfort is gained through acceptance of the stories of the poets and priests and that which philosophy reveals may be discomfiting. Lucretius has, therefore, created some doubt about the status of religious myths and introduces the possibility that philosophy may reveal a truth more terrible than that of religion.

The dark discoveries of the Greeks and the poverty of the Latin tongue require that Lucretius find the right words to shed light on this in Memmius's mind such that he will be able to "see into the heart of things hidden." Memmius is currently gripped by terror and gloom of the mind that cannot be lifted "by the sun's rays or the bright shafts of day" (I, 147–148). Such terrors can be lifted only by the external appearance and reason of nature. That such is the case raises a question as to why Lucretius must employ poetry to display clear lights before Memmius's mind; what precisely is the function and purpose of Lucretius's poetry? An initial answer to the question will only be provided toward the end of Book I (I, 921–950). Lucretius explains there that the majority of men are not prepared or suited to digest the bitter truth and thus require sweetened accounts of the nature of things. It is not immediately clear whether the majority of men could ever be brought to a point where they could accept the truth unsweetened. If not, they may forever be dependent on the "invented dreams" of the poets and priests. Recalling

the primary accusation against philosophy, if the majority of men cannot come to digest the unsweetened truth then they will always regard the investigation into the nature of things as a path toward impiety and crime.

Lucretius presents the physics in the first two books of the poem with these difficulties in mind. As James Nichols rightly points out, one cannot understand Lucretius's poem if one tries to read it as a systematic presentation of materialist physics. The manner of treatment of each individual section, and the organization of the poem as a whole are guided by the "human obstacles to openness to the truth." Such obstacles are a "more important determinant" of the length, breadth, and details of Lucretius's arguments than any attempt to offer a physical system.<sup>1</sup> What arguments Lucretius advances, and when he advances them, is then determined less by the "logic of systematic exposition" and more by the barriers presented to the acceptance of philosophy that Lucretius outlines in the proem to Book I. His choice of a poetic presentation is then an attempt to deal with the challenges to the philosophic life elucidated in the proem to Book I.

Lucretius's explanation of his poetic method toward the end of Book I serves as a prelude to the first of two accounts of the infinite that conclude each of the first two books. The placement of the explanation suggests that the question of the infinite and eternal is particularly difficult, dark, and novel. That the first account of the poetic method precedes and serves as a prelude to the first account of the infinite is evidence that the first account is a sweetened account; therefore, one should not expect it to reveal the full implications for human life of the nature of the eternal and infinite. Lucretius returns to the nature of the eternal and its implications for our world at the end of Book II. One must infer then that Memmius is unprepared to digest a full, or near-full, measure of the truth about the eternal at least until the end of Book II. That Lucretius chooses to wait until the end of Book II to deepen the account forces one to wonder if there are other discussions in Book I that present only partial, or sweetened, accounts of the nature of things and their human implications. Although Lucretius only informs Memmius late in Book I as to his poetic method, he is obviously using poetic sweetening well before informing him that he is doing so and why he is doing so. Moreover, Lucretius does not always inform Memmius what the unsweetened truth is and where he is giving Memmius a poetic embellishment. By the time Memmius has arrived at the first articulation of the poetic method, he must look back curiously as to what may have been sweetened and where he has possibly been deceived. The manner of treating the two books undertaken here is a response to this difficulty.

It is clearly the case, as has been observed by others, that the final sections of Books I and II dealing with the eternal and infinite are complementary. To see the deeper teaching, it is then useful to read them together. Such a method can be employed usefully in other parts of the first two books. In fact, looking at the structure of the first two books we see both comprise a proem and four separate parts dealing with some aspect of the nature of the first things and the original principles of Lucretius's materialism. In a brief outline, Book I begins with a proem followed by an account of the general principles by which the study of nature must make its start (I, 146–417); next we are given an account of certain necessary attributes of the first things (I, 418–634), followed by a critique of other doctrines pertaining to nature's first things (I, 635–920), and a conclusion detailing the first account of the infinite dealing specifically with the universe (I, 921–1117). After the proem to Book II (1–61), Lucretius begins with an explanation of the motion necessary for the creation of compounds out of the first things (II, 62–332), then deepens the account of the necessary attributes of the first things—this time explaining their shape and number (II, 333–729)—followed by an account of the lack of all secondary qualities of the first things (II, 730–1022), and a conclusion describing the second account of the infinite, this time focusing on the innumerable worlds (II, 1023–1174).

There is a complementarity to the four parts of each of the two books. The account of the fundamental principles that begins the first part of Book I (I, 146–482) in and of itself cannot explain generation or destruction. What is most required to do so is an account of motion, which Lucretius provides in the first part of Book II (II, 62–332). In the second part of Book I (I, 483–634), we are told that necessity demands that the seeds of things be eternal, indivisible, and indestructible. This, however, cannot begin to explain what can and cannot be created, which we were told is the central discovery of the man from Greece (I, 76–77). To account for what can and cannot be created and the limitations imposed upon all things by nature, an account of the shapes, and the limitations of shapes, of the first things is needed. That is provided to us in Book I's complementary section in Book II (II, 333–729). The third part of Book I (I, 635–920) is a critique of the doctrines of Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Heraclitus. The central difficulty in their teachings is that the first things they posited have qualities that are perceptible and must therefore be destructible. In the third part of Book II (II, 730–1027), Lucretius will deepen the critique of his rivals by arguing that necessity demands that the seeds of things possess no secondary qualities. The final sections of Books I and II (I, 921–1117 and II, 1023–1174) are—as mentioned

earlier—taken up with an account of the infinite, first as it pertains to the universe and second as it pertains to our world.

The separation of the complementary parts is best explained by the challenges that are presented to Lucretius in finding the right words and poetry necessary to reveal the dark discoveries of the Greeks so as to free Memmius's mind from fear. The full implications of the truth about the nature of things are delayed, and perhaps partially hidden, by Lucretius's separation. The separation may thus raise the question of Memmius's fitness for the truth about the nature of things, which will be taken up in [chapter 4](#). That Lucretius deems it necessary to withhold until Book II the full implications of those things brought to light in Book I reveals three distinct movements within the first two books of the poem. The first movement may be described as one from Venus to Mars: where Book I emphasizes stability and regularity, and concentrates on the process of generation, Book II—beginning with the account of atomic motion—highlights the capriciousness, impermanence, and instability in the nature of things.

The second movement is marked by the increased strangeness of the objects of philosophy. What comes to light in the increasing strangeness of the first things is the fact that what is first for man is not first by nature. The movement through the first two books slowly reveals that the majority of men are concerned with what least is. The difficulty for Memmius in accepting the human implications of the nature of nature may be partially seen in the greater frequency of Lucretius's digressions against religion in Book II. While there are two such digressions in Book I—the first dealing with Memmius's task in accepting the teaching of the void and the second, Lucretius's own mission that explicates his poetic method—there are no direct digressions against religions of the kind we find in Book II. There are three such digressions. The first follows Lucretius's account of the extraordinary velocity and hence violence of the motion of the first things. The second occurs after the account of the infinite number of first things and is directed against the cult of the Magna Mater, where Lucretius repeats his theological assertion from Book I (44–49) as to the absence of divine governance. The third digression follows Lucretius's insistence that there are innumerable worlds such as our own. The digressions appear to be employed in anticipation of particularly difficult aspects of the nature of things that Memmius may not be ready, or willing to accept.

The movement from Venus to Mars together with the increased strangeness of the first things is accompanied by a third movement—to move man and his world further from the center of the nature of things. Man desires some harmony among the ways of nature, the governor of

nature, and the human things. This harmony is best exemplified by the praise of Venus that begins Book I, where, to repeat, man's privileged place in the nature of things is established by ties between Venus and the descendants of Aeneas. Man desires that the nature of things be governed by circumspection and care. The proem to Book II, the account of motion, the stripping of all secondary qualities from the seeds of things, and finally, the account of the infinite and the innumerable worlds—all of these undermine the hoped-for circumspection, harmony, and desired privilege.

This is admittedly an unusual way to read the first two books. Moreover in not following Lucretius's own order of treatment, we admittedly lose something. Yet the first two books are directed as much to confronting the human obstacles to the investigation into the nature of things as to the explication of the physical doctrine itself. In following this method, we can reveal those obstacles more forcefully. The chapter approaches the books in the spirit of Benjamin Farrington's apt and pithy summary of the poem: "The main theme of the poem is the social and psychological consequences of man's action upon nature, of man's knowledge and ignorance of nature, of man's lies about nature."<sup>2</sup> Two issues, therefore, are at play in Lucretius's presentation of his physics. First, as only the discovery of nature can legitimize Lucretius's rejection of the ethos of the political community, the physics must attempt to answer the question of what is nature and what is required for there to be such a thing as nature. Second, given the novelty of his teaching on the nature of things, Lucretius presents the account of nature in a manner that is mindful of the potentially harrowing human implications of the discovery of nature and the difficulties in accepting that discovery.

### Nature, History, and Freedom

#### *IB (I, 146–482)*

Lucretius claims that only through a rational investigation of the nature of things can man live a peaceful and tranquil life. Fear dominates men's lives because they are ignorant of the causes of both the regular and the strange phenomena they see in the world and the heavens (I, 151–154).<sup>3</sup> Due to this ignorance, they ascribe such regular and strange happenings to the work of the gods. Given that this ignorance is the primary cause of their fear, it would seem that it must be terrifying phenomena that are most responsible for the belief in divine governance. Although belief in divine governance is presented here as fear-inducing because it makes it impossible to say what can and cannot come into being, it is not

immediately clear whether men initially ascribed such happenings to the gods out of fear or as a remedy for some preexisting fear. The fear induced by divine governance is certainly a departure from the proem's account of the divine governance of Venus, which is anything but fear-inducing. We learnt in the proem that philosophy arose in the first place when the man from Greece rose up to contend against religion. His rebellion was not, however, simply—or even primarily—inspired by the fear aroused by religion but, according to Lucretius, he was moved by the desire for honor and independence to be the first to “shatter the bars to the gates of nature.” The problem with religion for men such as the man from Greece is less the fear it induces and more its barrier and prohibitions against looking into the nature of things. The central difficulty that the philosophic life faces is then the need to justify itself to the city—a justification that rests on the discovery of nature.

Philosophy must take its start from the first principle that nothing is ever created out of nothing by divine force (I, 150). That nothing can come into being out of nothing through divine intervention presupposes the existence of necessity, and demands immutable limitations as to what can and cannot be. Lucretius does not therefore take for granted the existence of nature, but understands it to be necessarily hypothetical. Lucretius does not begin with the first things but with such limitations. The first things are secondary insofar as they are a way of explaining the limitations of things. If all things are not produced out of something, then they could be created from nothing and develop in any way, shape, or form. Nothing could then be said to exist by necessity.<sup>4</sup> What exists by necessity has its patterns of growth, range of possibilities, and powers, limited by that out of which it is born and grows. The study of the nature of things is thus concerned first and foremost with the limitations of things. Revealing out of what basic substance nature produces, provides growth, and dissolves all things will confirm that nothing can come into being out of nothing and how each thing has its power limited by nature (I, 58–62). That nothing can come to be out of nothing then demands that there be some first thing according to Lucretius. If it is with these first things that “everything begins,” it then follows that for there to be things that have a beginning, grow, and suffer corruption, the first things must be free of birth, growth, and corruption. Nature must, therefore, be the realm of the necessary and eternal and it is not the first things but the force by which nature creates composites out of, and dissolves back into, the first things (I, 56).

The fundamental principle by which philosophy takes its start stands in contrast to the generative process of Venus, who was said to be solely responsible for generation. Recalling the essential discovery of the man

from Greece (I, 74–77) we infer that there must be a limit to creation. If gods could create something from nothing, we could not speak of what is necessary; without necessity, there can be no proper investigation into the nature of things as there can be no such thing as nature. Divine intervention and nature are therefore to be understood as mutually exclusive. Nature must then be understood as a term of distinction.<sup>5</sup>

Lucretius outlines six proofs for the impossibility of creation out of nothing, each appealing to what we commonly see as necessarily so (I, 146–214). First, each thing has its own fixed seed, just as fruit trees are only capable of producing their own type of fruit, each fruit being produced from its own seed. Furthermore, we see that each thing has its own seed and season; if this were not so, generation and growth would be spontaneous. Growth, we see, is not spontaneous but requires both time and proper nourishment. The process of maturity is such as to preserve each thing's kind as the earth brings forth new life when the conditions guarantee its safety (I, 179). The fact that all things possess their own seed and process of maturity additionally explains why we see that each being is limited in terms of what it can and cannot be and become, Lucretius here emphasizing size, strength, and longevity. He ends the account of the impossibility of creation out of nothing by asking: If these principles of growth do not govern generation, why then do we not see men of such size that they could cross the seas with a single step, destroy mountains with their bare hands, or live through many ages (I, 199–204)? Since such gigantic creatures do not exist, Memmius “must admit” (I, 205 *fateare necessent*) that nothing can be made from nothing. The example of such giant creatures forces one to consider the gods. Lucretius therewith reminds us of the primary task of investigating the nature of things to free man from religious fear.

The second fundamental principle is derived from the first. As nothing can be created from nothing, nothing can by necessity be reduced to nothing (I, 215–264). Lucretius asks Memmius: If things could be reduced to nothing at their death, how could Venus create new life (I, 226)? The fundamental matter by which “Venus” produces things must persist after the thing's destruction for new life to be born and to grow. The invocation of Venus is rather surprising given the stated object of the investigation. The invocation is evidence that Lucretius does not wish at this early stage to deal directly with the impossibility of gods' creation of things from existing matter.<sup>6</sup> As our commonsense perception acknowledges, we see the death of one thing contribute to the life of another, as rain is absorbed into crops and crops into animals. Nature does not bring absolute destruction of anything to our sight (I, 224). The dissolution of things into nothing is not only contrary to our experience of the world,



but also paints a picture of nature as unstable and fragile. Throughout the four proofs he offers, Lucretius deals rather delicately with what is potentially a rather sad and bitter aspect of the account.<sup>7</sup> To offset the potential bitterness, he concludes the account of dissolution back into its constituent seeds and leaves Memmius with the pleasing tableau of how “Father Ether” sends the passing rains down into the lap of “Mother Earth” whereby the death of all things nourishes the birth of another. The account of death and dissolution ends with a pleasant rural scene of new calves on shaky limbs drunk on pure milk and cities that flower with children (I, 250–264). To the potential bitterness of death and dissolution is applied the soothing sweetness of birth.

If all things can neither be created from nothing nor dissolved into nothing, then all things must be composed of bodies. That such bodies cannot be seen gives rise to Lucretius’s concern that, having demonstrated the first principle and its necessary correlate, Memmius will begin to distrust his words. Despite the invisibility of the first beginnings, he “must confess” they are among the things that as yet cannot be seen. Lucretius seeks to convince Memmius by demonstrating that there are other forces that act upon our senses but which we cannot see; wind stirs the sea, speech strikes the ears; we experience a variety of odors, heat and cold touch our skin, and all these touch our senses without being seen.

That we cannot see the first things but can see that even the hardest of things are subject to erosion will have to be proof enough of the existence of the particles given the inadequacy of our sense of sight and the niggardliness of nature. This reads as something of a lamentation on Lucretius’s part given the centrality that first things play in the exposition of nature. His lamentations are, however, misleading. Later in the critique of rival doctrines (I, 779), and in a more detailed fashion in Book II’s account of the nature of the first things (II, 730–1022), we learn that it is of absolute necessity that the first things have a secret and blind nature. The invisibility of the first beginnings, Lucretius remarks, is likely to be rather difficult for Memmius to accept (II, 730). Their secret and blind nature points toward the strangeness of the first things and the great distance separating the ways of nature and the concerns of man.

Discussion about the gradual erosion of all things leads directly to the next section on the existence of the void, since erosion is a consequence of the void within things. Lucretius begins his explication of the void by emphasizing the great importance it will play in Memmius’s ability to adhere to what Lucretius has to teach him. We learnt in the proem to Book I of Lucretius’s fears that Memmius will abandon him before having learnt the full truth about the nature of things (I, 50–53, 102). What Lucretius remarks here about the void cannot but remind us of

that passage. An understanding of the void, Lucretius claims, will “prevent you from wandering around, always doubting and seeking after the sum of things, and distrusting my words” (I, 331–333). Lucretius proceeds to offer three arguments as to the existence of the void before warning Memmius not to be led astray, relent in his objections, and finally “confess” that there must be void in things. Instead of resuming the arguments in favor of the existence of the void, Lucretius tasks Memmius with continuing the investigation alone to prove its existence. Lucretius expresses confidence that, given Memmius’s keen mind, he will—like a hound—follow the tracks Lucretius has laid and “penetrate all unseen hiding places and draw forth the truth from them” (I, 408–409). The full truth about the void, therefore, has only been partially revealed and the rest remains hidden. One wonders what truths are hidden and why they are hidden. Memmius’s possession of a dogged instinct to pursue the truth may be a bit of flattery, since Lucretius deems it necessary to follow up immediately with a promise that is revealing of Memmius’s true character. Should he flag in his task, Lucretius promises that he will be forthcoming with such a stream of “melodious” arguments that they will both likely die before he has exhausted the demonstrations. That such lifelong “melodious” demonstrations might be needed suggests the great difficulty that Memmius may have in accepting the void. That Lucretius’s nearly limitless spring of arguments will pour forth from his “sweet tongue” is further indication that the void is in need of a honeyed presentation. The fact that Lucretius later characterizes the void as part of the “steep path” his philosophic rivals fear to tread is additional evidence of the bitterness of the void (I, 659) and may raise further questions about Memmius’s supposed doggedness.

As the whole consists of only two things, the first things and void, Lucretius argues that all things must then be properties or accidents of matter and void (I, 449–482). A property is that which cannot be taken away from any given thing without its ceasing to be what it is, such as weight from a stone, or heat from fire, touch to matter, and nontouch to void. All other things are accidents, specifically slavery, wealth, poverty, liberty, war, and peace. None of the examples Lucretius gives of properties relate to human things while all the examples of accidents he gives are human things. The human things are presented here as having no immediate or lasting impact upon the nature of things. From the perspective of philosophy, those things that are of primary concern to man are not the most fundamental things.<sup>8</sup> Man—prior to the study of the nature of things—is concerned with what by nature has the most fleeting nature, by what least is.

Time and history are likewise accidents and have no independent existence. Time is incomprehensible absent motion, and history is merely the

accidental motions of matter in time and space. All human events are, therefore, nothing more than accidents of animate bodies who are themselves accidents of matter. Lucretius uses the Trojan War as an example, which recalls the proem's account of Venus as mother of the Aeneads. By describing the Trojan War as an accident, one wonders what it can mean for the Romans to characterize themselves as descendants of Aeneas. Can the founding of Rome by the descendants of Aeneas be divorced from the Trojan War? Does the demotion of the war not in fact demote the founding of Rome? To ascribe historical events to the realm of the accidental suggests that all political foundings are contingent and therefore not of any significance in the larger sphere of the nature of things. As was argued in the analysis of the proem to Book I, the city stands for some idea of how one ought to live and it legitimizes that way of life by sacralizing its founding. In doing so, it establishes the authority of the ancestral and its synonymy with the good. The demotion of historical events to the realm of accidents denies the city's claim to divine foundation.

The demotion of the human things to the accidental is fundamental to the inquiry into the nature of things because it legitimates the raising of the question of what nature is and how one ought to live. The theological union of Rome and Venus through Aeneas elevates Rome and what it means to be Roman to a position of privilege in the nature of things that forecloses the question. This unmerited raising of the human things, and in particular Rome, is therefore a barrier to the investigation of nature. Man cannot then take his bearing from history as to how we ought to live for such knowledge is only available by grasping the eternal and necessary nature of things.<sup>9</sup> Philosophy is therefore necessarily nonhistorical as it must begin with an attempt to liberate oneself from the particular premises and prejudices of one's city.<sup>10</sup> It is this liberation that is achieved by the man from Greece in breaking down the gates that bar access to nature.

The demotion of the human things to the realm of the accidental may lead one to suspect that the human things are not objects of serious inquiry. In fact, the demotion reveals that genuine inquiry into the nature of things must seriously consider the human barriers to philosophy. Man's tendency to elevate the political things is born of an attachment to the city that potentially keeps him from the truth about nature. The investigation into the nature of things must then consider such attachments and the risk they pose to the investigation. Philosophy must turn to the soul to investigate its motives and potential attachments. This Lucretius does in Books III and IV before returning to the cosmological issues. These attachments give rise to the hope that there exists some harmony, or potential harmony, between the first things and the human things and

perhaps the fear induced by the intimation that no harmony in fact exists. One manifestation of this desire is Lucretius's ironic request that Venus seduce Mars and bring peace to Rome.

### *II B (62–332) Motion and Freedom*

As we have seen, the proem to Book I is a plea to Venus for peace at a time of great calamity so that Lucretius can write and Memmius can find the leisure to read his poem. The proem to Book II is a correction of that plea. No longer calling upon Venus to seduce Mars and thereby stem the tides of war, Lucretius remarks that it is sweet to dwell high upon a hill in the temples of the wise and observe the plight of men in a shipwreck, or the cruel contest of war, or struggling for political preeminence (II, 1–13). No longer requiring peace so that he may do “his part,” Lucretius leaves us with the impression that the observation of war, violence, and chaos may be necessary for the wise come to see the truth about the nature of things. Although the study of nature is the sole source of happiness, that happiness depends upon the calamitous motion of the mass of men. The creation of the poem, it would seem, is not dependent upon Venus's seduction of Mars but upon the reign of Mars. The realization of what man needs to live a pleasant life appears to be found within the tranquil observation of random, violent, and purposeless motion. The proem to Book II thus begins to supply what was missing from Book I—that which brings the first things together into things. The proem's contrast between the life of rest and that of motion therefore sets the stage for what is to come—the account of random, meaningless, and violent motion.

Lucretius's introduction to the section on atomic motion reveals the extent to which Venus has vanished from the account. The first things in constant motion move frenetically in every direction (II, 98) and clash and fight at high speed (II, 87). Some join into compounds and others roam endlessly within the boundless void. We can see a likeness of this motion, Lucretius tells us, in particles of dust illuminated by the rays of the sun. The particles in the sunlight—like the first things in the void—can be seen to swirl unpredictably, changing direction in a chaotic fashion apparently pushed on by unseen forces (II, 130, 137, and 142). The movement of the first things is prefigured in the central example from the proem when Lucretius likens them to troops on the field of battle trading blows, engaged in an “eternal” struggle (II, 115–123).<sup>11</sup>

Given the fact that the first things are not attracted to each other and have no intrinsic plan, a great force is required to bring them together. Lucretius thus opens the account of the particular movements of the first things by describing their incredible velocity (II, 143–167). This velocity,

he argues, must be quicker than the speed of light, as light is slowed as it passes through the air. This example not only further reveals the great violence with which the first things clash but also accentuates the absence of Venus or the lack of care and circumspection with which the things of the world are created. Although it was said that Venus brings forth all things into the “holy coasts of light” (I, 22–23), the first things by contrast are moving through the darkness of the void. That this velocity almost destroys the truth of the poem to Book I is made plain by what Lucretius relates immediately following the account of velocity.

Lucretius digresses to criticize “some” who contend that, without the help of the gods, nature could not create a world so consonant with the needs of man who bring all things through the “ways of Venus” to reproduce their kind (II, 174–177). This invocation of Venus points to the identity of these “some” as the poets and priests. The theological account of divine creation of the world seeks to establish a harmony between the ways of the gods, the ways of man, and the ways of the heavens. Such thoughts, he claims, are far from truth and reason as even those ignorant of the true causes of things must admit that the world is so replete with flaws that it surely could not have been created by gods (II, 178–182). That no knowledge of the first things is needed to see that the world is too replete with flaws to be divinely created or governed suggests that most men should understand this fact. Those who ascribe the creation of the world to gods may therefore be doing so out of an inability or unwillingness to come to terms with its flaws and the implications of such flaws. The account of the divine creation of the world must then be a remedy for the fear that the world, lacking divine support, must have come into being and therefore must end. Lucretius promises Memmius to make all this clear to him later. When he returns to the denial of divine creation in Book V, it serves as the necessary prelude to the most bitter statement on the mortality of the world.<sup>12</sup> That Lucretius delays relating these truths suggests that Memmius is in fact attracted to the stories of the “some” and is yet unprepared to digest such bitter truth.

The fall of the first things, regardless of their velocity, cannot account for the creation of composite beings. As there is nothing to impede the motion of the first things in the void, the first things—although of different weights—must fall with equal velocity and, therefore, could never come into contact with one another. There must then be another motion that allows them to collide. This creative motion is the swerve. Lucretius states that at uncertain times, at uncertain places, the first things swerve the least possible distance (II, 219–221). The swerve takes the first things off their downward trajectory just enough for them to collide with one another. If the swerve were absent, the first things would fall like

raindrops never coming into contact with one another (II, 222–224). The swerve of a single atom at some past time would appear to be sufficient to account for creation, but Lucretius argues that the first things must continue to swerve. If the first things did not do so, there would have to be an unbroken chain of causation whereby all new motion is given to it by old motion. Without the continuous swerve of the first things, there could be no motion that could break the bonds of fate (*fati foedera*) (II, 255).<sup>13</sup>

By breaking the bonds of fate, the swerve opens up a realm of freedom. The nature of the freedom created is curious and obscure. The swerve is said to be the source of voluntary action, but Lucretius's account does not explain how one gets from the swerve of the first things to "freedom" of thought or movement. While the first things enjoy a certain kind of "freedom," it is not entirely clear that man does. Rather than revealing the nature of that freedom, or explaining that freedom through atomic motion, Lucretius relies instead upon our belief that we enjoy such freedom. He states, "Whence arises, I say, that will torn free from fate through which we follow wherever pleasure leads, and likewise, swerve aside not at certain times and places but where the mind suggests? Beyond all doubt man's will begins all this and sends a current of movement through our limbs" (II, 258–261). This is hardly an argument and in fact complicates more than it explains. First, it is not clear that voluntary movement originates with man or if it allows man to follow where pleasure leads. Second, what is it that initiates man's will? Does man somehow control the swerve of the first things, and if so, what is the material origin of our ability to do so? Lastly, the swerve according to the examples used applies only to the movement of our limbs, and when Lucretius later explains thought, there is curiously no mention of the swerve.<sup>14</sup> Since the examples of this freedom account only for locomotion, one would have to say that it is a freedom of a limited and particular kind. An additional difficulty is that Lucretius already argued that liberty—like slavery—is an accident, not a property, of composite beings.<sup>15</sup> In any case, the swerve is neither meant to bring, nor can it be said to bring, the *rationes* of the first things into harmony with those of man. That such is the case is shown by the fact that the "freedom" that the swerve apparently establishes is applicable to all animals (II, 264–266).<sup>16</sup> Rather than elevating man's freedom above the fundamental facts of the nature of things, the freedom established by the swerve places man on a level not significantly different from all animal species.<sup>17</sup>

The limited nature of our freedom is further emphasized by what Lucretius takes up next. As the swerve may cause difficulties with establishing any genuine regularity in the nature of things, Lucretius attempts

to explain that the swerve does not upset the necessary patterns that nature demands all things follow. He claims that because matter is never lost or added to the sum of all things, “the basic bodies show the same patterns of movement now as in time past and will always travel the same way in the future and what has been brought to be will be again on the same terms, and exist and grow and flourish as much as the bonds of nature allow” (II, 295–308). Putting aside the issue of whether the arguments correct the irregularity and unpredictability, the swerve has introduced into the account of the nature of things, the “bonds of nature” that further circumscribe the breadth of man’s freedom. What can and cannot be is not determined by man’s freedom but by the fundamental principles that govern the nature of things. Whatever the nature of man’s freedom may be, it is not Lucretius’s intention here to argue that man’s freedom provides him the capacity to direct or determine what was earlier described as the “deep-set boundary stone” of nature’s permanent order. That nothing can alter the sum of things, therefore, casts a shadow upon man’s freedom. Certainly that freedom must be understood as dependent upon the motion of the first things and that freedom, such as it is, cannot fundamentally alter the nature of things. That man’s freedom is at last a small factor in the overall direction of the nature of things is emphasized in Lucretius’s conclusion to the account of motion. Lucretius states that it should not cause wonder that, though the first beginnings are in constant motion, the sum total appears at rest. He proves that such is the case by the example of the movements of legions engaged in military exercise. While the mountains echo the clamor of cries of war and the ground trembles under the mighty tramp of their feet, observed from high upon a hill they seem to stand still. The image is evocative of the proem to Book II and recalls the seeming futility of such movements.<sup>18</sup>

The sections of Books I and II that we have been considering begin to reveal what is necessary for there to be such a thing as nature and the human implications of such a discovery. More importantly, they begin to reveal what is required of Memmius to begin the inquiry into the nature of things and to come to terms with its discoveries. Two things in particular stand out in this regard: history and freedom. The discovery of nature is synonymous with the discovery of the necessary and eternal. As articulated by the discoveries of the man from Greece, the discovery of nature is the knowledge of “what can and cannot come into being, how each thing has its powers limited and its deep-set boundary stone” (I, 74–77). These limitations are immutable and not alterable by any actions on the part of man. Man’s own life and the objects of his primary concern are therefore understood as accidents of the motions of nature. As Lucretius makes plain in his account of the Trojan War, nothing of

what man calls history is of any lasting consequence when viewed in light of the eternal order. History is neither possible independent of that order nor capable of altering it. Similarly, through the account of motion Lucretius increases the distance that separates the human things from the first things. The violence of the motion reveals a world not governed with the ends of man in mind. The limited realm of freedom established by the swerve leaves one with a sense of the deep and unmovable limits in bringing the eternal order in closer proximity with the human things. The more that men entertain hopes of some harmony between the ways of the eternal order and the ways of man, or some manner by which they can effect such a harmony, the less they will be able to live in accord with the truth. If philosophy is the only path to happiness, it would seem to require a radical detachment from ordinary human concerns. As the heart of the poem will make plain, philosophy requires—or leads to—living beyond hope and fear.

### **The First Things**

#### ***IC (I, 483–634)***

Immediately following the demotion of all human things to the realm of the accidental and the attendant reduction of history, Lucretius turns to the eternity of the first beginnings. This teaching, like that of the void, is prefaced with the remark that it may be difficult to believe (I, 487). The difficulty is a consequence of the fact that it appears to contradict what our eyes suggest about the nature of things. Everything we see appears malleable, penetrable, and subject to dissolution. Nothing we see in creation therefore appears perfectly solid and eternal. Even the most durable of substances are not impervious; lightning can penetrate the walls of houses, and iron, bronze, and gold are rendered soft by extreme heat. Lucretius's choice of examples is evocative, lightning particularly so. From the proem it was said that the accomplishments of the man from Greece in the face of religious superstition were gained due to his courage, made manifest by the fact that he did not fear the terrors of lightning. Lightning in fact goaded him to be the first to break down the gates to nature. Lightning then is associated with the fear of gods that may keep us from the discovery of nature. The fear inspired by lightning gives rise to questions concerning the world's begetting and beginning and the strength of the walls of the world.<sup>19</sup> The example of lightning indicates that the difficulty with believing in the eternity of the first beginnings is more complex than merely the challenge that it presents to our common sensory experience of the world. The eternity of the first beginnings



raises profound questions about the creation and fate of all things, most importantly the world.<sup>20</sup>

Pierre Bayle can help us see the implications of the assertion of the eternity of the first beginnings. According to Bayle, all the heathen natural philosophers posited the eternity of matter. While they may have disagreed as to the origin of the world and the nature of the first things, “they all agreed . . . that the matter of the world was unproduced.”<sup>21</sup> The assertion of matter’s eternity is a necessary correlative of the fact that none disputed the impossibility of creation *ex nihilo*. Even those heathen natural philosophers who believed in a god all posited “uncreated being distinct from god . . . which owed its existence to its own nature . . . and has no dependence upon any other thing, either to its essence, existence, attributes, or properties.”<sup>22</sup> In this respect Bayle says that the impiety of the Epicureans is not significantly different from that of any other pre-Socratic school of natural philosophy. In fact, Bayle argues, the Epicurean theology is significantly more consistent with the universal philosophic claim of the eternity of matter. The idea that the gods are “far removed and separated from our affairs,” “needing us not at all,” and “neither propitiated with services nor touched by wrath” is a reasonable conclusion about the nature of the gods given the eternity of matter. Once one supposes the so-called impiety of uncreated matter, “it is less absurd to maintain as the Epicureans did, that God was not the author of the world, and did not concern himself with the government of it.”<sup>23</sup> To establish that the world operates according to fixed laws, one must posit the eternity of matter. The existence of fixed laws, required for there to be a nature that is susceptible to being studied and understood by reason, is impossible consequently without the eternity of matter. The very possibility of philosophy is thus dependent upon the eternity of uncreated matter. Those who posit both the eternity of matter and a providential God commit one of two errors. First, the eternity of matter together with divine creation would make a mockery of a beneficent God who enjoys perfect felicity. Given the evident flaws in the world, no creator could look upon it without being grieved by it. Any attempt to mend it would only keep the creator “struggling continually with the malignity of the matter productive of the disorder.”<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, it is not possible to argue for divine creation “without violating the laws of order.” Such a violation would necessarily confute the very possibility of philosophy.

The eternity of matter is, therefore, a necessary postulate in establishing the existence of nature. The impossibility of creation out of nothing can only hold if there is an eternal stock of indivisible matter out of which all things are created (I, 540–542). Unless the first beginnings are eternal, before our own time all things would have been reduced to nothing

and as a result must have been generated out of nothing (I, 540–542). If nature had not set a limit to the divisibility of the first things, by our time the bodies of matter out of which nature could create things would be such that no thing could have a fixed process of generation, growth, and maturity (I, 551–564). As the nature of things is composed of matter and void, which are necessarily single and pure, matter itself must be without void (I, 503–510). All visible things must therefore be composites of matter and void. Our commonsense perception of the destructibility of all things must mean that there is void in all visible things hemmed in by solid matter (I, 520–539). That things vary in hardness or softness is a consequence of the variability of void within the things since “without void nothing can be crushed, or broken, or split in two by cutting, nothing can admit liquid or again percolating cold or penetrating fire, by which all things are destroyed” (I, 532–535). This is apparent to all who can see as we can observe that things are more quickly dissolved than can be remade (I, 556–557). Moreover, as we know that a “finite amount of time exists for each generation of things,” such limitations are only possible given the indivisibility of the first things. The eternity of the first things is for that reason necessary for nature to have a “foundation to begin upon” (I, 572–573).

The foundation set by the first things appoints to each thing, according to its kind, a limit to growth and “of remaining alive.” The eternity of the first things determines what each thing is capable of doing and not doing according to the “bonds of nature” (I, 584–585). If the first things were susceptible to being altered in any way, we could never know with certainty what can and cannot come into being and “by what process each thing has its power limited and its deep-set boundary stone.” (I, 595–596). These lines echo the proem to Book I and its characterization of the discoveries of the man from Greece won by marching beyond the “walls of the world.” They are the pithiest definition of nature offered by Lucretius. The repetition of these lines highlights the great importance that he attaches to the idea of the eternity of matter. The theological importance of the definition can be limned from its repetition in the proems to Book V and VI (V, 82–90, and VI, 58–66). The proem to Book V satisfies a promise that Lucretius made in the first syllabus of the poem in the proem to Book I. There he stated that he would discourse on the ways of the heavens (*ratione caeli*). By Book V, Memmius has presumably arrived at a position to hear the full account of nature and its implications for the motions of the heavens. Lucretius remarks that those who have not been taught the true nature of the gods are likely to look upon the heavens and revert to old superstitions, not having learnt “what can and cannot come into being,” and “by what process each thing has its

power limited and its deep-set boundary stone.” (V, 88–90). In the proem to Book VI, in preparation for the discussion of the causes of atmospheric phenomena such as thunder and lightning, Lucretius repeats for the last time the summary of the discoveries of the man from Greece, claiming that ignorance of the “deep-set boundary stone” that nature imposes on all things leads men back to fear “cruel taskmasters, whom poor wretches believe to be omnipotent” (VI, 42–66).

Lucretius remains silent in Book I about the full theological implications of the eternity of matter. Memmius will learn of the consequences for our world only in Books V and VI because he is not yet prepared to be exposed to the bitter truth. Far from these bitter truths derived from the eternity of the first things, he presents a rather pleasing picture of eternity in Book I. The emphasis throughout much of the section is on the necessity of eternity to account for the coming into being of composite things rather than their destruction; eternity is here presented as foundational for the very possibility of generation. The one-sidedness of Lucretius’s initial presentation is brought into greater relief by turning to its companion section in Book II. Although the eternity of the first things is necessary to begin explaining the foundation upon which nature builds all things, it is not sufficient to explain the other part of the discoveries of the man from Greece, that being what can and cannot come into being and what gives to them their “firm set boundary stone.” It is within the account of the shape of the first things that that is more fully articulated.

### *II C (333–729) Shape*

The account of shape is preceded by the account of motion. It is therefore not surprising that the discussion of shape continues with the emphasis on Mars rather than Venus that we found in the discussion of motion. What we need to know about the shape of the first things is threefold: their kinds, variety, and differences in form. Lucretius begins by explaining that there cannot be an infinite variety of shapes as this would make it impossible to know what can and cannot come into being. That being said, the variety is such that we can observe differences within members of the same species. That such differences exist is necessary so that members within a species can distinguish each other. Lucretius’s evidence for the truth of this postulate is striking. The ability of members of the same species to identify individuals can be seen in the mournful, persistent, and inconsolable searching of a mother cow whose calf has been sacrificed to the gods. Reminding us of the sacrifice of Iphigenia from the proem to Book I, Lucretius presents here a somewhat less terrible picture of religion. While the suffering of the cow is a consequence of men’s

religious rites, Lucretius has moved from human to animal sacrifice. He also implies that the loss experienced by animals is not dissimilar to that of men. One cannot help but wonder how the attachment the cow shows for its calf, and that men possess for their own, is related to religion. The suffering of the cow casts new light on the actions of Agamemnon. The sacrifice that Agamemnon believes is demanded by Diana may in fact naturally originate in some prior care within man akin to the concern of the mother cow. If such is the case, then the overcoming of religious fear will not mean an end to man's troubles.<sup>25</sup>

The variety of shapes is also necessary to explain why we experience sensory pleasure and pain. Those things that touch our senses pleasantly are made of smooth and round particles and those that are noisome are rough and barbed (II, 340–477). All sensation is a product of touch. The importance of this fact is emphasized by Lucretius's utterance of an oath, "by the holy powers of gods." The oath raises the question of how the account of shape must apply to the gods. The frequent references to gods in the account of shape would appear to be a constant reminder of such curiosity.<sup>26</sup> At the very least our knowledge of gods must come by way of touch. The gods would then have to be capable of touching and being touched. If all sensation is a consequence of atomic shape and attached to body, then the gods would also have to be composite beings. Regardless of Lucretius's silence of the nature of the gods, the discussion that follows cannot help to deepen the question. Our experience of all things, he explains, whether hard or soft, is a consequence of their particular composition and ours. Furthermore, as there are fundamental limits to our sensations of pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, hot and cold, and the like, there must be a limited number of shapes of the first things (II, 478–521). Though Lucretius does not draw out the theological implications of this fact, one wonders if the beauty and strength of the gods is likewise constrained by this finitude of the shape of the first things.

Given the limited number of shapes there must be an infinite number of each shape, since all things require an infinite number of first things to be born, to grow, and to feed themselves (II, 567–568). Even if there were a single or unique thing, it too would require an infinite number of suitable first things to be made. If the sum of things were finite, Lucretius likens the chance of anything coming together to the possibility of a shipwreck being rebuilt by being tossed together upon the violence of the seas (II, 551–559). Lucretius's analogy of the power of the void to the power of the seas reminds us of the violence that is essential to the coming into being of all things. While all mortals should be wary of the seas for its treacherous violence, untrustworthiness, and fraudulence (II, 551–568), the sea's violence must, however, pale in significance when compared

to the violence of the void. That the violence of the sea is incapable of bringing such things back into being may go without saying, but what the analogy indicates is the depth of indifference to the good of man the sum of things and the void must present. The violence of the void in comparison to the sea reveals the utter absence of “circumspection” in the creation of all things. We can here begin to understand Lucretius’s earlier hesitation to provide Memmius with the full range of arguments as to the nature of the void.

The violent motion of the first things is in a state of equilibrium between the generation and destruction of all things. The war of the first things is carried on in the infinite void, and the forces of neither destruction nor generation can forever gain mastery over the other. The birth of one thing is tied to the death of another; the cries of children when coming into the coasts of light are mixed with the wail of mourning that attends the funeral dirge (I, 576–580). This process of generation and destruction is without end and, therefore, there can be no end to human suffering and war. Again Lucretius quietly reminds us that there will not be, and cannot be, any seduction of Mars. As all happiness is in some way dependent upon and inextricably linked to misery, we appreciate how fitting Lucretius’s central example of the observance of war was from the proem to Book II (II, 5). The pleasure that is derived from such observation is a product of this fundamental insight, together with one’s reconciliation with the fact of this equilibrium.

How men attempt to sort through the difficulties that the infinite and eternal present is the subject of the final part of Lucretius’s discussion of atomic shape. Given what he has explained about the eternal war between the first things, one might be inclined to believe that the war is carried on within the confines of the world. Lucretius wants Memmius to be certain that such is not the case. The eternal war between the first things is carried on in the infinite and so must apply to the world as well. The challenge of this insight is apparent from how Lucretius begins the discussion. Memmius is told that he must “guard sealed and treasured in memory” what he is about to be told (II, 581–582). The issue seems less that he will forget what he is about to be told and more that he may wish to forget it. Memmius is first told that there is nothing we can see that is composed of a single particle. In addition, the strength and power of each composite being are a consequence of the variety of elements that is contained within it. The earth contains such a multiplicity of first things that she is regarded as the Great Mother of gods, beasts, and all things. The great variety of first things explains the fact that the earth gives birth to such diversity of life. This understanding of the earth as the Great Mother has its origins in the songs sung by Greek poets. The poets divinized the earth and so she

is worshiped and accompanied by eunuchs, music, and an armed guard who strike fear into vulgar, impious hearts and amaze those of ungrateful mind.<sup>27</sup> Lucretius remarks that although all this is “excellently told,” it is “far from truth and reason.” Such divinization of the world is not in keeping with the truth about the gods so Lucretius repeats here his theological verses from the proem to Book I (I, 44–49) The gods, we are reminded, have no need of men and are “far removed and separated from our affairs” (II, 646–651). The repetition confirms that world lacks divine support and reveals that the procession is born of men’s fear and their inability to be reconciled to the fact that the world must, like all things, be subject to the fundamental process of generation and corruption.

The last task in discussing the shapes of the first things is to make sure that Memmius does not come to believe that the shapes can be joined in just any way whatsoever. If that were so, then we would see monstrosities come into being composed of half man and half beast, earth-bound creatures conjoined with those that inhabit the sea, and Chimeras (II, 700–706). What we see is that all things are born and fed from fixed seeds. That all things are similarly limited must preclude any conjoining of men and gods, such as Aeneas. Lucretius thus quietly denies the possibility of the divine founding of Rome and with it the privileged place of the Romans. Lucretius will return to the impossibility of monsters in Book V in the account of man’s development from his forest dwelling condition to the emergence of life in cities. Lucretius there recounts that many different kinds of beings likely came into existence and quickly perished as they could not protect themselves or find man’s protection by being of use to him. That such creatures no longer exist should not, however, lead one to imagine that Centaurs once existed. Centaurs and their kind are an impossibility because there can never be a creature with a “double nature” (V, 878–882). Lucretius continues by claiming that the people who believe in creatures such as Centaurs are the same that babble on about some prior golden age when rivers of gold flowed over the earth, trees bore jewels for flowers, and men existed of such enormity and strength that they could stride across the seas and turn the heavens. The nature of all things is fixed, immutable, and proceeds according to the bonds of nature (V, 922–923).

### **The Pre-Socratic Rivals and the “Steep Path”**

#### ***ID (I, 635–920)***

The necessity of the eternity of matter and its constituent properties demands that men come to terms with the fact that neither the world

nor the city has divine origins or enjoys divine protection and guidance. According to the conclusion of Pierre Bayle's discussion of Epicurus in his *Dictionary* "the eternity of matter draws after it the destruction of Divine Providence."<sup>28</sup> The eternity, solidity, and indivisibility of the first things are necessary to guarantee that all things do not dissolve into nothing and to preclude the possibility that nothing can be created out of nothing. The nature of the first things is thus dictated by the fundamental principle with which philosophy takes its start—the claim that nothing can be created out of nothing. Lucretius had prefaced his argument for the solidity of the first things by acknowledging that such a hypothesis is difficult to accept given the fact that nothing we see in nature is perfectly solid (I, 483–488). Given that everything perceptible is subject to dissolution, the first things must possess a nature divorced from all things that we are capable of seeing. This is the first instance of an acknowledged strangeness in the first things, or deviation from common sense. It is therefore fitting that it is to the more commonsense understandings of the first things articulated by the rival pre-Socratics that Lucretius turns to immediately following the eleven proofs for the solidity of the first things. The critique is undertaken on two fronts: a theoretical critique and ad hominem attacks. Although Lucretius's use of ad hominem attacks may seem juvenile, they are in fact important in understanding the cause of the rival's theoretical failures.

The three rival doctrines of Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras all posit first things that can be seen and as a result must be soft. Heraclitus's fire, the four elements of Empedocles, and the *homoeomeria* of Anaxagoras, are all perceptible and thus composites (I, 675–678, 684–689, 778–781, 848–856, and 915–920). The difficulty that Lucretius reveals in each of the three accounts is that such soft primordial matter are subject in time to be destroyed as they admit to no limits on divisibility. By postulating such soft first things the pre-Socratic rivals are forced to acknowledge the possibility, if not in fact necessity, of generation out of nothing (I, 670–674, 756–757, 791–796, and 856–857). All attempts to explain the nature of things based upon perceptible first things must collapse into an account that cannot but support the theological view of the whole. To refute the possibility of creation out of nothing, one must posit first things as blind, hidden, and concealed by nature (I, 777–778).

All three thinkers posit divisible matter because of their collective denial of the void in things (I, 658, 742, 745, and 843). If they had admitted the void, they would have recognized that the first things could not correspond to anything we see in the world. As Lucretius had argued in the section immediately preceding that of the rival accounts, it is the presence of void that demands that all visible things be necessarily reduced

to their collective first beginnings (I, 532–535). The failure to admit the existence of the void has been the cause of the ruin of such otherwise great men (I, 740–741). It is difficult to understand what Lucretius means by the fall of his rivals. The calamitous effect of their denial seems here to go beyond the theoretical flaws within their account of the nature of things. Their refusal to admit the void is not merely an issue of flawed physics: the difficulties with the doctrine of the void were manifest in Lucretius's initial presentation. Lucretius prefaced his remarks by first stressing the utility of the doctrine and giving voice to a suspicion that Memmius may distrust what he will be told—a distrust tied to doubts about the nature of the “sum of things” (I, 329–333). Lucretius does not there specify exactly what questions the void is meant to answer about the sum of things, but as we later learn the doctrine of the void is tied to the question of the eternity of the world. That Lucretius hesitates so early on in his exposition of the nature of things indicates that the doctrine of the void and its consequences are truths that Memmius may not as of yet be in a position to fully accept. The reluctance of the pre-Socratic rivals to admit void in things may be similarly born of uneasiness about admitting what the void would demand concerning men and the world.

In his treatment of Heraclitus, Lucretius suggests that the theoretical failings of the rivals are a consequence of some preceding nontheoretical issue. Heraclitus is admired most amongst those “dolts” who judge the truth by that which “tickle the ears” and are attracted to doctrines “varnished over with fine sounding phrases” (I, 639–644).<sup>29</sup> The accusation is in part that Heraclitus falsely adorns nature seemingly to garner favor with the ignorant. The denial of the void is perhaps an attempt to cultivate favor among the “frivolous part of the Greeks” (I, 640). The followers of Heraclitus deny the void but apparently in some sense recognize its necessity. The critique, however, goes beyond that. The Heracliteans “see many things that fight against them” and “shrink from leaving pure void in things” because they “fear the steep path” and therefore fall away from the truth (I, 657–659). The “steep path” is that which ascends from the doctrine of the void to its necessary correlates: the fact that the world is not divinely governed and is subject to the eternal process of generation and destruction. That the denial of void leads to the destruction of their first beginnings and the possibility of creation out of nothing is thus presented as a consequence of this fear. Their theoretical failings are therefore traceable to their fear for the world.<sup>30</sup>

That this is so may be indicated by two seemingly minor repetitions on Lucretius's part. First, Lucretius reserves the insult “dolts” both for those attracted to Heraclitus and those who deny that the sum of things is infinite and therefore argue that the world occupies a central and



privileged place (I, 1068). The second repetition is tied to what seems like high praise for Empedocles and his followers. Empedocles is not subject to the same kind of attack that Lucretius levels against Heraclitus, but, given his divine discoveries, one would be permitted to think that he “seems hardly to have been born of mortal stock” (I, 733). The discoveries of Empedocles have been uttered “with more sanctity and far more certainty than the Pythia who speaks forth from Apollo’s tripod and laurel” (I, 738–739). Nevertheless it remains the case that, as a consequence of his denial of the void, such a great man came to a great fall. Having taken away the void from things, Empedocles—like the others—subjected his first beginnings to destruction. Given the nature of his first things, Empedocles must therefore conclude that the sum of things at some time must have been reduced to nothing and reborn from nothing (I, 753–757). If such were the case then the world would have had to come into being through divine intervention. Empedocles, it would seem, is as unwilling to face the “steep path” as Heraclitus. Although Lucretius does not make that argument for the mortality of the world here, it is a truth that Memmius will have to be exposed to eventually. Once Memmius is ready to hear this most bitter of all truths, Lucretius assigns to his own proofs for the mortality of the world “more sanctity and certainty than the Pythia” (V, 111–112). The repetition draws attention to what it is precisely that Empedocles, and the other rival theorists, fear to confront in their investigation into the nature of things.

The critique of the rival theorists implies that Lucretius’s teaching on the nature of things follows the “steep path” and is therefore the most bitter. The rival doctrines, by positing soft first things that correspond to things we see, demand that they admit the possibility of creation out of nothing as all must have in time have been reduced to nothing. To preclude such a possibility, the first things must possess a nature secret and unseen completely divorced from nearly all qualities that we see the things of the world possess (I, 779). At the end of the critique, Lucretius says that one who fails to accept this would eventually be forced to posit first beginnings that laugh and cry (I, 919–920). While this might be rather easily dismissed as a *reductio ad absurdum*,<sup>31</sup> it is suggestive of the source of the rivals’ theoretical failings. The rivals in their unwillingness to tread the steeper path are perhaps moved by a desire to maintain a harmony between the first beginnings of all things and the cares and fears that plague man. That the fear of the “steep path” leads to such absurdity suggests that their theorizing is born of an unwillingness to come to terms with, or fundamental ignorance of, the divide between what is first for man and what is first by nature. Lucretius will repeat this supposed *reductio ad absurdum* in the extension of the critique against the rivals in Book II.

## *II, D (730–1022) Absence of Secondary Qualities*

Lucretius returns to the critique of Anaxagoras in the final argument that the first things must be devoid of all secondary qualities (II, 976–977). As the first things cannot correspond to any perceivable things, they must lack all qualities that the things in the world possess; they must be without color, taste, smell, heat, and sound (II, 730–1022). The heart of the argument is that the things that we perceive are subject to change and that all things subject to change are by necessity mortal (II, 748–756, 859–864, I, 789–793, and 670–671, and III, 519–520). Therefore to establish an “immortal foundation” for the sum of life, to establish the existence of nature, the first things must be devoid of secondary qualities (II, 859–864). The inclusion of secondary qualities opens the door to death of the first things and thus the first things will “pass back utterly into nothing” (I, 673, II, 864). The rivals consequently fail to establish the impossibility of creation *ex nihilo*. They cannot then ultimately have discovered nature.

The next step in the creation of such foundations is apparently more difficult, since Memmius must “confess” that the first beginnings lack sensation and life. For the first beginnings to “escape the ways of death,” they cannot possess sensation (II, 916–918). This necessarily follows if the first things are to be eternal, for the living things are the same as the mortal things. All things that we perceive are subject to change, dissolution, and death; therefore the first things must be lifeless to be deathless.<sup>32</sup> After a series of arguments to convince Memmius that experience shows how the sensible and animate can arise out of the insensible and inanimate, he concludes with the restatement of the *reductio ad absurdum*. Lucretius’s repetition deepens the argument in some important ways. Although it is perfectly reasonable to assume that he is thinking of Anaxagoras, Lucretius does not address him by name. More importantly, in the first articulation of the argument, Lucretius had said that the positing of first things that correspond to the visible things of the world led one to first things that laugh and cry; he here adds more attributes. Not only must the first things laugh and cry, they must also “discourse wisely on the composition of things” and “examine what their own first beginnings are” (II, 978–979). While such a notion is “delirium” and “lunacy,” it does appear to be an idea to which Memmius is attracted. Lucretius in fact threatens Memmius “that he dare not take a stand” in defense of such a notion (II, 982–985).

It is not immediately clear why Memmius might be attached to such absurdity. The conclusion to the section is perhaps telling in this regard. Lucretius argues that we are all composed of celestial seed originating in

Father Ether. Mother Earth having subsequently received the celestial seed, gives birth to all things and eventually returns all things to the earth. The ultimate origin of all life, Lucretius argues, is the concurrence, motion, order, position, and shapes of the first things. Father Ether and Mother Earth are living beings and so mortal beings and as we were instructed in the digression on the *Magna Mater* and reminded here that the earth is not divine. The conclusion thus suggests that accepting that the first things possess neither sensation nor life is necessary to come to terms with the fact that the whole is not divine and the nature of things is not governed by thoughtfulness and concern for the needs of men. The placement of the repetition of the *reductio ad absurdum* is then indicative of a desire, seemingly unconscious on the part of the rivals, to have a world made of things capable of being formed with circumspection and care.

### The Infinite

#### *IE (I, 921–1117)*

Calling Memmius to attention, Lucretius asks him to “hear more clearly” what follows upon the *reductio ad absurdum* of the pre-Socratics. Lucretius emphasizes that what he has to teach Memmius is of considerable difficulty given the “obscurity” and novelty of the matter at hand. The difficulties are not, however, simply due to the fact that what Memmius will be taught is obscure. The difficulty is that Memmius will likely recoil from what he is going to be taught. For this reason Lucretius must sweeten an otherwise bitter truth. Memmius is likened to children who are in need of medicine but refuse it on account of the bitterness of the remedy. For that reason, Lucretius, like a physician who rims a cup of wormwood with honey to administer bitter medicine, will speak bitter truths in “sweet-spoken Pierian song” (I, 946). This sweetening is necessary to hold Memmius’s attention until he has seen the whole of the nature of things (I, 947–949). The poetry is employed so that Memmius does not, like the vulgar, shrink back from what Lucretius has to reveal.

That Lucretius’s presentation of his poetic method occurs after the critique of his rivals suggests that the topic at hand will shed further light on the nature of the “steep path” that must be tread to reach the truth about the nature of things. That the “steep path” was tied to the rivals’ shared denial of the existence of the void explains why Lucretius furthers the discussion of the void here. Lucretius treads upon the steep path with his first discussion of the infinity of space (I, 951–1007). That the infinite is in need of poetic sweetening means that the finite is in some measure

more pleasant and comforting than the infinite.<sup>33</sup> The precise difficulty with accepting the necessity of infinite space and precisely how it finds itself within the obscure or dark aspects of the nature of things is not immediately clear. Lucretius offers four arguments for the necessity of infinite space. As nothing can have an end unless it is bounded by something and there is nothing beyond the universe, one “must confess” that it must be infinite (I, 958–967). Even if one tried to think of a limited universe, one could not help but to ask what is beyond it. It is not then possible to logically think of a bounded universe (I, 968–983). Lucretius illustrates this impossibility with the example of man standing at the edge of the universe with a spear. If he throws the spear, it will either carry on infinitely or be stopped by some material boundary. But what then exists beyond the boundary? In either case, Lucretius exclaims, one “must confess” that the universe is infinite. Lucretius argues that there is no “escape”; thus, Memmius is “compelled” to admit the truth about the infinite. Should Memmius persist in marking some extreme edge to the universe, Lucretius threatens again to “pursue” him with the question of the fate of the spear.<sup>34</sup> Given Memmius’s apparent reluctance to accept the infinite universe, one wonders what hold the notion of the finite has upon him. What is Memmius’s attachment to the idea of a closed or bounded universe?

Within this infinite space, there has to be an infinite amount of matter. A finite amount of matter in an infinite space could neither come together and create things nor could such things be maintained (I, 1016–1019). Without an infinite amount of matter in an infinite space, one would have to argue that the first things either have a plan, are governed by intelligence, or can reach agreement amongst themselves to act in certain ways (I, 1020–1022). This, Lucretius states, is surely not the case. Given that matter and space are infinite, the world must have come into being through the accidental clash of the first things. This is true not only of the world but also of the seas, the earth, the sky, the race of mortals, and the gods. Such accidental creation includes the gods’ demands that man cannot rely upon them for assurance that the earth will continue to persist.<sup>35</sup> Composite things are in turn kept from dissolution by the impact on them of the constant barrage of the first things holding them together and repairing their losses (I, 1023–1050).

Lucretius does not here follow up by explaining that the earth is mortal given its composite nature; in fact, the book concludes by leaving Memmius with the impression of its eternity. Its closing argument is that those who allow for a finite number of first things “open the door to the death” of our world (I, 1113). Instead of drawing the conclusion about the mortality of the world, he turns to argue against an alternative view

about the position of the earth in the universe. Some falsely claim that the earth occupies a central position in the cosmos and is kept in existence by the fact that all things by necessity press toward the center. He claims that those who suggest that the earth is at the center, and that all things are drawn to the center, have set forth an erroneous view given the infinity of space. In infinite space, there can be no center and no position of superiority. The conclusion to Book I begins the attempt to free Memmius of the notion that the gods are responsible for the coming into being and continued existence of the world by the assertion that the earth is not at the center of the universe. Man's happiness is tied to accepting that the gods do not rule. The nature of things requires that man accept his significantly diminished importance in that nature.

### ***II E (1023–1174)***

Book II's concluding section returns to the discussion of the infinite and furthers the devaluation of man both in terms of his concerns and his standing in the universe (II, 1023–1074). The conclusion will repeat and deepen the account of the world as the product of the accidental, unintentional meeting of the first things, which through a myriad of previous unsuccessful formations finally created all that we see. What Lucretius has to teach is, however, going to be difficult for Memmius to accept and so Lucretius prefaces the section in a manner reminiscent of the prelude to Book I's teaching on the infinite. Where Book I stressed the bitterness of the teaching on the infinite, Lucretius now stresses the novelty and wonder of what must follow from that initial presentation. The novelty and wonder of what Lucretius will teach about the infinite is compared by him to how men must have reacted when they first looked upon the heavens.<sup>36</sup> That initial wonder has apparently been lost and men satiated with looking upon the heavens no longer consider it worthwhile. While the first part of the prelude suggests that men have grown bored of the heavens, the conclusion suggests that the weariness is rooted in something more profound. What Lucretius wants to provide Memmius is an experience perhaps akin to what the first men felt upon looking at the heavens. This experience may not, however, culminate in wonder but apparently in obstinacy. Memmius may be dismayed by the novelty of the teaching and "spew" reason from his mind. Lucretius is prepared for Memmius's rejection of what he is about to be told and tells him that if it seems true, "concede victory," and if not to "equip yourself to fight" (II, 1040–1043). Lucretius will travel the infinite and seek by the flight of the mind to travel beyond the ramparts of the world (II, 1044–1048). This journey is reminiscent of that undertaken by the man from Greece

(I, 66–77). It was his journey that culminated in the discovery of what can and cannot come into being and appears to inspire the accusation of impiety and crime. The elaboration of the teaching on the infinite that Lucretius will present at the conclusion to Book II is then tied directly to the central challenge that the city presents to philosophy. One can then appreciate why men grew weary of looking upon the heavens and why Memmius may be reluctant to assent to what he is about to be told.

Given the chance creation of our world in the infinite, there is no reason to doubt that many other worlds identical to our own exist. Given also the forces of motion, and the infinite number of first things, there cannot be a single unique thing; all things that are created from first things must belong to a class with countless others of similar kind (II, 1077–1080). Memmius therefore “must admit” that there are other worlds identical to our own (II, 1064). Moreover, given the infinite number of first things and the obvious combination that has created our world, he “must admit” the existence of other worlds such as our own, populated with beasts and nations of men (II, 1067–1076). Finally, we see no unique creature here in our world but races of men and species of animals, and reason thus demands that Memmius “confess” that the sky, earth, sun, moon, and sea are not unique but numberless (I, 1077–1089). At the conclusion to Book I, the impossibility of the gods’ governance of our world was not explicitly deduced from the account of the accidental creation of our world. Lucretius now makes explicit that given our accidental creation, and that our world is but one in a larger class of worlds, the nature of things in no way comports with divine agency or governance. Lucretius asks, how could the gods govern such vastness? (II, 1095–1104). The rule of the infinite is moreover not in keeping with the true nature of the gods. The gods (as we learnt in the proem to Book I) live lives of peace and tranquility, and Lucretius invokes them here as witness to the absence of divine governance.

The existence of other such worlds reveals something additional that the discussion of the infinite in Book I did not address. The existence of innumerable other worlds reveals that our world has come into being due to the death of yet another, and therefore, it must collapse in time to contribute to the birth of another (II, 1105–1174). That the earth is subject to the order of generation and corruption is perhaps the steepest of Lucretius’s teachings. What it means for man and his position within the nature of things reveals the distance we have traveled since the proem to Book I. The initial notion of the Romans, and Memmius in particular, as enjoying the favoritism of Venus had been rejected both in terms of the nature of the gods (I, 44–49) and the nature of the first things (I, 455–458). With the accidental creation of our world, its eventual death, and the existence

of innumerable other worlds, Lucretius has revealed that there is nothing unique about events here on earth, nor any way in which those events have any lasting effect on the nature of things. There can then be no genuine progress or history.<sup>37</sup>

Coming to terms with the hopes and fear that men entertained about their place in the nature of things is most necessary to live well and discover the truth about the whole. The conclusion to Book II is an imitation of the travels of the man from Greece beyond the walls of the world and across the infinite. To make that journey, and accept what one discovers there, one must first come back down into the city, so to speak. Although the account of the infinite points to and begins the discussion of the necessary mortality of the world, it is not until the beginning of Book V that Lucretius will offer a complete account of its eventual demise. In the interim, Lucretius turns to the human things and—in Books III and IV—takes up the investigation of the soul. It is to the twin challenges of death and love that Lucretius turns before revealing the fullness of the truth about the place of man and the earth in the cosmos. It would appear that it is only possible to confront the fundamental truth about the world after having come to terms with the human things. It is therefore to these that we now turn.

## CHAPTER 3

### PHILOSOPHIC RESIGNATION: LIVING BEYOND HOPE AND FEAR

The two accounts of the eternal and infinite that conclude Lucretius's exposition of his materialist physics point toward the insignificance and impermanence of our world. Lucretius next brings this cosmic teaching to bear on the human soul in the central portion of the poem. More specifically, these two books reveal the reaction of the soul to the question and nature of the eternal. In the syllabus, we were told that what is most needed to live well is an account of the composition of the mind and soul and an explanation of the images of the souls of the dead that terrify our minds when "laboring under disease, or buried in sleep" (I, 127–135). What Book I unites will be taken up separately in Books III and IV. Through an account of the material composition of the mind and soul, Book III seeks to free us of our fear of death, and by way of an account of the operations of our senses both physical and mental, Book IV explains why it is we believe we perceive that which cannot be. Liberation from the terror of the mind would therefore appear to require more than a material account of the soul. Such liberation will have to contend with the unwillingness of the reader to trust the senses and not be swayed by what Lucretius will call "the hazy additives of the mind" produced by our cares, fears, and hopes.

Books III and IV are dedicated to a common end but begin in remarkably different fashions. The proem to Book III begins with the strongest statement yet as to Lucretius's indebtedness to the man from Greece. The proem to Book IV however, is one of two proems that make no mention of the man from Greece, and strongly affirms Lucretius's originality and the singularity of his own achievement. One might be tempted to say that Book III is the most "epicurean" book and Book IV the most Lucretian. After such self-assertiveness, in Book V and the concluding



book, Lucretius returns to prefacing each book with a praise of the man from Greece. Book IV for this reason stands out as a digression of sorts. This most Lucretian book ends with an attack on what may be our deepest of all cares, and the source of our most illusory hopes, love. That an account of love concludes the only book that begins with Lucretius's assertion of his own uniqueness, a uniqueness that is based upon his having poetically sweetened the otherwise bitter the truth about the nature of things, suggests a decisive way in which Lucretius surpasses his master. Lucretius's superiority is due to a superior understanding of the soul. He appreciates that the primary difficulty is not revealing the mortal nature of the soul but man's rebellion against the fact of his mortality. Taken together, Books III and IV suggest that it is love as much as fear that is the source of those things that "terrify the mind." The order of the presentation suggests that, despite having learned the truth about their mortal condition, men are still prone to illusions of the mind. The conclusion to Book IV suggests that such illusions have more to do with men's hopes than their fears, more to do with erotic attachment than fear of death. The philosopher Lucretius knows that one must be an expert in erotics to communicate to the many the truth about the nature of the eternal.

### I. Proem to Book III

Although Lucretius has praised the man from Greece before, Book III is the first to begin with such praise. In the proem to Book I, the man from Greece was credited as having been the first to discover the truth of what can and cannot be by shattering the gates to nature after having traveled in mind beyond the flaming walls of the world (I, 62–79). Lucretius here deepens the debt owed to the man from Greece by saying that he walks in the path first trod by him out of love and desire to follow him. Lucretius assures Memmius that he is not possessed of a desire to compete with the (still nameless) man from Greece as he is a swan and Lucretius but a swallow.<sup>1</sup> That Lucretius claims here, and only here, that he is merely following the man from Greece may be reason to see Book III as the most Epicurean book within the poem. It is also the only book where Epicurus is mentioned by name (III, 1042). The man from Greece has given Lucretius the clearest window onto the nature of things and, echoing the proem to Book I, has chased away the minds' terrors, allowing Lucretius to see through the void beyond the walls of the world. In the proem to Book I, having traversed the void, the man from Greece is triumphant in casting down religion (I, 78–79). There is no corresponding triumphalism in the opening of Book III. Instead Lucretius claims that by seeing through the void, the peaceful abodes of the gods are revealed

to him where nothing impairs their peace of mind. It is equally clear by looking down through the void that there is no Acheron. This panorama fills Lucretius with both divine delight and "horror" (III, 29 *horror*).

Lucretius had earlier ascribed this sensation of horror or awe, a mixture of wonder and fear, to the reaction elicited by the procession of the Magna Mater (II, 609); later, he gives it as the reason for the erection of temples to the gods (V, 1165).<sup>2</sup> Such horror is also induced by the fear of thunder and lightning, (V, 1220) together with other fearful natural phenomena that lead men to ascribe wonderful power to the gods. In the proem to Book I, it is the horrifying aspect of the heavens that crushed man beneath religious superstition and that which the man from Greece was first to raise his eyes against (I, 62–67). That Lucretius should describe his own reaction to seeing through the void in such terms colors the man from Greece's conquest of religion or at least the fear that seems to give rise to religion. What then is the "horror" that Lucretius experiences? Certainly it is not the same as the horror that led men to erect temples to the gods or that fear of gods which maintains order in the city, as is implied in the procession of the Magna Mater. As has been suggested, and will be taken up in the concluding chapter, the belief in intervening gods and erection of temples in their honor is born of the fear that we live in an unwallled universe. While Lucretius may experience divine delight that there is no Hell, he sees most clearly in traversing the boundless void that man lives in an unwallled universe, unsupported by gods. The horror induced by seeing through the eternal and infinite void is the pain attendant on the necessary detachment to life that one must undergo to be resigned to man's mortal condition. If there is divine pleasure in the realization that Acheron exists solely in the minds of men, this pleasure is not unalloyed. The pleasure of philosophy is a rather austere pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

Lucretius's reaction suggests that liberation from the fear of Acheron is not by any means the end of man's troubles. Fear so "suffuses all with the blackness of death" that even those who claim to know that the soul is a material composite, and therefore by extension a mortal thing, when banished from the sight of men, devote themselves zealously to religious oblations. It is in times of trouble and tribulation that one can see into the bottom of men's hearts. That such conditions lead men back to religion must mean that religion is not merely as source of fear but also of consolation. Others due to avarice, or ambition to climb to the pinnacle of political power, are led to a host of crimes fed in no small part by fear of death (III, 31–86). The "blind lust for distinction" that drives such men appears to be a remedy to the uncertainty of life, and a flight from death. The life of man troubled by fear of Acheron reveals that what man desires is that his life have particular significance. Such significance, as we began

to learn in the account of the infinite, is ultimately not to be had. The lust for distinction, the longing for personal significance, is a rebellion against the truth of the eternal and infinite.

Lucretius concludes the poem by repeating the lines that conclude the poem to Book II that compare those troubled by the terrors and darkness of the mind to children who fear the dark. Such terrors can only be lifted by the reason and aspect of nature. In both poems Lucretius sharply criticizes the foibles, false pomp, empty glory, and crimes of political ambition. The foolishness of such a life of seeking after preeminence can be appreciated only in light of the conclusion to each of the books. In the case of Book II, such ambition is laid low by the realization that man's world is one of many in the infinite whole and must eventually suffer destruction. In the book at hand, such ambition is laid low by the brute fact of man's mortality. The insignificance of our world in the cosmic whole is magnified by personal insignificance. The poem emphasizes the need to liberate men from fear of Hell, yet it is far from clear that such liberation is able to respond to the fear men have of their eventual destruction. Certainly man's life would be rendered more tranquil by being disabused of the belief in Acheron, but that in itself would not simply cure them. The question most in need of consideration is: Can an account of death as the material dissolution of our bodies and souls provide an effective consolation to what it is that men most fear?

## **II. The Constitution and Nature of the Mind and Soul (III, 94–416)**

Lucretius begins his efforts to confront man's fear of death by way of a material account of the mind and soul. The nature and composition of the mind and soul are such that they could not persist without the body. Lucretius argues that the mind and soul are joined together and make one nature (III, 136–160). This unity is, however, rather complicated as revealed by Lucretius's discussion of the mind. The deliberative part, which we call mind and intellect, dominates the body and is situated in the center of the breast. The mind, Lucretius continues, knows its own pleasures and is moved even when the soul and body have not been stimulated (III, 145–146). It is within the mind and intellect that we feel terror and joy. The mind sometimes feels pain and joy when the soul has felt nothing, but when the intellect is deeply stirred by terror, throughout the body we see the soul affected. That the soul is affected can be seen through the observable functioning of the limbs, be it sweating, the stumbling of the tongue, or the giving way of the knees. In this formulation we find an association of body and soul that binds them together. Their

unity is such that the soul is spread throughout the limbs and obeys the commands of the intellect, moving according to its will (III, 143–144). That the mind can affect the soul in various ways—Lucretius argues—must mean that the mind and soul are physical things, for nothing can touch or be touched other than matter (III, 161–167). We see that the mind suffers with the body as when the body is pierced; bones and sinews are shattered and torn by violent blows. Therefore we must conclude that the mind is a physical thing (III, 175–176). That the mind suffers with the body would seem to lower the independence it once appeared to have. The mind at least cannot be said to rule the body in monarchical or tyrannical fashion. That the body has such influence over the mind will become important insofar as the freedom of the mind is important for understanding the challenges men face in living the philosophic life. This will become increasingly apparent as Lucretius takes up the material constitution of the mind and soul.

That the mind acts swiftly and can be moved by the slightest impulse means that it is composed of the tiniest and most mobile particles. Being made of such tiny particles, the mind must occupy an exceedingly small place. The mind is so small that upon our death one cannot discern any bodily difference in appearance or weight. That the mind and soul are entirely composed of the roundest and smoothest particles means that they are exceedingly tenuous substances. Moreover, that they are composed exclusively of such round and smooth particles ought to make one wonder how exactly they are held together. The initial discussion of the composition of the mind and soul seems to emphasize their fragility. That the mind and soul are so fragile must demand that they are very much dependent upon the body to keep them together. In addition to the fragility of the unity of mind and soul, the elements that go into making the mind and soul also seem particularly ephemeral. In a discussion meant to liberate us from fear, it is remarkable how frequently Lucretius reminds us how fragile the mind and soul are.

He continues by stating that we should not conclude that the mind and soul have a single nature, but are constituted by three elements: breathe, heat, and air (III, 231–257). These three alone, however, cannot account for sensation and thought so there must be a fourth, which has no name (III, 242). This nameless element is the initiator of sense bearing movement by which heat, the invisible power of wind, and air, receive their motions. As there is some difficulty in accounting precisely for the atomic arrangements that give men such varied dispositions, Lucretius offers an apology given the poverty of his native tongue (III, 260). A similar apology had been offered prior to the account of the general principles of atomism in Book I (I, 136–139). There the difficulty was apparently the

novelty of the concepts and that they could not be properly translated from the Greek source. Here the problem is not simply the limitation of his native tongue but also the hiddenness of the causes (III, 316). Despite this difficulty, he will touch upon the main points in a summary fashion. There are two difficulties here. First, the most essential element in the soul is entirely without name. Second, Lucretius first spoke of breathe but subsequently speaks of wind. While wind and breathe are perhaps close to one another, they cannot be said to be identical. The importance that the account of the composition of the mind and soul plays in liberating men from fear of death would make such lack of clarity surprising. The obscurity of wind may account for its repeated characterization as secret in nature (III, 247, 269). Both the cause that gives each man his disposition and the nature of wind are said to therefore be secret. The decided lack of clarity in the composition of the mind and soul creates difficulties when Lucretius turns to show how these elements are mixed, arranged, and function (III, 258–322). The elements, he claims, move back and forth amongst themselves in such a way that neither can they be separated from each other nor can individual powers be separated. Knowledge of that which regulates the predominance of any one of the elements would appear essential but also has a secret or blind nature. That which gives to each individual his disposition, and regulates that disposition in particular circumstances, would appear to best characterize one's overall nature, insofar as in anger, fear, or calmness the individual remains the same. Such knowledge is important because it would shed some light on the prospects of educating each individual.

Lucretius says that the combination of the three elements of heat, air, and wind is such that the one with the greater predominance determines the individual's disposition (III, 288–320). It is important to note that Lucretius does not speak exclusively, or even predominantly, of the human soul;<sup>4</sup> all of the examples initially given are of other animals.<sup>5</sup> Lucretius's presentation of soul is silent as to any differences between the human soul and that possessed by the animals (III, 258–322). When heat is the most prevalent in the mind, as it is with the lion, the individual is given to wrath. Those who are more disposed to fear, have within their souls a cold wind like deer. Those predisposed to tranquility have an abundance of air like cattle. That which regulates the predominance of one of the three elements would appear to be the fourth nameless element.<sup>6</sup> While Lucretius states that some men too readily fly into anger, others are too quickly troubled by fear, and others are calmer than is necessary,<sup>7</sup> he is unable to find the secret or blind cause of that which gives to each man his disposition (III, 316). As the placid nature of cattle and the savage nature of lions are based upon the dominance of a particular

element in the souls of each of the species, one imagines that individual men are defined by the predominance of a particular element. Lucretius draws from the composition of each the connection that “although training may bring some to an equal outside polish, yet it leaves there those original traces of the character of each mind” (III, 307–308). The faults of men, he adds, cannot be torn up by the roots; consequently, there will always be some who run too readily to anger, others who are attacked too easily by fear, and others still more meek when insulted than is right. Despite that fact, and the difficulties with the partially secret or hidden nature of the composition of the soul, Lucretius claims that the differences in human character are so trivial that nothing is beyond the power of reason to remedy. This being so, “nothing hinders our living a life worthy of the gods” (III, 322).<sup>8</sup> This is a bold statement when viewed in light of the ambiguity and obscurity in the account.<sup>9</sup> One may be forgiven for asking if such an assertion is substantiated by the account of the material composition of mind and soul.

By again using animals as examples to argue about the nature of the human soul, it appears somewhat odd to say that reason is such that it can deal with the defective disposition of most men, if not all men, such that we can live a life worthy of the gods. The timidity of deer or ferocity of lions is more than a disposition; it is their nature. One does not find fierce deer or placid lions. The composition of their minds and souls is not subject to the kind of reformation by way of education that Lucretius appears here to stipulate is possible in men. The association of man and animal casts a shadow over the idea that education can lead us all to a life worthy of the gods. As with the account of the swerve and its use of animals as the primary examples, one suspects that what we find here is an embellishment.

What are we to make of this assertion, given what we have learnt up to now about the nature of the soul and the life of the gods? That such an assertion comes before Lucretius’s most explicit discussion of the proofs for the mortality of the soul increases its curiosity. That Lucretius had spoken of his own horror at the sight of the whole makes it all the more incredible. The most obvious meaning of the assertion is that nothing stands in our way of living a life of perfect peace and tranquility. From the little we have learnt until now about the nature of the gods, it would appear that they enjoy such perfect peace and tranquility as a consequence of needing nothing, as they are mighty by their own resources far removed from human affairs. Such a state can hardly be said to accord with the life of man or Lucretius’s own discussion of the affairs that currently occupy Memmius (I, 41–43). To live a life worthy of the gods may bring to mind the life lived in the well-walled temples of the wise. The

difficulty was noted in our discussion of the proem to Book I was that it is not clear that one can live simply removed from the affairs of man. The assertion made in the context of the attempt to overcome man's fear of death may mean that our living a life worthy of the gods is to live as though one were immortal. The tranquility enjoyed by the gods is surely partially a consequence of their immortality; such a possibility is not, however, available to man. In fact, the discussion until now means to prove that man's desire for immortality is what keeps him from living well. Living a life worthy of the gods must therefore mean having come to terms with death. Perhaps having resigned oneself to the fundamental fact of the human condition may in fact allow us to live as though we were immortal.<sup>10</sup> We have not, however, been informed what would be required to achieve such resignation. Aside from these difficulties, the question must also be raised whether such a life can be lived by all men. When Lucretius says that nothing stands in "our" way of living a life worthy of the gods, does that mean all men? We have seen repeatedly, and will be reminded in the proem to Book IV, that the majority of men shrink back from the truth about the nature of things. That the city and its priestly authorities, we recall, regard such a life as the beginning of impiety and crime suggests that the universalization of a life worthy of the gods seems unlikely to say the least.<sup>11</sup> The suggestion that all are capable of such a life may then be poetic sweetening.

This suggestion is rendered more likely by the discussion that completes the rest of the section on the composition of the soul. The nature of our dissolution and the violent imagery that pervades the rest of the account makes it all the more difficult for Lucretius to present death as carefree (III, 211). From the very beginning of the discussion, Lucretius states that the body is the soul's protector and that the soul is the guardian of the body and the source of its existence; they therefore cannot be "torn apart" without both being damaged (III, 323–326). Their being "torn apart" is a violent image in an account meant to free man of his concern for death. This violence will only intensify as the discussion proceeds. The point all along has been that the mind (III, 333), soul, and body are born together and are so intertwined from birth that their survival is dependent upon each other. The separation of body from soul or soul from body is death to both. Lucretius's choice of words in the passage is particularly graphic and unsettling in comparison to what has gone before. He remarks that the severance of flesh from soul leads to "convulsions" and the "rotting" of the body (III, 343). A few lines later Lucretius states that, from their very first moment in the mother's womb, the body and soul are born and grow together and therefore their severance would lead to "disease and ruin" (III, 347). As Book III progresses, it becomes

increasingly clear that it is impossible to give a completely reassuring or sweetened account of death. What the account cannot but reveal about death and decay is precisely what makes death frightful (III, 870–878). Lucretius therefore no longer speaks of death as carefree (III, 211) and is now forced to speak of “the chill of death” (III, 401).

Lucretius graphically explains how the strength of the mind is such that man can live on despite the complete loss of all extremities; the man whose every limb has been severed leaving him only a “mutilated trunk” can remain in life so long as the mind is not severed (III, 407). Lucretius then likens the mind to the pupil of the eye, the soul being that part of the eye that surrounds it. One could conceivably cut all the body of the eye out leaving only the pupil and sight would still remain (III, 408–415). Two more bloody and horrible pictures Lucretius could not have painted to demonstrate the dominance of the mind over the body and soul. It is not unlikely that, despite the best effort to reassure the reader that he should not dwell upon the concerns of bodily death and should think of his life as centered around the mind, the prospect of gruesome and horrific bodily injury and suffering will always remain. As James Nichols points out, Lucretius, unlike Epicurus, never offers a consolation for the “possibly very great pain of dying,” presumably because no such consolation is possible, at least not for everyone.<sup>12</sup>

### III. Proof of the Mortality of Mind and Soul (III, 417–829)

After offering such graphic depictions of the relation between body and soul, Lucretius provides evidence that the mind and soul are born and therefore must die. That the mind and soul are composites has already been well established, as has the fact that all composite things are subject to dissolution. If the reader has been convinced of the scientific account of the preceding two books, then the mortality of the mind and soul should be obvious. That Lucretius proceeds to offer 29 arguments for the mind and soul’s mortality then appears puzzling. One possible explanation is that Lucretius is aware of the obstinacy of the fear of death and he therefore feels it necessary to make the case in such a relentless fashion.<sup>13</sup> It could also be that each kind of soul needs a separate argument and so Lucretius tries to provide for them.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on the importance of accepting the mortality of the soul and the number of proofs he offers brings to mind Lucretius’s earlier insistence of the importance of the doctrine of the void. In that instance, Lucretius first emphasized its importance and then left the discovery of the rest of the evidence for Memmius to root out with canine tenacity. That he does not follow that earlier method and leave it to Memmius’s energy to discover the rest may



suggest that getting Memmius to accept the doctrine of the void pales in significance to accepting the mortality of the soul. It may also be that even those who might through great effort come to accept the teaching of the void are not then easily reconciled to the extension of that doctrine to the soul. That such is the case was suggested in the proem, where those who claim to understand that the soul is a material composite are in times of trouble led back to the fear of gods and Acheron.

Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, the fact that Lucretius offers so many proofs suggests that something is needed in addition to the material account of the mortality of the soul. That Lucretius offers 29 proofs suggests that the thanatology too is likely insufficient. What we in fact see is that while the thanatology goes to the very essence of what death is, it also reveals precisely what men fear about death. Its conclusions regarding the nature of death reveal in turn the limitation of the materialist physics when turned toward the human things. This is not to say that what is revealed is inaccurate or false, but that the material account of the soul may not provide a consolation for what it is that man most fears about death. As was brought out in consideration of the proem, men are less concerned with the actual process of dying than with their personal extinction.

The tone of the discussion is set by Lucretius's first proof (III, 425–444). He begins with the fragility of the mind and soul by likening them to smoke. He suggests that the mind and soul may be more delicate than smoke as they can be easily moved by smoke.<sup>15</sup> We see from the outset Lucretius emphasizing the delicacy of the soul and reminding the reader that such a delicate thing can be protected only by the body (III, 440–444). The emphasis on the body becomes stronger as the section progresses, and the violence of the descriptions of bodily suffering builds as Lucretius proceeds. It is hard to imagine the anxiety that men have over death being allayed by such proofs. That such anxiety is warranted also appears to be given a greater evidentiary basis as the sections progress.

Certainly once the soul has departed from the body, it cannot remain intact in the air. That the soul is so reliant upon the body raises this question: How porous is the body and how rigid and sturdy as a container is it? Such sturdiness was emphasized earlier (III, 403–405). It is, however, brought into question in the next proof. As is obvious to all, over time the body weakens and its powers fade. Recalling the end of the world as prefigured in the conclusion to Book II, Lucretius says external blows in time damage the body until the whole complex collapses (III, 451–454 compare to II, 1139–1145).<sup>16</sup> This would also suggest that the body is constantly being assaulted by the nature of things. Not only does the

body decay with time, but it also suffers from disease and harsh pain (III, 459–461). As the mind also knows its own pains and disease, it must share in death as well. Grief, fear, and suffering are given to the mind by its composition and union with the body. This can be seen by the fact that when the body is ill, the mind often becomes deranged; its derangement is proof that it can be touched by pain and illness, the “builders of death” (III, 472). That our minds are afflicted when our bodies suffer is graphically portrayed in the progression from foaming at the mouth, groaning, writhing in pain, followed by babbling, madness, and raving, as the force of the illness pulls the mind and soul apart within the body (III, 487–501). The soul, Lucretius graphically recounts, is penetrated by the illness, torn to shreds, and slowly leaks out piece by piece (III, 526–539).

The close union of mind, body, and soul therefore indicates that the afflictions of the body are likely to afflict the soul. The tenuousness of the soul and the questionable sturdiness of the body thus present death as not only certain but everpresent (II, 577–578). Later, Lucretius will speak of severed hands and ears that in time soften and rot (III, 551–553), eyes “torn out by their roots” (III, 563), souls “wrenched” from bodies, faces that turn ashen, bloodless, and pale at the moment of death (III, 595–596). Nothing, however, matches the violence of the final proof in the first series, and the central proof of the 29 offered. In the fifteenth argument for the mortality of the mind and soul, Lucretius explains that because the mind occupies the center of the body, a lightning fast blow that severs the body in half would certainly sever the mind as well. That the mind can be so severed must mean it is a mortal thing (III, 634–639). Such a severance would cut through the soul of the soul and bring an end to sensation, such an absence being the brute fact and essence of death. If this were not gruesome enough, Lucretius continues as if we have yet to be convinced and relates the spectacle of scythe-bearing chariots hot with spattered blood (III, 640–656). Although it is certain that few will ever suffer a death as horrific as those depicted in the passage, Lucretius has in the first part of the section, through the graphic depiction of bodily suffering, brought home the fundamental truth about death. Death is to be understood first and foremost as the absence of sensation as the result of the often violent and painful divorce of the body and the soul. By not attempting to hide the terribleness of death, by not sweetening the account, Lucretius reveals additionally that man’s revulsion at death cannot be reasonably held against him.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Lucretius claims that our fear of death proves that our souls are mortal, for no immortal thing would fear death (III, 597–614). We see in the final moments of life, after some cause has weakened our bodies, that the soul seeks release from the body. As each of our senses fail, we feel our soul fail and when finally

our minds are dying, their final complaints betray their mortality. Fear of death is thus perfectly natural to man.

Lucretius's conclusion upon completing these arguments is: "Therefore death is nothing to us, it matters not one jot, since the nature of the mind is understood to be mortal" (III, 830–831). Yet the naturalness of the fear of death that the 29 proofs point to is in conflict with the assertion that death is nothing to us.<sup>18</sup> Our fear of death is natural since it is a perfectly reasonable reaction to the softness of our bodies and the great indifference we perceive in nature when it comes to our concerns and needs. From a commonsense perspective, Lucretius's final statement is unsupported given what we have learnt from the proofs for mortality of the soul. From the point of view of the physiological destruction of our souls, it is true we have nothing to lament. If fear of Hell and what may become of us after death is our primary concern then it may make perfectly good sense to say that death is nothing to us given the evidence. But as Lucretius helps us see, it is not exactly clear that the fear Lucretius most needs to combat is fear of Hell but fear for our eventual extinction. Given what the 29 proofs have revealed about the nature of death, it can hardly be said that death is therefore nothing to us. The statement itself reads as a kind of concluding thought. If what we have been provided with is sufficient to see that death is nothing to us, and that the material account is itself a sufficient consolation one might expect that the account would here end. Lucretius however continues. The last section of Book III further reveals not only that fear of death is perfectly natural but that it is also far more stubborn than Lucretius initially suggested.

#### IV. The Turn to Speeches (III, 830–1094)

While the materialist account may be able to explain death in terms of a dissolution of bodies and souls, it would appear incapable of calming and doing away with the fear that most plagues man. In the third and final part of Book III, Lucretius no longer speaks of the process of dying but what it means to be dead; he confronts men's fears of what happens after death and more importantly their lamentations over their extinction. Instead of approaching the difficulty by way of materialist principles, Lucretius now relates what men say about death. The last part of Book III turns toward speeches about death—the speeches of those who lament death, the meaning of the speeches, and what should be said to them in reply. By Lucretius's own accounting therefore, the materialist approach appears to be insufficient.

Turning to what men say is recognition of the limitations to the materialist approach with which Lucretius had begun his attempted consolation.

The recognition of the limits leads to a looking inwards—a looking more closely at man. This is not to say that the natural science is abandoned, but that it is in need of a supplement. Natural science may be able to speak about the soul but not to the soul. Natural science needs an understanding of the character of those with whom it must live that it is incapable of supplying by its own methods. Lucretius, in the last part of Book III (together with the account of love that concludes Book IV), attempts to show why the majority of men draw back from his teaching. The approach that listens to man's fears about death and his attachment to the world as expressed in erotic longing, tries to understand why the majority of men are easily attracted to the alternative account of the nature of things articulated by poets and priests.

Lucretius begins the third and last part of Book III by stating that just as we do not feel the pain of the past, so when we are gone and body and soul have been divorced, nothing can happen to us (III, 832–841).<sup>19</sup> Even if at some future time all our matter should be put back together again as it is, this would not matter one bit as we would not remember our previous life. Looking back at the immense time gone by, and the various motions of matter, Memmius must believe that the same matter which we are will come to be again. Just as we do not now concern ourselves with who we were before, so no pain afflicts us from our former lives, because we cannot remember that former life (III, 847–862). It is a genuine possibility given the nature of things that this compound we are has been and will be again. In the process of dissolution and reformation our memories are, however, severed. We should not then fear death as we will not remember what has past. The difficulty here and in what comes next appears to be that the majority of men do not, and perhaps cannot, identify themselves as simple composites of matter and void.

Lucretius states that when you see a man resenting the fact that upon his death, his body will be interred, his flesh will rot, and that he will be consumed in fire, or that he will be devoured by wild beasts, you should know that his fears are unfounded (III, 870–893). Though the man says that he does not believe in sentience after death, he does not adequately believe his own theory or its premises. This is the second time we see a man who accepts the material account of the soul but remains with, or returns to, fear of death. The man knows that the truth about death is the absence of sentience but is plagued by a “blind pang in his heart,” and therefore, “does [not] wholly uproot and eject himself from life, but unknown to himself he makes something of himself survive” (III, 877–879). When a man imagines how “birds and beasts will mangle his body after death” (III, 880) he takes pity upon himself, but in fact, “he does not separate himself sufficiently from the body there cast out,

he imagines himself to be that, and standing beside it, infects it with his own feeling" (III, 881–883). Lucretius concludes that such a man is angry at having been born to die and does not realize that in "real death," there will be no other self standing by "to bewail his perished self, or to stand by to feel pain that he lay there lacerated or burning" (III, 884–887). There we see the root of the fear and lamentations of being born to die. We are also told, apparently in consolation, that it is no more cruel to be devoured by beasts after death than it is to "shrivel in the hot flames" upon the pyre, or suffocated with honey, or crushed beneath a load of earth in burial (III, 888–893). Three times in this relatively short passage Lucretius makes mention of man's concern with being devoured by wild beasts. The notion of being devoured by animals will occur again at III (992) in the account of Tityos, who symbolizes the life driven by the passions and most particularly love. Later in Book V, we see that man in his original forest dwelling condition is said not to fear what becomes of him after death but fears being eaten while he sleeps. Man may therefore more naturally fear his extinction than Hell.

Lucretius's attempt to confront the suspicion or hope that we are something more than our mere physical presence is curious. In the first formulation, the man who claims not to believe in sentience after death continues to fear death, due in part to a "blind" pang in his heart. This blind pang leads him to doubt what he intuits, that death is the absence of sensation. In his hidden distrust, he "does not separate himself from the body there cast out." Now, one could ask what, or who, is this "himself" that Lucretius is here referring to? Is this "himself" something other than the body that lies dead? In the second formulation, the man is said to fear the pain of the body after death because he does not "separate himself from the body, nor does he sufficiently remove himself from the outcast body" (III, 881–882). Here the man needs to see himself as something other than mere body to come to terms with his fear. The man is fearful because he is said to "imagine himself to be that [the body]" and "infects it with his own feeling." What is required is that the man imagine the impossibility of such imagining in death. This could be interpreted as saying that the body is not simply the man and that to come to terms with his fear, he must come to realize this fact. Coming to terms with the fear of bodily harm after death demands that we not conceive of ourselves as merely our bodies. The body presents great difficulties in thinking clearly about death, insofar as the man intuits what death is, but as the passage as a whole reveals, concern for bodily suffering keeps him from accepting this truth (III, 875–876). Coming to an acceptance of the truth about the nature of things demands a proper account of the nature of mind and soul (I, 131); the body, however, presents serious difficulties for accepting the true account.<sup>20</sup>

Lucretius next presents two speeches given by men lamenting death and the harsh rebukes that such men ought to be given in response to their lamentations (III, 894–930). The first speech is of a man mourning that he will be deprived of all of life's pleasures in death (III, 894–911). One ought to reply to such lamentations that one will no longer pine for such pleasures in death. Lucretius states that if the man could utter such a reply to himself then he would free himself from much fear and anguish. It is those who survive the man who suffer, for "no day will take this eternal sorrow from our hearts" (III, 908). We should then ask the man what is so harsh and cruel about death to make him "pine in everlasting sorrow" (III, 911). That our sorrow for the dead man, and the man's lamentation over his death are characterized as "everlasting," reveals something about the prospects of fulfilling what was apparently deemed necessary in the preceding section. That grief for the dead, and the lamentations about death, are so characterized, renders it doubtful if all can ever reach a point where death would be "nothing to us", even through our contemplation about death.

In the second speech, a man at a feast delivers one of many toasts lamenting how short this life is; "Short enjoyment is given to poor mankind; soon it will be gone, and none will ever be able to recall it" (III, 914–915). Lucretius's mocking reply is "as if after death their chief trouble will be miserably consumed and parched by a burning thirst" (III, 916–917). No one, he continues, misses himself, or his life, when his understanding and body are asleep. The sleep from which no one awakens Lucretius calls the "cold stoppage of life," a stark contrast to the burning thirst that men apparently fear. Again we see a case where man is aware of the eternity of death, for he states that death places such pleasures forever beyond recall. That being so, the response does not fit the lamentation. It is in the process of great bodily satisfaction and pleasure that the speech is made. It is this indulgence of bodily pleasures that keeps men from acceptance of the truth about death and gives rise to such lamentations. Although it may be the case that a proper understanding of what death is would render such fleeting bodily pleasures less attractive, it does not remove what it is that the man most laments: he does not give voice to fear of eternal thirst, but of never enjoying the pleasures of drink again. Once one accepts the truth about death, one might be free from the pursuit of such ephemeral goods and no longer be inclined to seek after such goods as a means of assuaging what one knows cannot be assuaged. The ephemeral pleasures keep men from accepting death, and only an acceptance of death can free them from the pursuit of the ephemeral.

Nature herself is then made to speak to the man (III, 931–977). Nature does not attempt by materialist principles to convince man of his error,

but berates man for his wayward passions. We see here the continuance of the association of man's fear of death and indulgence of the flesh in eating and drinking. Addressing the man as "thou mortal" and "thou fool," she asks, if his life has been pleasant, why not take carefree rest and leave "life's table" as a "banqueter" who has been filled? However, if life has been one of few joys, why lament its passing? Would not a man who has led a joyless life rather kill himself than add more toil and pain through its prolongation? Nature's final rebuke is that there is nothing she could find or invent to please men—everything, she says, is always the same even if he were to live for all eternity (III, 944–949). Again it appears that the fear men have is not of eternal torment but of eternal nothingness and personal extinction.

Lucretius asks: How should one answer Nature's "charges"? He says we ought to answer that her charge against us is "just" (III, 951) and her case is true. Nature speaks to the man who has had all that life could offer, who despite this, always wanted what he did not have and scorned what he possessed (III, 957). Such a man is charged with being a "criminal." As his life has slipped through his hands and he is now amazed that death stands so near, he cries that he might have to depart before being satisfied and filled with good things. Nature demands that he stop his tears and, with a calm mind, yield to his years (III, 955–963). Her charge is again said to be "just," as one thing must give way to another. Before our birth, some men had to die so that we could live (see also I, 263–263 & II, 71–79). No man possesses life as a freehold; all are but tenants. It is a kind of greediness for life that keeps the man from accepting death. That we are by nature given to fear death and that Nature herself, or the nature of nature, appears at least partly responsible for the limitless nature of desire makes the justice of Nature's rebukes ring a bit hollow. Nature had, in her first speech, told the man not to cry more than is right; therefore some tears appear to be justified and so too does man's attachment to life.

Lucretius has frequently characterized death as liberation from desires. Nature herself confronts man's limitless desire with the fact that no new pleasures are available. Happiness in this life is dependent upon controlling one's appetites. The frugal life is, however, regarded by the majority of men as a life "close to death," one that is said to "loiter at the gates of death" (III, 59–70).<sup>21</sup> Lucretius does not object to this view, as the task in this life is to live in such a fashion as to be as independent of the body as possible. Life is practice for being dead and the philosophic life an attempt to simulate death. Death is approximated by philosophy in that the more the mind is concentrated, the more reason is liberated from the distractions, hopes, and cares of the body. It is not then that "death is nothing to us" but that we must learn what death is and must learn how to die.<sup>22</sup> It

is primarily in this sense that one must understand the first two books as a preparation for the question of death. The investigation into the more general question of generation and destruction is therefore a necessary beginning and is part of a study of the question of death.<sup>23</sup>

In the finale to Book III, Lucretius says that if men could know what effect their fear of death has upon their lives, and understood it as the source of their great dissatisfaction, they would stop and begin to investigate the nature of things (III, 1053–1075). Our mortality is the greatest impetus for our looking into the nature of things because it opens us to the whole. Through the study of the nature of things we seek, and hopefully find, the eternal necessities and the limits of the human condition. Lucretius says, however, that the majority of men run from themselves (III, 1068). Men are so frightened of death that they are incapable of seeing the problem.<sup>24</sup> Those most frightened of death are also those most attached to the body. In the final formulation of Book III, we see that the investigation into death is a process of investigation of the self, at the center of which is the tension between an “endless thirst for life” and the truth of our “eternal death” (III, 1073–1075 & 1084). What we see here is that the common reaction to being confronted with the nature of the eternal is flight.

In listening to what men say about their fear of death, we see more clearly the intransigence of that fear. The turn to speeches is a recognition of and response to the limitations of the material account’s ability by itself to overcome that intransigence. This intransigence requires that the philosopher understand the nature of those with whom he lives. A proper defense of the philosophic life would then require something more than the materialist physics to persuade the majority of men. The greatest difficulty presented to our reconciliation to man’s mortal condition is here expressed as a “lust for life,” and never-ending craving for that which we do not possess, an eternal “thirst for life,” seemingly no less eternal than death itself, that leaves men’s mouths “forever agape.” This endless lust and thirst for life, an endless attachment to life, is most properly related to eros. Knowledge of such craving is knowledge of erotics. It is, as Lucretius will inform us, inextricably linked with poetry. It is thus fitting that the next book begins with Lucretius repeating his rationale for having written in verse rather than prose and concludes with an account of love.

## V. Proem to Book IV Lucretius Asserts His Independence

Of the six books that constitute *On the Nature of Things*, only two do not contain a paean to “the man from Greece.” In Book II, without making



mention of the man from Greece, but perhaps intimating his discoveries, Lucretius remarks that it is sweet to live within the well-walled temples of the wise. Now for the second, and last time, Lucretius will begin a book by drawing attention to himself and his originality. The proem must be read in light of the proem to Book III where Lucretius presents himself as a swallow to the man from Greece's swan. The proem to Book IV is a correction of that view. As mentioned in the introduction, this may give warrant to considering Book IV the most Lucretian book of *On the Nature of Things*. Lucretius begins Book IV by repeating the lines, with minor alteration, that served as the preface to the first account of the infinite (I, 921–950). They are now used to preface not a particular teaching but a whole book. Lucretius's claim to originality is to have written a philosophic work in verse, a feat he claims none has achieved before.<sup>25</sup> Having written a philosophic poem, he has traversed a pathless country where none has ever trod. This journey to the Pierides is needed given the darkness of the subject matter. Everything must be brightened by the Muses' grace and sweetened by verse as the majority of men shrink back from the truth about the nature of things, and are like children unwilling to take bitter medicine. Lucretius's poetry, like honey on the rim of doctor's cup, tricks the reader into taking what will cure him.

That the reader must be deceived suggests that he may not appreciate what is necessary to cure him. Alternatively, he may know what is needed but is unwilling to take it. Just as children may not know that it is the bitter wormwood that cures them and not the honey, one might wonder if Lucretius's patients will remain similarly ignorant. As children will not willingly take unsweetened wormwood, what exactly suggests that the reader will ever be prepared to take the truth without its being sweetened? There is after all no suggestion that the truth will ever be sweet. Lucretius will nevertheless "try" to administer his medicine, acknowledging the possibility that his attempt may in fact fail. Lucretius states that he sweetens his teaching through verses if by "chance" he can touch the reader's mind (IV, 23). What is the element of chance that Lucretius here refers to? Is it the chance that, because of the sweetness, the reader will pay adequate attention? Is it that the reader will, having tasted the sweetness of the verse, remain long enough to come to taste the bitter and not be repelled by it? In any case, the poetic sweetening is no guarantee that the reader will be cured. Certainly there are illnesses doctors are incapable of curing. Can all men be brought to a condition of soul that would allow them to taste the bitter truth unsweetened? The majority of men are like children who fear the dark, and the true account is also dark. It may well be that no amount of honey could lead them to a position of being able to digest the truth unsweetened. They are perhaps

in a condition of perpetual childishness, cannot be treated, and are thus incurably attached to the world as they understand it.

The doctor can by looking at the patient recognize him to be a child, and therefore knows that he must initially deceive him to make him well. The doctor, moreover, treats each patient individually, modifying his prescriptions accordingly. The poet, however, cannot readily see his patient. He must then be writing not only to the addressee but also to an audience of men whom he has never met. A poet, or any writer, cannot choose his readers. He must therefore speak to all who happen upon his pages. The poem therefore must address the philosophic, potentially philosophic, and the nonphilosophic alike. The proem to Book I revealed that the nonphilosophic are not simply indifferent to philosophy but in fact view it with suspicion if not with hostility. In speaking to the nonphilosophic, Lucretius must defend himself against their accusations (I, 80–82). If all men cannot be so liberated, one must wonder about poetry's role in providing a defense of the philosophic life against the accusations leveled against it. If poetry is the proper means of communicating with the nonphilosophic multitude, then any attempt to provide a defense would have to be done poetically. The question that will have to be addressed in the next chapter is whether Lucretius's reader is of such a kind that he can be eventually led to a position in which the poetic sweetening is no longer necessary. Suffice it to say for now, the current state of Memmius's soul is akin to the childlike, vulgar many who need a sweetened, and hence a somewhat falsified, teaching on the nature of things.

The context of the first employment of these verses was a preface to the doctrine of the infinite. As was seen in the previous chapter, the doctrine of the infinite void was a particularly bitter and difficult one. The bitterness is due to the fact that it leads to the necessary conclusion that our world is not unique, has no privileged place in the whole, and is therefore subject to the same process of generation, decay, and destruction as are all composite things. The repetition of Lucretius's explanation for his versifying immediately following the teaching on the mortality of the soul, and as a preliminary to the discussion of sensation, thought, dreams, and ultimately of love, sheds further light on what exactly it is that keeps the majority of men from being reconciled to their fundamental condition. The context of the repetition therefore reveals that the need for poetry stems from the fact that the majority of men are not easily reconciled to their fundamental condition. The metaphor that Lucretius uses to justify his versifying is indicative of a deep understanding of the nature of the human soul. It is the recognition of the fact that for the majority of men, the soul is moved not by love of truth but by both fear and love. Unlike his supposed master, Epicurus, Lucretius has no reservation about writing

in verse. According to Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus was of the opinion that “Only the wise man will be able to converse correctly about music and poetry, without however actually writing poems himself.”<sup>26</sup> That Epicurus did not regard such versifying as fitting for the philosopher may indicate that, when it comes to the human soul, the pupil is superior to the master.

The majority of men shrink from the truth about the nature of things because they wish the world to be otherwise, and so they flee from the question of the eternal. This desire leads them think that they see what in fact does not exist. Recalling the poem’s syllabus from Book I, to overcome the terrors of the mind we are most in need of an account of the nature of the mind and soul and an account of the images that we encounter when laboring under disease or asleep that we believe are the souls of the dead (I, 127–135). The account of the soul has been provided in Book III and the account of such images will be provided here in Book IV. That the account of sensation and thought culminates in an account of love suggests that the belief in such images and the delusions of the mind that lead to such beliefs, are more closely related to love than the fear of death. That is, they are a product of our attachment to life. The longing for personal significance and the flight from death that ends the account of death is one of the primary reasons that Lucretius must write in verse. The choice of verse is a concession to the persistence, and intransigence, of the lust for life. The longing for particular significance and its attendant lust for life, is here presented as that which most stands in the way of men coming to the truth about the nature of things.<sup>27</sup>

Lucretius presents the use of poetry as a concession to man’s erotic nature so as to keep the reader’s attention while he learns the truth about the nature of things. The poetry is meant to be an aid to his study such that without it, he would likely abandon, or shrink from, the teaching prior to having understood it.<sup>28</sup> The suggestion is therefore that the poetry is a temporary crutch. The presumption is that the reader may arrive, thanks to the poetry, at a place where he no longer has need for such poetic concessions. The poetry is a way of liberating the reader from the need of poetry. Poetry is therefore meant to be ministerial to philosophy. Poetry is not independent of philosophy, and for the genuinely philosophic, it would not be necessary. As Lucretius claims to be the first to have composed a genuinely philosophic poem, he must have arrived at the truth about the nature of things without such poetic aids. The philosopher only has need of poetry insofar as he needs or wants to communicate with the vulgar, the nonphilosophic (IV, 20). If Lucretius was addressing only the philosophic, he presumably could dispense with poetry. The philosopher may want to communicate with the nonphilosophic or prephilosophic

out of desire for friendship as is stated in the proem to Book I (I, 140–142). Alternatively, he may have to do so, given their hostility to philosophy cultivated by the poets and priests (I, 82). The ability of the poets and priests to convince Memmius of the impiety and crime associated with philosophy is tied to the belief in the images of the souls of the dead and the larger question of the immortality of the soul.

In Book IV Lucretius seeks to address, through an account of sensation and thought, why men believe they see the bodies of the dead emerge from Acheron (I, 127–135). In the account of our various senses, two related issues begin to emerge. First, in the account of the senses we return to a difficulty that first emerged in the previous chapter: the nature of freedom. The issue is the freedom of the mind and how much of our understanding of the nature of things, given to us by our senses, is filtered through, and potentially corrupted by, our cares and fears. The purpose of the account of sensation as told in the second syllabus from the proem to Book I and repeated here (IV, 26–44) is to confront the images of the dead we think we see when stricken by disease or asleep and to illuminate the relationship between our cares and our capacity to understand the world. Second, in the course of explaining how each of the senses operates Lucretius's primary purpose is to confront what appear to be errors of the senses, which lead to distrust in the senses. This distrust is the beginning of the belief that there is much more to the nature of things than the senses are able to capture. While the senses appear at times to misrepresent the nature of things, the problem is the hazy additives of the mind. The account of such haziness will culminate in an account of love.

## VI. Sensation, Thought, and Dreams

Beginning with vision, Lucretius says, that just as snakes shed their skin, so too all things emit likenesses, simulacra, of themselves. Why the snake should shed its skin and not all other things shed a thin image “no one could whisper a reason” (IV, 66), especially given the fact that on the outer surface of all things there are tiny bodies that can be cast off in the pattern of things themselves. These images are so delicate and thin that singly they cannot be perceived (IV, 54–89). It is only therefore the constant shedding of the simulacra that creates perception (IV, 104–109). The simulacra are shed from the things in all directions, just as the sun casts its light in all directions.

The simulacra of existing things are not the only ones that come to our sight. There are also simulacra that are created spontaneously in the air by the conjoining of the simulacra of two existing things. The rarity

of such happenings may explain why Lucretius here provides no examples.<sup>29</sup> The bigger concern appears to be the phenomenon of the simulacra of things being torn when colliding with solid objects and no longer accurately representing the thing from which they have been emitted (IV, 143–160). The rapidity with which the simulacra can be formed and corrupted is compared to the formation of clouds. Like clouds that block all light and leave one suddenly feeling as though “all the darkness of Acheron has escaped and filled the sky with the faces of black death,” the sudden corruption of simulacra can create a terrifying view of the nature of things. In this brief summary of the spontaneity of the creation of simulacra, Lucretius presents a world that we often see as frightening. Lucretius’s account of the simulacra attempts to explain the innocuous nature of the simulacra and how it is our minds that give such things as clouds their menacing quality. That the images have this menacing quality is a product of fear rather than an unbiased reception of the simulacra. The frightful aspect of the nature of things may therefore be largely a consequence of man’s overarching hopes, cares, and fears.

The example of the formation of clouds that resemble monsters raises the question of the speed of the simulacra as they travel through the air. We know from the atomic account of the first two books of the incredible velocity of the atoms; the example previously used, and employed here again, is the light of the sun (IV, 185). Light is moved forward by the succession of more light, one simulacrum pushing the other forward. The same process applies to all simulacra moving through space (IV, 183–194). The light of the sun, for instance, begins deep down within the body of the sun. It therefore must first find its way out of the sun, which can only slow its initial motion. Those simulacra that begin from the outer surface of things by contrast have nothing that initially impedes their motion. We must therefore admit that the simulacra move with incredible velocity (IV, 199–216). Throughout the section on the velocity of the images, Lucretius recalls the motion and velocity of the first things from Book II (II, 142–164). In the previous chapter, we argued that the velocity of the atoms largely explained the violence of the clashes between the first things that allowed for the creation of compounds. An incredible number of simulacra moving around at such great velocity raises the issue of possible distortions before they can arrive at our senses. The farther we are from an object, the greater the chances for the simulacra to be distorted by either the air or a collision with other simulacra. The chances of corruption attendant on distance must give us pause when considering the great fear that is inspired by celestial phenomena and the gods.

That there are many instances when the senses appear to err in perceiving certain objects is without question. Lucretius takes up 13 such

instances in an attempt to explain them, not as sensory errors, but as errors of interpretation attributable to the mind (IV, 353–461). Lucretius admonishes the reader, “Don’t fasten the mind’s mistake upon the eye,” since to do so would be to wrongly presume that the eye alone can comprehend the nature of things (IV, 385–386). Lucretius concludes that, “We see many other like things that make us wonder, all trying to shake our trust in sense perception; wrongly since most of the errors they have caused spring from the mind, that add their own conclusions, and make what sense has not perceived seem true. For nothing is harder than separating truth from the hasty, hazy additives of the mind” (IV, 462–468).

Reliance upon the senses is here characterized as a trust (IV, 463 *fidem*). To trust in something is not to hold it as infallible. Trust is in part a suspension of judgment. The extent of that trust is brought into question by the fact that *most* (*maxima*) of the errors spring from the mind (IV, 464). That most, not all, errors spring from the mind would obviously mean that some errors spring from the senses, or that the error originates in something other than the mind. That may be so but what is the alternative to trust in the senses? The first alternative Lucretius takes up is skepticism, which claims to know nothing. To claim that one knows nothing is, however, a claim to know something. To claim ignorance is at least to possess knowledge of one’s ignorance (IV, 469–472). If one grants that they know nothing from whence did one acquire the knowledge of what it is to know and not to know? How did one arrive at the understanding of truth and falsity? This knowledge could only have originated in the senses. If one should deny trust in the senses, one would have to find a thing more worthy of trust than the senses. Should reason be afforded that greater trust? Are we then going to say that reason has sprung from false sensation and refutes the senses from which it originated? Lucretius concludes that, unless sensation is true, all reason is false (IV, 485).

Reason appears here to be entirely dependent on sensation. Could right reason be the product of defective senses? If reason is dependent upon sensation, how could it refute the senses? Can ears convict the eyes, or touch the ears? Can taste refute touch or smell confound it? Each sense, Lucretius argues, has a separate and independent function. One cannot therefore prove the other wrong. If reason cannot provide an account as to why the tower appears round when it is square, it is better according to Lucretius, to “one who finds no reason explain the shape of either figure in faulty manner, rather than anywhere to let slip from your hands the holdfast of the obvious, and to break the credit from which all the foundations upon which life and existence rest” (IV, 502–506). This has been characterized as a “curious concession” to skepticism.<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps better to concede in the direction of ignorance and skepticism than to

embark on a path whereby one claims to know, more than one can in fact know based upon what the senses give to us of the world.

If one breaks the first of all trusts, one would destroy the foundation of all reason and life (IV, 486–521). What the destruction of all reason and life means Lucretius explains with an analogy to building. He states that the erection of a building must begin with a straight baseline. If this line is drawn askew, then the edifice as a whole will come out crooked and shaky. Lucretius had stated that we take our start from the fact that nothing can be created from nothing through divine intervention. This is the baseline of scientific inquiry. One can only sustain the presupposition if one first maintains one's trust in the senses. If that trust is abandoned, then the impossibility of creation out of nothing through divine intervention must be as well. The abandonment of the senses will lead one back presumably to fear of the gods and hence away from the philosophic life.

The difficulty of separating the hazy additives of the mind from the truth of our sense impressions is deepened in the account of the particular senses. Lucretius begins that account with hearing. Hearing is, like all other senses, reducible to touch and is generated by the impact of matter upon the ear. That speech and sound are matter is made obvious to us in the process of speaking. Sometimes shouting rasps the throat given that such loud voices are composed of particles that roughen the pathways of the throat (IV, 524–548). The material nature of voices is further supported by the phenomenon of the echo. The echo is explainable by the fact that the matter is being bounced from place to place. Men often take the echo to mean that Nymphs, Satyrs, or Pan live in the hills (IV, 549–594). The men in the hills are said to be led to this belief because they fear that they live in such isolation that even the gods have forsaken them (IV, 590–592). Those who live in such isolation remind one of the men who are led back to worship of the gods after having been banished from society (III, 48–53). Fearful of their isolation, they are easily “led by some other reason since all mankind are too greedy for ears to tickle” (IV, 592–594).<sup>31</sup> The hazy additives of the mind in this instance have their origin in fear, which gives rise to a desire that the senses reveal more, or something more pleasant, than they are capable of or is true of the nature of things. We see here perhaps why the concession to skepticism is better than its theological alternative.

The distortion of the truth is also apparent, but for different reasons, when Lucretius takes up taste next. Taste can be explained by the process of the first things within food pressing against the tongue. Those seeds that are smooth touch gently and are therefore pleasurable, those that are rough sting the tongue. The main difficulty here is explaining why one

species' food is another's poison (IV, 633–634). The material explanation is that, since all species are of varying composition, the pores of the tongue must then also vary between them, some having a greater distance between pores than others. What is sweet to some is bitter to others because the space between the pores is greater, thus allowing the particles of the food to pass through them more readily (IV, 633–662). The variation between species is then related to man when wracked by illness who cannot tolerate foods he finds pleasant when healthy. Disease so upsets the body that the position of the first things is disturbed. One's body may become so disturbed that honey may in fact take on a bitter taste. Perhaps it is a similar dislocation when we are overcome by disease that explains why men believe they see the dead. Certainly those things experienced when the body is distorted by sleep and disease are not a good indication of what can and cannot be. That the order of the first things in the body has some effect on how the things of the world are experienced and that we are fooled into thinking some things exist when in fact they do not raises a general question of whether all men are so configured as to experience the world as it exists in fact.

This problem of the accuracy of our natural endowment is brought out in the account of smell. Lucretius explains how each animal is led through its sense of smell to its appropriate food, bees to honey and buzzards to carrion. This sense of smell maintains them insofar as they are kept away from poison (IV, 673–686). Lucretius concludes the account of animals being drawn to their appropriate food by scent by arguing that it does not apply exclusively to the sense of smell. He then relates the odd story of the fright the mere sight of a cock inspires in a lion. There are within the cock's body seeds that, once they enter the lion's eyes, cause a pain so sharp that the lion cannot stand to look at it (IV, 706–721). This story is related not as some anecdotal peculiarity in the nature of the lion and the cock. Lucretius begins the story by suggesting that there are some things that have no impact upon some creatures' senses. Lucretius deduces two possibilities as to why we are not similarly affected by the cock. First, the seeds are never processed by the eye, and second the seeds go through the eye but do not create any pain. This suggests a lack in our sense of sight or an addition in the sense of the lion. In either case, there are things in nature that are not perceived similarly. The former suggests that there are seeds for which we have no corresponding sense to process, which would mean that we lack a sense that the lion possesses. There are then other senses that exist in the larger animal kingdom that we lack. This raises the question whether there are phenomena in the world of which we are fundamentally ignorant. Moreover, are there things that we are incapable of perceiving? Alternatively, are there things that we,



like the lion, perceive as painful but pose no true danger? Certainly the lion has nothing to fear from the cock nor do men need to fear the menacing shapes they see in the clouds.

This is a rather curious conclusion to the account of the particular senses. That there are simulacra that the lion experiences that we do not may be a fitting prelude to the primary difficulty in the account of thought and the “sight of the mind” so to speak. Our minds are capable of being moved by incredibly fine images. The simulacra that strike the mind are much finer than those that impact the eyes or ears (IV, 722–731). Lucretius states that the simulacra we see of Centaurs, Scyllas, and Cerberus, are often the product of the spontaneous formation through the meeting of different simulacra in the air. Such beasts have never lived, but the fine images of man and beast meet to form and strike the mind. These simulacra are too fine for the eyes to perceive but match the fineness and mobility of the mind, and hence are grasped by the mind alone. The mind then gives to the senses these simulacra and fools the mind into believing it has seen something it has not. Lucretius compares what the mind sees when we are awake to what it sees when we are asleep. In waking life, the senses can compare the truth of the senses to images that are given only to the mind. Here emerges the fundamental importance of the senses. When we are asleep, nature compels our senses to be quiet and our memories lie inactive, and therefore we cannot refute the false by the true. Hence, when asleep our senses are inactive and our memories dormant and we seem to see those who have left life and whose master is now death and dust (IV, 757–767). The power of the mind is in some odd sense greater while asleep than awake but, without the confirmation of the senses, it is led to believe that what it sees corresponds to what actually exists. A single image while we are awake may strike the mind and capture its attention; the multiplicity of such single images is what enables man to think of anything seemingly at will (IV, 779–787). The mind’s ability to focus on certain events to the exclusion of all else is necessary for concentrated attention. Without such ability, the massive amount of sensory data would likely overwhelm man. There is, however, another side of this ability of the mind to sharpen its focus. The mind is also subject to “hopes” that lead it to see some things to the exclusion of others, and focuses on those things it is intent on seeing (IV, 805). The mind’s selective “seeing” leads us into the error of “draw[ing] large deductions from small indications and [bringing] ourselves into deceit and delusion” (IV, 816–817). Lucretius does not specify what those hopes are, but one can easily imagine what they might be that lead the mind to the delusion of seeing the dead arise from Acheron.

The power of such hopes suggests that each of us has by nature a greater or lesser ability to discern the truth of the nature of things through the senses based upon the hopes that we entertain. Such hopes would also directly affect our supposed freedom. The already limited realm of freedom and willfulness that Lucretius had established in Book II appears to narrow considerably throughout Books III and IV. The limitation on our freedom of thought and mental disposition is brought out also in what comes next. Lucretius will explain the state of our minds and souls in sleep and what determines the character of our dreams. Sleep, we are told, comes upon us when the links between body and soul are weakened. Once these bonds are weakened part of our soul is forced outside the body, and part retreats into the deepest recesses of the body. Not all of the soul, Lucretius tells us, leaves the body, as that would spell our death.<sup>32</sup> Lucretius adds that that part of the soul that is spread throughout our limbs is scattered, thus losing its union. These scattered parts are unable to join together and execute movement. Next, the atoms of body and mind are assailed by atomic blows from outside and are thus disarranged (IV, 939–944). This recalls the dislocation that Lucretius spoke of when men sufferer from disease.<sup>33</sup> Although the mind is not altogether unaffected, it remains perfectly awake and able to attend the simulacra that strike it. This process of part of the soul being driven outside the body, and part receding into the body suspends sensation and is sleep. Lucretius claims that sleep is deepest when a much larger portion of the soul is cast outside than that which remains in the body, and the severance of the bonds of the parts of the soul in our limbs is greatest (IV, 959–961). Thus, the deepest sleep is most akin to death in the sense that the body loses a larger part of the soul and is so little able to affect the soul. One might rightly wonder what effect this dislocation from the body has upon the soul itself. This dislocation and the inability of reason to judge the simulacra that strike directly upon the soul accounts for why the images of the dead come to us most powerfully in dreams.

Lucretius suggests that our dreams are the product of what occupies our minds while we are awake.<sup>34</sup> Lucretius's examples, however, indicate that our dreams are more than the product of our waking concerns. Lucretius gives us 15 examples of dreams, which can be divided into 5 groups. The first group consists of five examples that appear to be straightforward instances of people dreaming about those interests that occupy them while they are awake; lawyers dream of the law, generals plan campaigns, and sailors battle the wind; Lucretius always works on his quest for the nature of things,<sup>35</sup> and those who watch spectacles at the circus dream of those spectacles (IV, 966–986). These examples fit nicely with the explanation of the cause of dreams. The next group of

three examples is more curious. Lucretius speaks of the dreams of horses, dogs, and birds (IV, 987–1010). One may say that the dreams of animals are determined by their “interests,” but their interests are in turn determined by their nature. They dream of those things that they are given to do by nature. In the third group’s two examples, Lucretius returns to the dreams of men (IV, 1011–1017). Great men dream of great deeds, and kings dream of victory and fear having their throats cut. One must ask why these two human examples are separated from the first 5 human examples by the 3 that deal with animal nature. That dreams are shared by men and animals indicates that there is nothing divine occurring in dreams, unless one would be so foolish as to think that the gods wish to communicate with animals. There is therefore no communication with the divine occurring in dreams.<sup>36</sup> Are the dreams, and therefore the interests, of these men determined in a fashion similar to the dreams of the animals? The example of the king appears to straddle the third and fourth group. His dreams concern both his interests and his fears. The two examples of the fourth group are dreams that concern fear of revealing one’s hidden guilt and fear of death (IV, 1018–1023). Since we have been told that not all vice can be uprooted from man’s nature (III, 310) and that we naturally fear death, this fourth category is a further blending of interests and nature. The last group of examples all speak of man, but are not necessarily limited to man (IV, 1024–1036). They all deal primarily with bodily function: thirst, the need to urinate, and the wet dreams of puberty. The order of the last three may be said to begin with a need that can be readily controlled, followed by one that can be less so, ending with one that appears almost entirely out of our control.

While one could reasonably argue that Lucretius has simply given us 15 different examples of dreams, their order reveals a movement that begins with dreams determined by a simple interest of a willful kind, and moves toward dreams that are determined less by interest and will but are more the result of a predetermined nature blending the psychic and physical. Lucretius here reveals the depth to which the operation of our minds and soul is dependent on our cares and fears. Lucretius’s account of the senses and thought brought out the degree to which such cares and fears determine the degree to which we have an accurate picture of the world as it is. The passage on dreams most forcefully reveals what limitations our concerns, fears, and desires place upon the freedom of the mind. Any ability to engage in the investigation of the nature of things would seem to require the control or overcoming of such cares, fears, and desires. The strongest of such desires is arguably love, as can be seen in the very opening lines of the poem. The beautiful and pleasing spectacle covers over what lies beneath: the language of animals greedily wishing

to propagate their kind, of captivity to love's charms, and the madness of being violently lashed by Venus (I, 13–19). The sweetness of the surface of love is stripped away in what comes next.

## VII. Erotics

The attachment to the body and the complexity of bodily need pointed to in the conclusion of Book III's discussion of the fear of death is brought out in the conclusion to Book IV and the discussion of love. Lucretius had given us an anticipation of the bodily nature of love in Book III in the interpretation of the myth of Tityos. Tityos's affliction of love is illustrated by the suffering of having his enormous torso devoured by buzzards and eagles (III, 984–994). Although Lucretius there denies that there is Tityos in Hell, his depiction of the bodily suffering of love prefigures the account of love to come. The account is almost completely physiological.<sup>37</sup> The physiological nature of love is first mentioned in the proem to Book I. There, we recall, Lucretius asked Venus to seduce Mars so as to bring peace to Rome. He asked Venus to deliver unto Mars love's eternal or deathless *wound* (I, 34). Having received love's wound, Mars lies tranquil in Venus's arms at which point Venus can whisper a plea for peace into Mars's ear (I, 35–40). The peaceful effect of the wound of love and the tranquil depiction of the union of the lovers in the proem to Book I stand in stark contrast to the account of love given in the conclusion to Book IV. We will see there that the wound of love gives rise to an insatiable desire that in turn is played out in violent physical struggle between the lovers, and to a state of mind that can only be described as madness. The task of philosophy is to counteract the madness inspired by love, as it was the task of philosophy to counteract the fear of death in the previous book.<sup>38</sup>

In the account of death, it was stated that to come to terms with the fear of death one needed to embark on the study of the nature of things. The difficulty arose that it may be impossible for the majority of men to begin a study of the nature of things because they cannot come to appreciate the effect that the fear of death has on them. This problem reemerges in another form in the account of love, for the wound of love does not tranquilize the lovers but gives rise to a physical and psychic frenzy. This keeps the lovers from seeing the object of their love clearly and therefore leads them to desire something that cannot be possessed.<sup>39</sup> While the sexual act may be a balm upon the wound, our condition after having engaged in sex is but a temporary respite. Our sexual physiology appears to be such that the madness is insatiable.

In the account of love, Lucretius speaks of three separate but related things: Venus, love, and the madness and frenzy that arise from love.

Venus is used to describe our physical parts used in the reproductive act, the natural urge to engage in sex, and the act of sex itself. Venus is therefore Lucretius's preferred term for all the natural aspects of sex. Love is used to describe the unreasonable attraction to the one that has wounded us by arousing our sex organs, and the unreasonable expectation excited by the sight of the beloved. *Cupido* is used to describe the physical and mental frenzy that the wound of love gives rise to if it is allowed to fester. The task is to somehow satisfy the natural need, Venus, without being drawn into the unreasonable expectations of love and its attendant frenzy or *cupido*. The difficulty is discerning to what degree the frenzy and its expectations can be avoided.

Lucretius begins by stating that the one whose "understanding" is wounded by the "bolt of Venus" turns toward the source of his wound, as one does in battle with an enemy, and aches for union so as to jet his fluid from body to body, for his desire presages delight (IV, 1048–1057). The images of the source of our wound feed our love, and we are advised to turn our "minds" away from these images and seek to cast our semen into any body. For the one who avoids love does not lack the fruits of Venus, but takes the advantages without the penalty (IV, 1073–1074). In the moment of possession, the lovers seize each other and assault each others' bodies. In the act of Venus the lovers are given a brief respite, and the false hope that the very body that set their desire aflame will extinguish that flame. However, "nature denies this completely for this [love] is the one thing of which the more we have the more the heart burns with insane desire" (IV, 1088–1090). The images of the beloved are not like food and drink, as the body gets nothing from them, and so "in love Venus deludes lovers with simulacra" (IV, 1101). "When Venus is ready to sow the female field," the deluded lovers lie tasting each other, hungrily seize each other mouth to mouth, press tooth to lip, trying to chafe substance off the other. So eagerly do the lovers cling together in Venus's bond that their wish would appear to be to devour each other (IV, 1105–1114). At last when the built-up desire explodes from their loins, a small pause is given to their violent madness. But once again the same fury returns and the lovers seek to attain what they "desire," but they cannot find a way to satisfy it, for they are uncertain in their "secret wound" (IV, 1115–1120). What they desire is not sex itself, as clearly the desire does not dissipate with the act and seems only to intensify. What then precisely is the nature of that desire? The "lust" for life, *cupido*, that concludes the account of death may begin to suggest an answer (III, 1076). The fact that the beloved is likened to a goddess, Venus, suggests that what the lovers seek in love points toward man's desire for immortality, to commune with the divine, and is a reaction to the question of the eternal.

Lucretius himself had asked Venus to grace his verses so as to give them “ever-lasting charm” (I, 29).

Lucretius states that it is not so difficult to avoid love and break the bonds of Venus (IV, 1144–1145). To do so, one must not ignore the faults of the mind and body of the one desired. Men who fail to do so become blinded by lust and attribute to their beloved advantages that they do not have (IV, 1146–1154). It is for this reason that we see ugly shapeless women loaded with honors and wealth and witness men mocking their fellow men and telling them to beg Venus for mercy, so foul is their love (IV, 1155–1158). A difficulty here presents itself. Lucretius had originally stated that we are wounded by the shafts of Venus, and that this wound makes us ache for union with the source of the wound (IV, 1052–1055). In the next formulation, the blind wound leaves the lover ignorant as to its impossible satisfaction and madness ensues (IV, 1115–1120). Finally, Lucretius states that the wound is not blind but the madness is (IV, 1153). The difficulty is that, as the account unfolds, it becomes clearer that the natural urge for sex cannot be wholly divorced from the madness. The characterization of the sex act as an unquenchable thirst and insatiable hunger first directs our attention to its naturalness. The madness that ensues from the impossibility of its satisfaction is, however, only temporarily calmed when the act is consummated. The source of the madness therefore appears to be, at least in part, located in the semen (IV, 1101–1120). The possibility arises that the madness itself is a bodily part of the procreative process and act.<sup>40</sup> Nature is said to battle against the idea that love can be satisfied by the source of attraction, yet love appears as the intermediate stage between the initial wound and the madness that finally allows the need to be temporarily satisfied (IV, 1084–1085). The greediness of lust is momentarily calmed by Venus, yet Venus cannot be consummated without such greediness. Just as in the speech of nature from Book III, our passionate nature demands what cannot be given. Just as the fear of death was a natural reaction to the fact of one’s finitude, so love is here depicted as natural. The question, here as there, is to what extent this nature can be overcome by the investigation into the nature of things, so that the life of philosophy is a genuine possibility for all men.

Lucretius’s suggestion that we could have Venus without love by turning away from the source of the wound and having sex with anybody appears difficult for two reasons. The first is the one just stated. If love is an intermediary stage between the initial wound and the completion of the generative act, then generation demands the deluded attachment of love. If we return to the proem to Book I, we see the unity of Venus and greedy lust. Lucretius in the proem states that Venus sinks her dart of love into every creature, which causes them to greedily beget their kind

(I, 18–20). Thus, in the other animals lust unified with love drives them to procreate. That the same process applies to man should not come as a great surprise.<sup>41</sup> First, Lucretius has throughout the poem drawn parallels between men and the animals and has not differentiated man from the animals in other important teachings.<sup>42</sup> Second, Lucretius advises the reader to turn his mind away from the simulacra of the beloved. The account of the freedom of the mind, and the freedom of the will from earlier in Book IV appeared to render suspect the degree of such freedom. There are two difficulties within the account of love that render our capacity to turn away all the more difficult. First, it is stated that we are blinded by lust (IV, 1153). This blindness leads to all sorts of misrepresentations; the sallow are honeyed, and the unwashed are informal.<sup>43</sup> Second, women are deceitful and trick men into love. Lucretius states that women will sigh for love, “not always falsely,” and that “often” they act sincerely, sending their lovers racing down love’s track (IV, 1192–1208). “Not always” and “often” mean of course, that sometimes women lead men into love unwittingly. For these reasons, the notion of sex without love is akin to Book III’s dictum that death is nothing to us. Love, understood as the desire for union, is the desire for completion as it manifests itself in the tyrannical urge to consume the other and the desire to satisfy what cannot be satisfied. Yet that very desire appears to be inseparable from the procreative act.

Lucretius states that one’s goal should be to have Venus without love. This is a rather strange formulation as Venus is usually indistinguishable from love. The description of love, however, is not pleasant fulfillment and tranquility, as witnessed in the proem’s seduction of Mars. Here the account of love is violent and the beloved is initially likened to an enemy. Love appears here closer to Mars than to Venus. Venus and Mars are, as elsewhere in the account of the nature of things, inseparable, and where their corresponding realms begin and end are nearly indistinguishable. What would it then mean to have Venus without Mars? This question is difficult to answer in light of the collapse of the line that distinguishes them. In Book I, Venus was associated with life and generation; Mars in Book II was most closely connected with decay and death. Venus without Mars would in light of the first two books be perpetual generation. In the account of love, however, while there is no denying that Venus is the generative act and therefore intimately tied to life, Mars disguised as love is not decay and death, but a tyrannical will to take something from the beloved that is unavailable. Love seeks to find in the generative act something that it is incapable of providing. By the end of Book II, it became clear that perpetual generation, the acts of Venus, were possible only due to the violence and decay of Mars. Love’s desire to find something in the

generative act that cannot be found there leads to the delusion that the beloved is lovelier than she truly is. Love plays itself out in an unreasonable attachment to the beloved that cannot accept the truth of her all too human qualities. Having degraded Venus from life itself to the mere act of sex, Lucretius demonstrates that love is the embodiment of our natural yet unreasonable attachment to life and the world. As was explained in the conclusion to Book III, we fear death not because of the perceived or imagined violence that is inflicted upon our bodies but because we are deprived of the pleasures of life. What we fear is extinction. It is the prospect of that extinction that gives rise to our attachment to the world and life. It is that attachment that plays itself out in the frenzy of love.

Lucretius's advice as to what to do to free one from such mad desire is as staid and unerotic as one could imagine. Instead of weeping at the beloved's bathroom door, the lover should imagine what malodorous scents are within. If he were ever permitted entry, he would find the first available reason to excuse himself and see finally that he has attributed more to her than any mortal merits. That being the case, he advises Memmius to find a compliant woman of good hygiene. Over time, familiarity will breed a kind of love that is slow, gentle, and steady. Such a love Lucretius says will have a cumulative effect on the soul not unlike the slow dripping of water upon a stone that over time bores a hole (IV, 1280–1287): love as a kind of Chinese water torture. Such advice contrasts sharply with the greediness and madness that Venus in the proem to Book I strikes into all things. The austerity of love in the finale has the same tone as the conclusion to the account of death and its description of the "joyless quest for joy" that characterizes the life of most men. If such an approach to love and death is required to pursue the philosophic life, it is hard to imagine man being attracted to its pleasures as recounted in the proem to Book IV. The primary disposition of the philosophic life as captured by the conclusions of Book III and IV is one of resignation.<sup>44</sup>

### VIII. Conclusion

In the finales of Books III and IV, we have been led to see that man possesses both an intransigent fear of death and an attendant eroticism woven into his very nature that desires what it cannot possess. Taken together, these two things indicate man's limitless fears and desires and a general unwillingness to admit to the natural limitations inherent in all things. Lucretius applies this account of man's nature most pointedly to those who possess great political ambition. What we see in the account of political men is that the private inability of men to live in accord with



reason is also a public incapacity to abide by the limitations inherent in all things. This again raises the question of the universal availability of the philosophic life.

Philosophy seeks to counteract eros in the same way that it seeks to counteract fear of death.<sup>45</sup> The philosophic life is not erotic. It is not erotic because it does not entertain false hopes that man can overcome his exposed, mortal condition.<sup>46</sup> The difficulty presented to the philosophic life is that it is perceived by the man of action, and the city more generally, as a sort of “lingering as it were before the gates of death” (III, 65–67). The philosophic life, we have been told, is primarily a life that seeks to come to terms with death. By contrast political men are in a constant flight from death.<sup>47</sup> It is to the political man, Memmius, and his fitness for philosophy to which we now turn.

## CHAPTER 4

### O' MORTAL, O' FOOL, O' CRIMINAL, O' MEMMIUS

Lucretius's poem is commonly understood as intended to win the friendship of its addressee, the politician Memmius, and to convert him to Epicureanism. While Lucretius expresses a desire for friendship with Memmius, there are significant obstacles—as seen in the account of love and death—to Memmius's conversion. Lucretius, at times rather subtly, indicates that Memmius may not be fit for philosophic life. The picture he draws of Memmius, and of political ambition more generally, reveals his political career to be a great barrier to his conversion. To understand Lucretius's true intention, one must appreciate the depth of his reflections on the fraught relationship between philosophy and politics. Lucretius's account of the development of political society reveals the philosophic life's difficult relationship with the political community. This tension was expressed at the outset as philosophy's perceived impiety (I, 80–81).

One possible response to the tension would be for the philosopher to live a quiet life withdrawn from politics and civic life. The proem to Book I began to reveal the limits of that approach. As withdrawing from the city is not a viable option, Lucretius's poem, we have been arguing, should be read as a defense of the philosophic life to the city. Lucretius's true intention is thus to find a secure place for the philosophic life in the city (V, 335–336). His response to philosophy's dangerous position, it turns out, is to find potential allies among the class of political men, Memmius being such a man. There are, however, rather serious obstacles to the success of such an undertaking. In the proem to Book I, we saw three difficulties that must be addressed. First, Memmius is a political man who cannot abandon his political duties and find the leisure to study Lucretius's poem (I, 43). Second, should he find such leisure,

there is the distinct possibility that he will contemptuously discard the teaching before having understood it (I, 53). Lastly, as mentioned, even if Memmius should devote himself to the task of understanding what Lucretius has to teach, he may come to believe that he is thereby embarking on a life of “impiety and crime” (I, 82).

These three difficulties raise questions regarding Memmius’s fitness for philosophy and the tension between philosophy and political life. In trying to understand that tension, we will begin with what can be gleaned from classical sources about Memmius and then examine Lucretius’s characterization of Memmius and political men more generally. This investigation into Memmius’s character is necessary to arrive at some determination of his fitness for philosophy and to consider the limitations presented to Memmius’s conversion to philosophy. The overarching concern is the compatibility of the political life with the philosophic life. The poem forces the reader to wonder if Memmius’s character is peculiar to him or if he is not a prototypical political man. Should the latter prove to be the case, then the issue is whether or not there are certain inherent, insurmountable tensions between philosophy and the city. This leads to a larger question: Does the political community have certain foundational needs that the philosophic life brings into question or cannot abide? Can any accommodation be reached between philosophy and the city and is a defense of philosophy to the city possible?

Very briefly then, who is Memmius? The picture that emerges from ancient sources is that of a politically ambitious, opportunistic rake. Memmius was married to Fausta, the reportedly loose daughter of the dictator Sulla. His political career appears to begin as quaestor to Pompey in Spain in 77 BC. Yet his attachment to Pompey is suspect given his later closeness with Caesar and his reported love letters to Pompey’s wife.<sup>1</sup> His next political station is as tribune to the plebs in 66 BC. In 60 BC, he opposed a triumph of Lucullus for having taken the spoils of war and unnecessarily prolonging the war.<sup>2</sup> While in the midst of his campaign against Lucullus, Memmius took a liking to Lucullus’s wife and attempted to seduce her. In a letter to Atticus, Cicero labels Memmius a “modern day Paris” for the attempted seduction.<sup>3</sup>

In 59 BC, Memmius became governor of Bithynia and brought along with him the poets Cinna and Catullus. According to Ovid, Memmius was himself something of an erotic poet but, according to the testimony of Cicero, he was of few talents and lazy, “averse to the labor not only of speaking, but even of thinking. His skills waned in proportion to his relaxation of effort.”<sup>4</sup> Memmius left an unfavorable impression on Catullus, two of whose poems refer to Memmius and his experience with him in Bithynia. In Poem 28, Catullus complains about his ledger book

being on the wrong side and metaphorically compares his treatment by Memmius to being sexually assaulted.<sup>5</sup>

In 58 BC, Memmius was Praetor and—as a member of the senatorian party—sought to “inquire” into Caesar’s conduct during his consulate.<sup>6</sup> As later events attest, he was eventually reconciled with Caesar. Following his Praetorship, he runs for consulship in 54 BC with the backing of Caesar.<sup>7</sup> Their reconciliation did not last long, however, when it was revealed that Memmius had tried to win victory by way of bribing the consuls.<sup>8</sup> He tried to save himself by accusing Pompey’s father-in-law of bribery but was forced to desist.<sup>9</sup> Cicero remarks that Memmius’s trial had all of Rome talking. Convicted of *ambitus*, bribery or more properly ambition, Memmius leaves Rome and goes to Athens.

In Athens, we find Memmius in possessions of a site upon which are the ruins of Epicurus’s home. His plan, according to a letter of Cicero, appears to have been to build upon the site. Such plans angered Patro the Epicurean who asked Cicero to intervene on his behalf so as to stop Memmius’s building project.<sup>10</sup> There is remarkably no mention of Lucretius in the letter. There is no evidence as to how the dispute was settled, if at all.

The little biographical information we possess makes the choice of Memmius as addressee curious. While he does appear to have some affinity for the arts, his rather unsavory character and political opportunism as depicted by Catullus and Cicero make for an unusual candidate for philosophic friendship. Why Lucretius would choose Memmius as his addressee has puzzled many who have read the poem. Classical scholarship’s attempt to explain the choice of addressee is unsatisfying since it is often dependent upon speculation as to whether or not the poem is finished<sup>11</sup>, and whether Lucretius became disheartened with Memmius over time.<sup>12</sup> These speculative endeavors lead classicists beyond the poem to explain Lucretius’s choice of addressee.

Benjamin Farrington, unlike others, argues that, “On all the important points Lucretius gives us the essential information”.<sup>13</sup> Farrington holds that we can give a proper account of the address to Memmius by looking at the existing text without conjecturing about its order, or completion, or a supposed rift between the two men. Farrington argues that Memmius remains present throughout the poem, and that we can account for those books where he is not explicitly mentioned without resorting to speculation. Farrington claims that Lucretius had hoped to convert Memmius to Epicureanism and was sufficiently aware of Memmius’s virtues as well as failings. Farrington holds that to convert Memmius, Lucretius must lead him away from his political ambitions to philosophy. Such a conversion requires that Lucretius bring into question Memmius’s political

ambitions, and political life more generally. The most subtle and prudent way of doing so is to voice these criticisms in the mouth of another and not explicitly mention Memmius by name.<sup>14</sup> Memmius's absence in the later books is not then the result of a reevaluation of his character or evidence that the work is unfinished, but is part of Lucretius's pedagogy with regard to Memmius.

Farrington claims that Epicurus filled a historical need whereby informal friendships were to fill the void left by the ineffectiveness of the state to provide for its subjects. Lucretius is carrying this message to Rome in its darkest hour under the prospect that it will not likely endure.<sup>15</sup> Lucretius thus desires friendship with Memmius as potential member of an epicurean garden which will flee the city given that, "the more the state failed to afford protection the more necessary it became for individuals to unite to render one another mutual aid."<sup>16</sup> How exactly an epicurean garden, unsheltered by men-at-arms, will protect itself from the tumult of political life is not made clear by Farrington.

Farrington takes seriously the importance of Memmius's status as a political man in the proem to Book I and thus recognizes a political motivation for the address to Memmius. A similar view is taken by James Nichols, who adds that Lucretius may have "remembered that philosophers had been expelled from Rome at the instigation of Cato the elder during the previous century."<sup>17</sup> Nichols refers to several of Epicurus's *Principal Opinions* that support the view that friendship with the politically powerful may provide protection from persecution. Nichols agrees with Farrington that friendship may begin in seeking some kind of advantage but is choiceworthy for its own sake. Nichols, therefore, claims that Lucretius's hoped-for friendship with Memmius will in time grow to be a more meaningful philosophic friendship. According to Nichols, such an understanding is supported by the fact that, for Epicurus, "the possession of friendship is the greatest of the things that wisdom prepares for the happiness of life."<sup>18</sup> It is this finally that Nichols believes to be the most satisfactory explanation for the address to Memmius and most in keeping with the Epicurean teaching on friendship. Anyone who contends that Lucretius adheres to the Epicurean idea of friendship would have to first contend with the issue of Memmius's fitness for such a relationship with Lucretius.

That Lucretius shares Epicurus's understanding of friendship is, moreover, not easily supported by the text. If Lucretius shared Epicurus's ennobled understanding of friendship, it is surprising to find few mentions of friendship in his poem. The three references to friendship (I, 140–145, III, 83, and V, 1019–1020) reveal the decidedly political, utilitarian, character of Lucretius's account of friendship. Lucretius does indeed begin by

stating that his intention is to win Memmius's friendship, but that statement must be understood in light of a fuller understanding of Lucretius's intention.

The first indication of Lucretius's intention occurs in the proem to Book I where he states that Memmius's "excellence" and the hoped-for "delight of . . . pleasant friendship" will allow Lucretius to bear all toil necessary to make clear the obscure findings of the "Greeks" (I, 136–145). While one must take this assertion seriously, this is not the only statement of Lucretius's intention and it is later subject to serious qualification. In the proem to Book I Memmius is said to be a favorite of Venus, a status of high regard since Venus is said to be the mother and governor of all things. Yet as we previously saw, Venus's governance, and therefore Memmius's status, is qualified, if not undermined, by Lucretius's later exposition of the account of the whole. What Lucretius has to teach Memmius is the "first beginnings, from which nature makes all things" (I, 55–56). Nature, not Venus, is governor. As the status of Venus is lowered, so must be Memmius's own high standing. At a minimum one must then consider whether the high praise of Memmius's "excellence" is a sweetening of the truth.

Friendship with Memmius will apparently become philosophic friendship only if he comes to a full understanding or appreciation of the dark discoveries of the "Greeks" (I, 137). Such penetration will require his undivided attention, which may not be available given his political responsibilities (I, 43). Additionally, through his characterization of political men, Lucretius raises the question of Memmius's fitness for the philosophic life. A preliminary to this questioning is the possibility that Memmius will reject the teaching before having fully understood it (I, 53). If Memmius proves incapable of seeing into "hidden truths," philosophic friendship cannot be Lucretius's true motivation.

Lucretius's claim that he desires "sweet friendship" with Memmius is not his final word in Book I as to his motivations. After his criticism of rival scientific theories, Lucretius states that he writes in quest of the honor of having traveled the "pathless places" of the Muses, and he indicates the novelty of his teaching (I, 922–926). Lucretius's honor is for being the first to write a philosophic poem in Latin. Unfortunately his discoveries are such that the common people "shrink back" from them (I, 945). Lucretius must then sweeten his teaching just as a doctor administering wormwood to a child paints the rim of the cup with honey (I, 936–40). As was argued in the last chapter, it is far from certain that a child will ever willingly accept the bitter medicine unsweetened and so must be always deceived into drinking that which will cure him. If the truth about the nature of things is bitter, one must then ask if the truth

will ever appear to the majority of men as pleasant. Lucretius's honor would appear to be dependent upon his teaching being made pleasant, that is, as something other than what it is. One cannot help but wonder if Memmius is fit for Lucretius's teaching or is he one of the common people who are repulsed by the truth about the nature of things? If Memmius is one of the majority of men and cannot be brought to accept the truth unsweetened, then his reception of Lucretius's poem would depend on an act of deception. It may be the case that Lucretius's honor and the reception of the poem depend on Memmius, despite his reluctance to look into hidden truths. One might go so far as to suggest that his honor depends on Memmius's inability to see such hidden truths.<sup>19</sup>

In Book V Lucretius states for the third and final time why he has composed his poem. There he claims to be the first to have revealed the truth about nature in the Latin tongue (V, 335–336). Lucretius's honor is not simply for being the first to write a philosophic poem but for being the first to bring philosophy to Rome. The difficulty, as stated in the proem to Book I, is that the exposition of the truth about the nature of things is difficult given the novelty of the teaching and the poverty of the Latin tongue (I, 136–139). Moreover, the darkness and terror of mind that afflict the ignorant cannot be displaced by bright shafts of light but only by “nature's aspect and lesson” (I, 148). The first lesson, as we have seen, is that nothing can come into being out of nothing through divine intervention (I, 150). It may be this very beginning and foundation of the philosophic life that could lead Memmius to “contemptuously discard” Lucretius's gifts before they are properly understood.

There is good reason to believe that it is this beginning that most troubles Memmius and leads him to believe, with the poets and priests, that he is beginning down the path of impiety and crime (I, 80–1). Lucretius worries that if Memmius is given this impression, he will quickly abandon his study. Such abandonment would prevent them from forming a genuine philosophic friendship. The problem is compounded by the fact that the priests' threats of eternal torment after death will convince Memmius to abandon Lucretius and turn Memmius's life to terror and confusion (I, 102–106). If Memmius should succumb to the threats of the priests, he may come to regard Lucretius as a teacher of impiety and philosophy as something to be approached with great suspicion. That philosophy is considered by some to be the beginning of a life of crime suggests that there may be a political dimension to the accusations against philosophy. The twofold accusation of impiety and crime may additionally suggest that the authority of law is dependent on adherence to certain religious opinions.

That Memmius is possessed of the qualities required for overcoming such threats and embracing the philosophic life is therefore a question

in the proem to Book I. That Memmius does possess such qualities may be seen in the fact that he is a favorite of Venus who has adorned Memmius with every blessing (I, 27). One is further encouraged when, without addressing Memmius by name, Lucretius remarks that he possesses a thoughtful mind (I, 50). Yet later in Book I, and now addressing Memmius by name, Lucretius introduces some doubt about Memmius's thoughtfulness. After having argued for the existence of the void Lucretius suggests that Memmius is unwilling to accept the teaching and that, despite his delays and objections, he "must confess" there is void in things (I, 398–399). Later, still trying to overcome Memmius's hesitation to accept the void, and again addressing him by name, Lucretius suggests that Memmius might be a lazy and reluctant student (I, 410). Thankfully for Memmius, so bountiful is the fountain of sweet verses that Lucretius can draw upon to teach him that only old age and death could stop the flow. The passage is, however, equally revealing for what it implies might be required to teach Memmius the full truth: Memmius may always require honeyed elaborations of the truth, and it may take an entire lifetime to convince him of just one aspect, albeit a central aspect, of Lucretius's thought.

Throughout the exposition of the fundamental tenets of atomism presented in Books I and II, we find Lucretius urging Memmius on and frequently demanding his attention. At the beginning of a new set of arguments Lucretius can often be found admonishing Memmius with the words "come now," as though he is having difficulties keeping pace (I, 953, and II, 63,333,730). At other times after providing several arguments in support of a particular point, Lucretius tells the reader that he "must admit," or "must confess," or is "restricted to grant," that what has been shown is correct. Later, Memmius is "conquered" and "must confess" that the first things are of the smallest possible nature, solid, and eternal (I, 624). Later still, Memmius's objections to the infinity of space are refuted, and he is left with "no escape" and "must confess" that there must be infinite space (I, 973). When trying to convince Memmius that there are infinitely many worlds Lucretius exclaims, "therefore again and again I say you must confess that other assemblages of matter in other places, such as this which the ether holds in greedy embrace" (II, 1064–6). Memmius's hesitance and resistance to accept the arguments presented to him are striking in the first two books.

What might explain this resistance and hesitation? Memmius's opposition is most pronounced in Lucretius's attempt to convince him that there are infinitely many worlds (II, 1024–1025). This teaching he claims is a novel one, and he asks Memmius not to recoil and "stop being scared off by newness alone. Don't spit reason from your mind" (II, 1040–1041).



The difficulty in accepting these principles and their conclusions is that they involve a progressive lowering of the concerns of man within the nature of things. The human import of these precepts is that our world, and all that is contained within it, are of small significance. One can also appreciate Memmius's reluctance to accept the existence of the void once the full import of the principles is reached at the end of Book II. The conclusion to Book II most fully reveals the absence of Venus's governance of the nature of things. The world of Venus defined by reproduction and birth is replaced by the governance of random, meaningless, destructive, and violent motion. Memmius's acceptance of the void is a necessary preliminary to his acceptance of the world's mortality at the end of Book II. We see now in what ways the account of the infinite from Book I was a sweetened account and why it was prefaced by Lucretius's first description of his poetic method (I, 921–950). By the end of Book II, Memmius is made to confront the fact that what is first for us is not first by nature. More personally, Memmius learns precisely why the primary concerns of political life, which are his primary concerns, are but accidents (I, 455–458). If Memmius cannot be brought to accept these foundational facts, he will forever be condemned to a life concerned with what least is.

The difficulty of getting Memmius to accept the teaching about the void and its attendant conclusions speaks directly to Memmius's ability to be brought to embrace the philosophic life. As Lucretius makes clear, the acceptance of materialist principles is a necessary preliminary to acceptance of the mortality of the soul (III, 31–38). Lucretius reiterates that fear of death most plagues Memmius and keeps him from abandoning his political ambitions and embracing the philosophic life. Memmius was earlier likened to a child who needs honeyed presentations of the truth, and in Book III, which culminates in Lucretius's discussion of the mortality of the soul, these childlike fears are attached to those who are moved by political ambition. As children are afraid of bogeys in the dark (III, 90), political men (a class to which Memmius clearly belongs) are "blinded" by their passion for public office (III, 59). Political men suffer like children from fear of the dark but hate the light and are therefore hostile to what might free them of their turmoil (III, 87–90). Political men are captured in that class of men that claim to know the nature of mind and soul and therefore have no need of "our reason" (III, 41–45). The account of the politically ambitious brings together fear of death and the lust for the ephemeral that keeps man from perceiving the truth about the nature of things. The politically ambitious are said to have a "blind lust" for public office that leads them to transgress the law to achieve great wealth. (III, 59–63) The terms used to describe political ambition

are the very ones used in the discussion of the madness that ensues in the embrace of the lovers. The lovers are said to suffer from a wound of the mind that keep them from seeing the truth of the beloved. The politically ambitious striving to reach the pinnacle of power and wealth are said to suffer a "wound" that is fed by fear of death (III, 64). Those who suffer such a "wound" desire bright fame and glory but paradoxically complain of wallowing in darkness (III, 78), yet have come to hate the light (III, 79–80). The political man not only hates the light, and therefore what will assist him in seeing the truth, but he is also in fact blind (III, 59). Being blind he will never come to see the truth; he is incurably erotic and fearful. The political man appears to be the least philosophic type. Moreover, the political man by this reckoning is eros personified. This fear of death and attachment to life is such that political men become hostile to reason itself. The relentless pursuit of honor and glory is in fact a flight from death (III, 59–78). Political life in this formulation is the furthest from philosophic life. The philosophic life is understood by the city to be one that "lingering as it were before the gates of death" (III, 65–67). As we saw in the account of the mortality of the soul, this view is in some way correct: the philosophic life is dedicated to coming to terms with the limits inherent in all things, not least of which is our mortality. Philosophy lingers "before the gates of death" as it seeks to come to terms with death.

Memmius's fear of death is, as noted, most forcefully addressed in the conclusion to Book III. After having offered 29 arguments for the mortality of the mind and soul based upon the atomic principles outlined in the first 2 books, Lucretius offers a more poetic attack on those who fear what might become of them after death. Lucretius puts these bolder rebukes into the mouth of another, the most striking of which is a speech by Nature herself. Nature apostrophizes the reader three times in the course of her speech. First, Nature scolds the reader as "O mortal" for his needless weeping over death (III, 932). Then, to those who have lived well and taken their fill of life, she asks, "Why not, like a banqueter fed full of life withdraw with contentment and rest in peace, you fool" (III, 938–939). Finally, to those who have experienced life as a burden and therefore should gladly depart, she exclaims, "Away with your tears, you criminal, check your lamentations!" (III, 955). The reader's self-pity and greed are the sources of his desire for the unattainable and illusory, and his restless pursuit of false pleasure, which distracts him from the truth of his condition, is said to be insatiable (III, 1053–1094). The reader's insatiable desires explain why his grief over death is said to be "everlasting" (III, 911, 907). One is therefore left skeptical about the possibility of such men ever coming to terms with their mortality, and thus living a truly

moderate, philosophic life. One is left with the impression that not mere fear of death but the longing for the immortality of the soul moves man to shutter his ears to nature and reason.

Given the character of political men and the objects of philosophic study, Memmius seems an unlikely candidate for conversion to the philosophic life. That Memmius is unsuited to the philosophic life may begin to explain why Lucretius appears at times less concerned with bringing Memmius over to his view than inducing him not to recoil at what is new and novel (II, 1023–1047).<sup>20</sup> Lucretius voiced the concern at the outset that his native tongue would present limitations in expressing a new and novel teaching (I, 136–139). When trying to convince Memmius that the world had a beginning, and therefore must have an end, he states, “Nor does it escape my mind how novel and strange a thing it is to contemplate, that sky and earth will be destroyed, and how difficult this is for me to prove conclusively with words” (V, 97–99). By Book V the difficulty is then not simply the poverty of his native tongue but how “strange,” “unfamiliar,” and novel the teaching is.

Lucretius’s concern that Memmius accept the novelty of his teaching can begin to explain the link between the address to Memmius and Lucretius’s stated aim of bringing philosophy to Rome and securing the life of philosophy in the city. Philosophy is after all a rather recent development in the arts and arrives in Rome only now via Lucretius’s poem. That Lucretius seeks to keep Memmius from simply recoiling at the new and novel reveals that Memmius is not a likely convert to philosophy. Memmius, as a prototypical political man, is indicative of the unbridgeable chasm that separates the life of politics and the city from the philosophic life. The distance of that chasm can be best understood through Lucretius’s account of the development of man’s political and artistic life in Book V.

Book V is prefaced with a statement as to who ought to be regarded as the truest benefactor of mankind. The majority of men regard Ceres’s and Liber’s gifts of corn and wine as most essential to life. Many regard Hercules’s feats in destroying the terrible beasts of the earth as also worthy of the highest praise. Yet despite Hercules’s efforts, the earth still teems with wild beasts that fill man with terror. The attempt heretofore to purge the world of fears is in fact worse than simply futile; it in fact multiplies such fears. Such gifts, however, pale in comparison to the one thing most necessary for a good life: knowledge of the nature of things. Only through the contemplation of the nature of things can the mind be purged of terror and distress. For that reason the true benefactor of mankind is the philosopher; the man from Greece is thus described as a God three times (V, 8, 19). The discoveries of the man from Greece are

a late development in man's progression from his barbaric forest dwelling existence to civilized life in the city and the unsurpassable peak of artistic development. Again we note that such discoveries only find their way into Rome via Lucretius's poem and that the city remains ignorant as to who are the truest gods. Thus, their piety is misplaced. As Lucretius, and by extension the philosophic life, is suspected of impiety we see that what separates philosophy from the city is the answer to the question of how one ought to live.

Memmius is a product of the regime and the way of life that the city explicitly or implicitly promotes as best. That way of life, we have increasingly seen, is by its very nature incompatible with the philosophic life. The issue of Memmius's possible conversion, therefore, is not merely tied to, or dependent on, his particular capacities but involves liberation from the way of life that political life cultivates. If Memmius is a product of the city then an attempt at his conversion would be an attack on the way of life of the city. Only by turning to the account of the origins of political life can one therefore come to understand the address to Memmius, the difficulties of his conversion, and the tension between philosophy and the city.

Man in his original state lived like a wild beast. The men of that time were hardier than men in civilized society and did not know to plow the earth or plant crops but ate whatever the sun and rain produced. Foodstuffs such as acorns and berries were sufficient for "miserable mortals" (V, 925–944). Such gifts of nature were enough not only to satisfy their bodies but also their "minds." Lucretius presents a barbarized though seemingly idyllic life of the first men. While naked, without fire and lodging, such rough creatures lived at the mercy of fortune, "every man taught to live and be strong for himself at his own will" (V, 960–961). This pleasant spectacle begins, however, to change into one of great uncertainty and insecurity. Most of the world we learn was uninhabitable, and what little there was provided next to nothing without man's industry. Man's use of art is consequent of the need to extend himself over nature. Nature's apparent indifference and man's nakedness are the primary justifications for the arts. Such men might have been spared some of the foolishness of civilized man but were captives of fortune. While the development of the arts is necessary for liberating forest dwelling men from fortune, chance, and accident, the arts are a mixed blessing. Such primitive men did not die by the thousands on the battlefield, and the "wicked art of navigation" was unknown to them. They might have perished from accidentally eating poison, but they did not deliberately poison each other. When night came like "bristly hogs" they slept naked upon the ground. While they had no fear that the sun might

not rise, and thus did not wonder as to the possible death of the world, they feared being devoured alive by wild beasts. Upon being mangled by wild beasts they could only call on “Orcus with horrible cries” as they were ignorant of what the wound required (V, 996).

Forest dwelling man had no knowledge of the common good or customs and laws by which to regulate whatever little interaction they might have had. Sexual relations were unregulated. Sometimes genuine attraction brought men and women together, other times women were bribed with acorns and berries, and sometimes women were simply “caught by man’s violent force and vehement lust” (V, 962–965). Lucretius explains that, with the coming of fire, skins, and huts, man settled into a domestic familial existence (V, 1011–1013). For the first time men and women remain together longer than their previously fleeting, and at times violent, sexual encounters. Sexual desire, Venus, saps their strength, their children break their pride, and the domestic arts served to soften man. This softening is not however accompanied by peacefulness. In fact, given what comes next, the peaceableness of forest dwelling men seems to have been lost. Without telling us exactly what the source of the violence is, Lucretius remarks that families formed pacts of friendship in eagerness not to be harmed or inflict harm. The level of violence must have been extraordinary since Lucretius claims that, while not all were moved to seek peace, most observed these pacts without which the entire human race would have perished (V, 1024–1027). Lucretius leaves the reader without a direct explanation of the cause of the savagery.

After what appears to be a digression on the development of language (V, 1028–1090), Lucretius returns to his account of the development of man’s political life. First, however, he needs to address a silent question of the reader regarding the discovery of fire. It was lightning from heaven that brought fire to man (V, 1091–104). This curious digression may begin to explain the increasing violence that accompanies the development of the arts. Lightning is a phenomenon that Lucretius refers to quite frequently. The first instance we saw is in the proem to Book I, where it is said that the man from Greece was the first to break through the walls of the world who did not fear the rumble of heaven and its lightning but stood firm. The first to have discovered the truth about the nature of things did not cower at the wrath of the heavens. Lucretius also ties the phenomena of lightning to the fear that gives rise to belief in the gods (V, 1219–1221). The precise nature of the fear inspired by lightning emerges later in Book VI. In a discussion of atmospheric phenomena, Lucretius reveals the full destructiveness of lightning (VI, 239–244): the coming of thunder and lightning may lead one to suspect that the walls for the world will soon collapse (VI, 121–123). The silent question, and

Lucretius's answer, may then begin to explain the reasons for the increase in violence that accompanies the discovery of fire. Lightning may be partly responsible for the beginnings of wonder and awe and may begin to make men question the firmness of the walls of the world. While forest dwelling men do not wonder at the heavens and do not question if day will follow night (V, 973–981), men in early society may begin to wonder about such things. The fear inspired by the suspicion that the walls of the world may collapse gives rise to a greater search for security and violent competition to attain it. The development of the arts, and in particular, fire, is natural and necessary given the niggardliness of nature. The difficulty is that the discovery of fire and the development of the arts bring in its wake the beginning of an awareness of the possible fragility of the world. It seems that this awareness and the fear it inspires are the true ground of the violence that plagues man's political development.<sup>21</sup>

Returning to the account, Lucretius does not tell us how long the nonbinding, noncoercive agreements of prepolitical society lasted. In any case, the next stage appears to indicate that such pacts did not satisfy all. Every day men changed their habits and were taught new ways of life and of fire by "men of genius" and strength of mind (V, 1105–1108). These men of genius would appear to be the most astute observers of nature. It is apparently these "new ways" that lead to the creation of cities governed by kings. That Lucretius attributes the transition to kingship to the introduction of new uses of fire by men of genius suggests some relationship between kings and men of genius. One might then expect that men of genius would hold a position of eminence in these early kingdoms: Kings "divided cattle and lands, and gave them to each according to beauty and strength and genius; for beauty had great power and strength had importance in those days" (V, 1110–1112). Men of genius are allocated land and animals but are not said to be highly prized. Their curious exclusion from this enumeration suggests that they may pose a threat to kingship. For men of genius are, such as Lucretius, responsible for the introduction of new and novel teachings and may by their discoveries undermine the kingly title to rule. New and novel teachings may upset the kingly standard of rule based on strength and beauty.

The place of men of genius in this first political society is further complicated by the next development outlined by Lucretius. After the distribution of resources based on the natural standards of strength, beauty, and intellect, men discovered property and gold. Wealth robbed the strong and beautiful of honor since men for the most part follow the rich (V, 1113–1115). With the discovery of gold men sought wealth, fame, "that their fortune might stand fast upon a firm foundation" (V, 1120–1121). While the rich unseat the strong and beautiful they apparently have not

been able, or inclined, to take the power of men of genius. The power of the men of genius, such as it is, presumably remains, given their notable absence in Lucretius's enumeration. Those who sought a firm foundation for fortune entered into a power struggle that is aggravated in part by envy. Envy, Lucretius says, like lightning, strikes what is highest. The threat that envy posed to all that is high recalls Lucretius's claim that nothing is sweeter than to dwell high in the well-walled temples of the wise (II, 7–8). The pleasure of observing the toils of which one is spared, comes with the realization that such toils make the serenity of the temple possible. The wise must then be concerned that they not be perceived to occupy a place of preeminence, subjecting them to the envy of the politically ambitious. If the philosopher must be thus wary, one way to deflect attention or ease the envy of the ambitious may be to assert one's lack of political ambition. Lucretius's repeated disparagement of political life is an attempt to assure Memmius (and others) that he harbors no political ambitions. As in the proem to Book I, Lucretius here scorns political ambition as a life lived contrary to the inherent limitations in all things. Political life is moved primarily by fear of death due to the tenuous nature of man's place in the nature of things. Engagement in political life is an attempt to flee or overcome the brute fact of the nature of things. Reconciliation with death would not then appear possible within the horizon created by political life. For that reason Lucretius claims that it is better to be ruled than to rule (V, 1129).

The struggle for "dominion and exaltation" led to the overthrow and death of kings and therewith to anarchy (V, 1120–1136). Men soon tired of the violence of the struggle for preeminence and were eventually taught by "some" to choose officials, establish constitutions, and live according to law (V, 1136–1144).<sup>22</sup> More than any other principle governing previous prepolitical and political arrangements, law is most properly a form of coercion and compulsion. Law, unlike previous principles, draws no natural distinctions; it treats all equally and thus compels all equally. The earlier natural standard of strength and beauty is now replaced by a conventional standard.<sup>23</sup> The breakdown of all previous political arrangements results from their failure to find an order that can compel men to follow an interest other than their own. Law compels men to take consideration of a common good rather than their own good. The law can do so only by establishing a communal opinion of the good and the first things. Law by itself appears incapable of establishing such common opinion. It can do so only by tracing its origins back to something more fundamental. Hence, in the order of Lucretius's argument, we see that the discussion of the origins of religion immediately follows the discussion of law (V, 1161–1240). Lucretius draws attention to the association of

religion and law by emphasizing how religion spread within and among "cities," "great nations," and "great states." That the law can only command obedience by tracing its origins back to the ancestral and the gods was suggested in the proem to Book I. Lucretius (as we saw in the first chapter) begins his poem with the prephilosophic view that the city rests on an understanding of the association of the good and the ancestral: the Romans are the descendants of Aeneas whose mother is Venus. Venus alone is there said to guide the nature of things and is the cause of all generation (I, 1–44). To be Roman means to have kinship with the first cause or first thing.<sup>24</sup>

Religious belief belongs to political life because man's awareness of the fragility of world is most fully brought to light in political life. Lucretius's examples of those who are tormented by such fears are kings and admirals. "Nations and peoples tremble" and "proud kings" shiver at the rumbles of the heavens. "Naval commanders" and their forces, together with "cities," fear the destructive forces of nature, which seem to "crush human affairs" and "trample upon beautiful rods and fearsome axes" (V, 1218–1236). The fear inspired by the destructive forces of nature, and ignorance as to the true causes of the frightening natural phenomena, led man to take "refuge" in belief in the gods. In the absence of religious belief, the fear for the eternity of the world and all that man loves that makes men savage. Such savagery can only be quelled by the union of law and belief in gods who guarantee that the walls of the world will not collapse.

Belief in the gods is thus naturally born of hope and fear, but is finally an illusory response to the brute fact of the nature of things, according to which, all that man loves is consigned to the fundamental process of generation and destruction (V, 1211–1217). Religious belief is an apparent remedy to man's vulnerable condition and an attempt to overcome chance and accident. The difficulty is that the city must refuse, in the interest of its continuation, to be reconciled to the brute fact of its perishability. Political life is necessarily maintained by the religious belief that the walls of the world, and the city, will not collapse. The city must refuse the central philosophic insight that nothing is eternal; it cannot abide by the fact that, "as one nation grows another wastes away" (II, 78). While it is necessary for the city's survival that it devote itself to the foundational myths about the gods, the reality is that no force mustered on the part of man or God can halt the process of birth, growth, and decay. The city must cultivate an attachment to the regime and its gods that is contrary to the fundamental fact about nature. The life of the citizen is therefore not lived in accord with the truth about the nature of things.



The dependence of lawful political life upon religious belief is most clearly expressed in the procession of the *Magna Mater*, which is an attempt by man to guarantee the longevity of the world and the political community (II, 604–643). Lucretius says that this procession's view of the gods is far from truth and reason but he leaves the reader with a sense that it is not without its merits, for it is excellently told (II, 644). The gods guarantee in the minds of men the continued existence of the world and the city. Man therefore owes something to the gods and must be concerned with their judgments. Religious belief thus contributes to law-abidingness, patriotism, and martial spirit and is therefore a supplement to the conventional justice of the city and a salutary restraint on crime. As in Lucretius's explanation of the origin of religious belief following the account of the regime instituted by law, we see how the city is maintained by men's belief in the gods and the closed horizon that allows them to believe that the walls of the world will be maintained (V, 1211–1217).

It remains the case the philosophy is possible only in the city and is both physically and intellectually dependent on it. Philosophy's intellectual dependence is revealed in the proem to Book I, which establishes that philosophy begins with doubt about the association of the good and the ancestral. The philosophic challenge to the union of Venus with the descendants of Aeneas reveals that Lucretius's starting point is the common opinion of the union of the good and the ancestral that governs political life. The proem to Book I together with the procession of the Great Mother from Book III, however, establish the fact that the common opinion of the unity of the good and the ancestral is necessary for sound politics. Philosophy begins by questioning the teaching of the good presented by the religious account of the whole (I, 62–79). Venus is not the creator of all things but nature is (I, 60). It is reflection on the prephilosophic foundations of political life that constitutes the beginning of philosophy. The foundation of the political community is therefore necessarily undermined by philosophy and the teaching of the truth about the nature of things. Philosophy's dependence upon the city thus goes beyond simple bodily need toward intellectual need. One might therefore question whether Lucretius is capable of providing a political justification for his attack on common opinion. This finally explains why Memmius may believe that, in following Lucretius, he is embarking on a life of impiety and crime.

The dependence is further glimpsed in the proem to Book VI, where we are told of the glory of Athens. Athens's greatness was to bring first grain, then laws, and finally the greatest of her creations, the man from Greece. In this enumeration we see that philosophy emerges only after

the law (VI, 1–6). All previous political arrangements prior to law cannot be said to be more in accord with nature, since the life lived in accord with nature is impossible without law, due to the stability it provides and the beginnings of philosophic reflection. Law is the most conventional of conventions. It is entirely of human making. With the discovery of law, the distinction between human making and nature is most fully revealed. Prior to law nature may lie hidden, for want of contrast. The life of the city and its laws may then most clearly reveal nature and the life that is most in accord with nature.

While the full development of political life, embodied by the regime governed by law, is the necessary prerequisite to the philosophic life, it remains the case that for philosophy the institution of law is a double-edged sword. Each city is organized around some account, articulated by religious myth, of its origins and way of life. That account answers the fundamental question of how man ought to live. The question of the best life is thus already determined by the law and its religious foundation. In doing so the city closes off the question as a question. The citizen is therefore compelled to be and remain largely unreflective. While law begins to reveal nature in its fullest sense and thus makes possible the philosophic life, it demands an uncompromising allegiance that the philosopher cannot pledge. For this reason, Lucretius states that the institution of law “taints the prizes of life” (V, 1151). The universal command issued in the law to pursue something other than one’s own good applies to the philosophic as well. The institution of law is necessary to curb the naturally selfish tendencies of individual members of the community. Man must choose the “yoke of law” to cooperatively produce some semblance of order and tranquility. Under the institution of law, the life of the mind that is essentially selfish is confronted with the compulsion to act in accord with the common good. The life of the mind devoted to the truth about the nature of things realizes that there is no naturally existing common good (V, 958–959). The common good articulated by the city is the good of only the majority of men. As the philosopher’s good transcends political life, no understanding of the common good can fully encompass his own. For Lucretius, the natural good of the individual can only be found in the philosophic life, a good that cannot be made common to all, and which the majority of men find repulsive, impious, and criminal. For the majority of men to live in harmony, they need to abandon the selfish pursuit of their own good for an unqualified allegiance to the conventional city and its gods.

The philosopher however has his own temples, as told in the proem to Book II. Nothing is sweeter according to Lucretius than to view men at war high up within the well-walled temples of the wise. The temples

of the wise are built from a vantage removed from the political machinations of the majority of men. Although the philosopher seeks to remove himself from the harsh practice of politics, he realizes his dependence upon the city. That the peaceful existence of the philosopher depends upon the disquieted disposition of the many reveals that the philosopher is reasonably seen as a parasite on the political community.<sup>25</sup> Wishing nothing more than to be left alone, Lucretius demonstrates that in fact there is no possibility of a strictly private life. The very fact that Lucretius composed the poem reveals that the idea of an "epicurean garden" is a dangerous fiction. Philosophy cannot live outside of the city because there is no security there. The philosopher needs to live within a walled city. The philosopher for this reason must concern himself with politics, if only to the extent that he must demonstrate that he takes seriously what the city takes seriously.

The philosopher is in the difficult position of both needing the city and being unable to accept what maintains the city. The philosophic life that seeks the truth about the nature of things cannot help but come into tension with the needs of the political community. Although the philosopher needs the protection that the community offers, he cannot pledge allegiance to that which sustains the community. Lucretius has two fatherlands: the intellectual fatherland of Athens and that of his native tongue, the particular society of Rome (VI, 1–6 and I, 136–139).<sup>26</sup> The search for the truth about nature cannot but question the conventions of law and the guarantees provided by the gods that are the foundation of the philosopher's particular society. This questioning constituted the beginnings of the philosophic life. The city's laws, and the belief in the gods that maintains the laws' effectiveness, cannot abide such questioning. It is here that the philosophic life appears strange and terrible to political men such as Memmius may also look dangerous. As the proem to Book I shows, the philosopher must begin by challenging the view that the good is the ancestral, a view that is of particular importance to Memmius, as a favorite of Venus. The proem to Book I claims that as a favorite of Venus, Memmius is central to the defense of the city.

The investigation into Lucretius's intention of finding a place for philosophy in the city is an investigation into the predicament of philosophy. Lucretius's choice of Memmius as addressee is driven by this predicament and the inherent difficulties in responding to it. Once such difficulties in Lucretius's intention are grasped, the reader recognizes his awareness of philosophy's dependence on the political community; why the community rightly regards the philosophic life with suspicion, if not hostility; and why Lucretius must defend that life to the political community. The poem in this way emerges as a serious work of political philosophy.

Lucretius's intention is the necessary foundation for understanding the poem in its entirety and the lens through which the poem must be viewed. If the poem is read in this light, Lucretius is revealed to be no mere materialist. Lucretius's seeds may not be offered as "good coin of the realm" but as a preliminary to a theology that means to deflect accusations of impiety (I, 80–81) and to establish the possibility that the philosopher is most properly pious (V, 8). Lucretius may appear bold, but his boldness still "bow[s] to civil law" and his theology is not driven by an antitheological animus that wishes to "bare popular opinions to the skin."<sup>27</sup> Lucretius confronts the prevailing religious opinion of the city with due and full recognition of the necessities of political life and the self-awareness of one who recognizes the impossibility of an epicurean garden.

## CHAPTER 5

### GODS OF THE PHILOSOPHERS AND GODS OF THE CITY

Given the nature of political life and its fundamental limits, we may begin to understand why Lucretius fits within Burke's understanding of the less enterprising Epicureans.<sup>1</sup> In light of Lucretius's account of the origins of philosophy, as seen in the analysis of the proem to Book I, philosophy must at some point justify its challenge to the city. That justification of philosophy must be understood with due consideration to Lucretius's account of traditional religious piety. The purpose here is to show how Lucretius focuses on the political significance of the traditional religious teaching. Religion's political significance as we began to see in the previous chapter is tied to Lucretius's account of the spread of religious belief. Having outlined the full political dimensions of religious belief, Lucretius offers an account of the gods that presents an alternative view of religious piety that attempts to shield philosophy from accusations that philosophy undermines the political community. We will then be prepared to return to the fear Lucretius voices in the proem to Book I to consider the extent that this new theology succeeds in securing philosophy's life in the city. The manner in which Lucretius seeks to fulfill this task can only be appreciated by serious consideration of what has been taken to be one of the more curious aspects of the poem: its finale. Having placed it within the context of Lucretius's intention, and the difficulties attendant to that intention, we will be in a position in the concluding chapter to consider what Lucretius would have made of the boldness of the Enlightenment project.

#### I

Lucretius has surprisingly few sustained remarks on traditional religion. When focusing on religion, he is chiefly concerned with the relationship

between politics and traditional religious belief. The most significant passage is his discussion of the procession of the Great Mother from Book II. We will, however, begin by returning briefly to the proem to Book I to draw out something of that relationship.

As was argued in the analysis of the proem to Book I, the city and its political authority rest on the association of the ancestral and gods. Central to this political teaching is that to be Roman is to have kinship with the first cause or first thing.<sup>2</sup> While the proem to Book I accepts the governance of Venus, nature, Lucretius later claims, creates all things (I, 54–56). To challenge Venus's governance is to challenge the authority of the gods and their direct link to Roman ancestry. That those who desire to look into the nature of things must stand against religion is made explicit in what comes next: Lucretius praises the man from Greece as the first to have stood up to the priests (I, 62–79, see also V, 745, 1218–1221). There we observed a genuine battle between the man from Greece and religious authority, as he is depicted storming the stronghold of religion and “breaking down the gates to nature” (I, 71), and setting a “deep-set boundary mark.” The man from Greece moves what the city regards as sacred and unmovable. His discoveries and not the laws of the city or its religious authorities are now to determine what can and cannot be, not the city or religious authority.

That by following Lucretius Memmius believes that he is embarking on a life of impiety is thus well-founded by philosophy's radical questioning of religious and political authority. Lucretius attempts to confront this fear by showing Memmius that in fact it is religious belief that is “more often” (I, 82) responsible for crime.<sup>3</sup> Lucretius thus recounts the sacrifice of Iphigenia at the hands of her father to guarantee the safety of the Greek fleet as it set out against Troy. Agamemnon's sacrifice of his virgin daughter to Diana is apparently proof enough for Lucretius to claim, “So much evil could religion prompt” (I, 101). One might question how biting this example is since it is not a Roman example and a mythical one.

Lucretius argues that the sacrifice of Iphigenia demonstrates the great crimes that religion is responsible for, but what exactly is the nature of the crime committed by Agamemnon? The sacrifice of his daughter is certainly an example of a crime against an innocent child; it is a crime that one could argue is against man's fundamental attachment to his own. It is, however, a crime meant to serve the political community led by Agamemnon. There was then a political good that the sacrifice was intended to serve; neither does Lucretius say that Diana was not appeased nor does he state the men were in doubt that the Goddess was appeased by the sacrifice. One might then wonder what the effect on the political

community, and its willingness and ability to defend itself, would be if it lost this religious support.

Traditional piety leads man to consider something higher, such as the political community, than mere interest. Agamemnon's sacrifice shows the need to sacrifice one's own for the good of the city. We are thus opened to the possibility that a political community without religious belief would be more terrible than one with strong public worship. That such is the case may be gleaned from Lucretius's fullest discussion of traditional piety and its relation to political health: the procession of the Great Mother.<sup>4</sup> Lucretius presents the poetic song about the Great Mother as an attempt to overcome or hide the terrible fact that the world must participate in the eternal process of generation and corruption. The first teaching of the procession of the Great Mother is therefore a cosmological one.<sup>5</sup> The divinity of the earth and its characterization as a Mother, suggests its eternity and its status as a generator of life. The procession is the fabulous outcome of man's uneasiness with the divination that the movement of the heavens and other cosmological phenomena do not bode well for the longevity of the earth. What follows are elements of human striving that endeavor to influence this foreboding possibility.

Following the cosmological teaching, the procession turns to earthly affairs and symbolizes what is necessary for the health of the political community (II, 604–643). First, the chariot of the Great Mother is yoked to lions as a symbol of the demand that children bow before their parents. The Great Mother's head is circled with a mural crown symbolizing her protection of the city. She is surrounded by Phrygian hordes, who are her original devotees and were rewarded with grain. Grain is later to be revealed as the first gift allowing for permanent settlement (VI, 1). Eunuch priests attend to her as a sign that those who break her covenant are declared unfit to bear and raise children. The procession is accompanied by the insane fury of knife-bearing priests and music said to drive men with "impious hearts" and "ungrateful minds" to fear the Goddess's power. Men-at-arms follow her to symbolize her holy covenant and its demands that men fight for fatherland. Undoubtedly the procession thus contributes to patriotism and allegiance to the city that cannot be separated from allegiance to the cosmological and religious teaching upon which it rests.

Lucretius concludes his discussion of the procession by stating, "Although this is excellently and well set forth it is far removed from truth and reason" (II, 644–645). It is certainly the case that, according to Lucretius, religion gives rise to the unreasonable desire, or is born of the desire, to make man at home in what seems to be an uncaring world. Religion therefore cannot be the path to happiness. However, Lucretius's

criticism is mitigated by reserved praise. Religion is “far from” truth and reason; it is not by definition simply contrary to truth and reason. Religion accepts that man is not the highest thing in nature or the origin of its meaning. Any attempt it may undertake to bring human things into harmony with the nature of things will be moderated to some degree by this understanding. Lucretius directs our attention to the possibility that the religious account and religious belief are an untrue but powerful response to something fundamental in the human experience of the capriciousness and uncaring natural situation in which man finds himself. Lucretius’s polemical attack on religion as a delusion and a major source of crime from the proem to Book I is thus tempered by an understanding of religion and religious belief as indicative of something meaningful in the fundamental nature of man. The religious teaching is excellently told insofar as it embodies a concern, shared by philosophy, to possess knowledge of the whole. Although its teaching is “far from truth and reason,” it is worthy of praise because it is directed by a concern with what is most important to human flourishing.

Lucretius’s qualified sympathy is born of an awareness that religion is responsive to natural human longing and that philosophy needs therefore to be mindful of the needs of the political community and political necessity.<sup>6</sup> The procession of the Magna Mater and the picture that we have been able to draw of traditional piety begins to suggest that religion is responsible for the coherence and continuation of a sound polity. If the political community is held together by a fable, we must consider the political effect of the traditional account of religious piety being subjected to the zetetic questioning that characterizes the investigation into the nature of things. We can do so by a close consideration of Lucretius’s account of the spread of religion.

## II

As we saw in the previous chapter immediately following the account of the emergence of political society out of man’s original forest dwelling condition, Lucretius promises to provide the cause of the spread of religion in “great nations” and how it flourished in “great states” (V, 1161–1168). The spread of religion is here associated with great nations and cities, and is coeval with the development of political society. The larger context of Lucretius’s account of how belief in the gods spread amongst the “great nations” and filled the cities with altars, is the “evolution,” for lack of a better term, of political life. With the invention of property and the use of gold, the reign of kings based upon the natural standards of beauty and strength (V, 1111) gave way to a situation of great chaos and



violence. Previously, the allocation of resources according to the natural standard of strength and beauty limited what the majority of men could secure for their well-being and thus their independence (V, 1140). Greed and the desire for revenge leads to regicide and destroys the natural standard regulating the desires and designs of men, giving way to great violence and chaos. The chaos that erupts reveals the violence that lurks beneath political order and the possibilities of a fanatical desire for justice. This chaos came to an end once men tired of the violence and were taught to elect magistrates and institute law (V, 1145–1147). The institution of law is a substitute for the natural standards and fear that govern under kingship.

That the account of the spread of religion immediately follows the discovery of laws suggests that religion is a politically salutary supplement to the laws.<sup>7</sup> Religion is then a means to suppress the violence that simmers beneath political order and a remedy for man's excessive desire for justice. Lucretius's earlier polemic against the tyranny and injustice of religion now gives way to an understanding of religion as a politically salutary restraint on the inordinate desire for justice.<sup>8</sup> Religion is also presented as a necessary supplement to the limited reach of the law. Though men might believe that in breaking the law they can deceive all men and gods, they "must be unsure whether it will be a secret forever" (V, 1156–1157). It is the religious supplement that plays upon the uneasiness with which the majority of men carry their misdeeds.<sup>9</sup> Far from the criminality of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, we see now that religion is a salutary and necessary part of political life.

The politically salutary character of religion may explain why the belief in the gods spread with the development of political community proper, but it is not a sufficient explanation of the origin of belief. The source of religious belief, as Lucretius will show, is in what is most fundamental in the nature of man. Lucretius's treatment of religion presents it as composed of conventional elements but fundamentally natural to man. The naturalness of religion is quietly hinted at in the discussion of man's forest dwelling existence. Although men in that condition did not fear death, it is said that when suffering from the wounds inflicted on them by wild beasts they cried out to Orcus (V, 996). Man is presented as inconceivable without religion. Their cries are born of their vulnerability to the harshness of nature. There is no indication that the eyes of forest men ever looked upon the heavens with wonder. In fact the motion of the heavens is explicitly said not to have caused them wonder, and they never considered that "eternal night might grip the earth forever" (V, 973–980). Once men lift their eyes to the heavens they sought explanations for the ordered, and at times menacing, motions of the heavens. Men "sought

refuge” in attributing these motion to the gods, as the frightening possibility was revealed to them that the earth had a beginning and therefore must also have an end (V, 1211–1214). The deepening of religious belief is dependent upon man having become suspicious that the walls of the world will not last forever, and that our world will in time come to an end like all composite things must.

The full realization that such is in fact the truth about the whole is made possible only with a high level of advancement in the arts that accompanies fully formed political society. It is within political society that man comes to see the fact that, despite his arts, he remains no match for the power of nature (V, 1233–1240).<sup>10</sup> The extent of man’s neediness and vulnerability and nature’s indifference only becomes fully apparent once he is no longer continually preoccupied with finding resources for mere self-preservation. With political life and the attendant arts, man acquires ambitions and desires that extend beyond mere self-preservation, as opposed to the forest dwelling men who knew nothing but to provide for their survival (V, 961). The advancement of the arts reveals that the arts are a mixed blessing. Their advancement begins to relieve man’s estate and engender hopes that the arts can conquer nature’s indifference. With the development of the arts man is given greater comfort and ease, but he sees more clearly that the nature of things confirms what he had already divined: the indifference of nature and the fate of the world. For the majority of men, the divination of this fact gives rise to a horror that seeks comfort in divine support for the world. The advancement of the arts is accompanied by advancement in understanding of the hidden force that grinds men down. Religion is therefore meant to remedy the pain stemming from the divination that the objects of men’s loves and desires are not eternal; religion seeks to harmonize what reason establishes as incommensurate.

The foundation of religious belief is a combination of hope and fear: hope that the walls of the world will not collapse, fear that man is helpless in influencing the outcome. The nature of the gods is directly reflected in such hope and fear. The specific content of man’s account of the nature of the gods is indicative of the true origin of religious belief. Lucretius reveals that the ways men ascribe certain qualities to the gods sheds light on the origin of belief.

The two most significant things about the gods are first, that they are able to toil and achieve great wonders without fatigue, and second, that fear of death never troubles them (V, 1169–1171). That the gods achieve much without toil ought to be taken to demonstrate that the gods can obtain what they seek or desire without effort, for their bodies are not an impediment to the satisfaction of their desires. Ascribing this power

to the gods is, according to Lucretius, born out of a sense of impotence in the face of the power of nature. That weakness can be most substantially traced to man's body. Part of that weakness and vulnerability is the constant need to replenish ourselves with food. That the gods "seemed" to move without toil and loss of strength must mean that the gods have no need for food.<sup>11</sup> Our need for food is only the most basic aspect of our neediness. Lucretius often employs the need for food metaphorically for a greater neediness that is tied to the body. The most important instance is found in the account of love. There erotic madness is couched in the language of hunger (IV, 858–876). That the gods are free of the need for food may indicate that they are likewise free of love. The perfectly tranquil lives of the gods render it difficult to imagine that they should be plagued by love.<sup>12</sup>

Such powerful creatures as the gods, men believed, could not be "easily" overcome by any force and therefore men "gave" them eternal life. Lucretius then says that man believed the gods to be the happiest creatures because they did not fear death. The association drawn between the gods' happiness and their freedom from fear of death is a projection of man's highest desire: the gods' perfection is due to their being free from fortune and necessity. They are accordingly in all respects perfectly self-sufficient, totally without need or fear. That which most moves man and troubles him finds resolution in his theology. A proper understanding of the nature of the gods is thus an appreciation of the complexity of man's neediness. The parsing of theology is an essential part of the investigation into the nature of man's soul.

The passage that may most reveal the source of the false additions of the mind may be found in the finale of Book IV's account of love. This passage, which is surpassed by none in hilarity, reveals with all seriousness the root of men's belief in the gods (IV, 1153–1170). Man's awareness of his own deficiencies, neediness, and frailty gives rise to a desire to possess something that provides him with the notion that he may commune with perfection, if not possess perfection. Love and fear of death culminate in the desire to possess the beautiful as one's own and forever, as the beloved becomes erroneously described as a goddess. Belief in the gods is a remedy for the fear induced by the intimation that the objects of man's erotic attachments are impermanent and imperfect.<sup>13</sup>

Lucretius's explanation of belief in the gods is placed at the end of his account of political life as it is within political life that man most experiences his weakness and insignificance. Attempts to compensate for this weakness by way of art only serve to aggravate his desires. His erotic longings and fears are thus given evergreater expression as his attempts to compensate for what he divines is the truth about the whole are thwarted.

Liberated from seeking after mere self-preservation, man divines that there is a disharmony between his needs and the way of the cosmos. The only way to bring such things into harmony is the guarantee provided by the gods that the walls of the world will not collapse.

### III

If we follow Lucretius's explanations as to why he composed his poem, we see that his final intention is that he wishes to be the first to bring genuine philosophy to Rome (V, 335–336). As philosophy is born of, and apparently justified by, its rising against religion, any introduction of philosophy to the city demands that it provide a defense of itself against the charge of impiety. Given the politically salutary and irreplaceable nature of belief, philosophy's introduction into the community requires that it introduce a reformed account of the gods that defends the philosophic life. Lucretius seeks to provide such a theological justification of the philosophic life by way of his "official" account of the gods.

Providing an account of Lucretius's "official" theology is particularly difficult given his procedure. Although it is certainly true that religion provides the subtext of the much of the poem, nowhere does Lucretius provide us with a sustained account of the true nature of the gods. This economy of speech is indicative of the nature of the difficulty that Lucretius faces: any defense of the philosophic life must be made on religious grounds, as the political community must be a religious community. Any defense must introduce rational deliberation into theological matters without undermining what religion provides the political community. Lucretius's economy of speech is thus a response to the precariousness of the relation between philosophy and the city, and philosophy's understanding of political necessity.

The gods enjoy perfect peace of mind because they do not suffer from fear or love. In the context of Lucretius's discussion of such things and the larger context of his atomism, this means that the gods have no needs or concerns of the body. Their bodies are accordingly exceedingly fine, which explains why we cannot see them, why they are scarcely visible to our minds, and that their abodes are similarly fine. The perfect peace of mind of the gods is due to their freedom from fear for their bodies, that is, death, and freedom from the desire to transcend their bodies, that is, love (I, 44–49 II, 646–651). Instead of the myths of the gods plagued by suffering of the body and physical exertion (III, 977–1013), Lucretius provides an image of the gods absolutely free of such suffering. They are happy due not to the power of their bodies but to their freedom from bodily concern.

Why, Lucretius asks, would such blessed creatures effect anything for our sake? (V, 165–186) Lucretius's rhetorical question begins to explain the power of the gods not in terms of their actions but what they would not seek to do. The emphasis on what the gods would not be willing to do is to be contrasted with statements made regarding what the gods cannot do given their nature and the nature of things. Lucretius uses both of these approaches to the question of the power of the gods and their intervention, or lack thereof, in the affairs of man. Our first glimpse of the nature of the gods is provided in the proem to Book I, where Lucretius states that the gods enjoy their immortal lives in perfect peace and joy cut off from human affairs (I, 45–46). The gods enjoy their tranquility because they are not moved by chance, fortune, or accident. Accidents are said to be, "slavery . . . poverty and riches, freedom, war, concord, all else which may come and go while the nature of things remains intact, these, as is right, we are accustomed to call accidents" (I, 455–458). The gods are happy precisely because they are free from care for the human and political things.

That the gods cannot be disturbed from their tranquility to undertake projects for man's sake can best be seen in the account of the genesis of the earth. We are told that we should not ascribe divine origin to the earth, as the nature of the earth attests. The earth is so replete with flaws that it surely cannot be the creation of the gods (II, 167–183, V, 156–194). The essential point is that Lucretius's theology does not try to establish a harmony between the nature of things and the nature of the gods. The magnificence of the gods is rather their blessedness, peacefulness, and happiness despite the world's disharmony.

Just as surely as the gods did not create the world, they do not govern it. Lucretius suggests that the gods' nature is incompatible with such rule (II, 1090–94). The boundless whole is too large and the innumerable worlds too vast to be governed by the gods. The gods are presented as both unable and unwilling to govern the boundless whole. That the gods cannot, and would not desire to, rule the whole reveals the most essential fact about them: they are fundamentally limited in what they can do and yet remain perfectly blessed and happy beings, despite their limitations.

Lucretius's account of the gods finds its complement in the description of the life of the philosopher, in the beneficence of the man from Greece, and the understanding of genuine piety. The glory of the man from Greece appears to reach a pinnacle in the proem to Book V. Lucretius there claims that the discoveries of the man from Greece merits his deification; "he was a god, yes god" (V, 8). He is deserving of such high praise because he was first to reveal the life of reason and through his wisdom brought us out of the darkness into the light (V, 9–12). The man

from Greece gave to us what would properly allow us to enjoy the true pleasures of life: "But good life was impossible without a purged mind; which makes him seem to us with better reason a god, from whom even now spreading abroad through great nations come sweet consolations of life to soothe our minds" (V, 18–21).

The poem of Book V's praise of the man from Greece is however exaggerated, and Lucretius issues a correction in the poem to Book VI. There he states that it is not the man from Greece that is divine but his discoveries; he is dead but his wisdom lives on (VI, 7). After having observed that life's needs were "mostly" easily attainable, and that life was "about as secure as it could be," the man from Greece saw that the majority of men still troubled their minds with profitless complaints (VI, 1–19). This was because their minds were like vessels full of holes. The man from Greece thus did not seek to "take life from storms so vast and such vast darkness," but rather sought to set "due limit upon desire and fear," and set forth the "highest good." The man from Greece thus prescribed the life of happiness founded on the recognition of its fundamental limits.

The man from Greece accomplished his benefaction primarily through lengthy speeches about the gods (V, 52–54). The possibility of happiness amidst great peoples (V, 20–21), we might then be drawn to conclude, is made possible by speeches about the gods. Lengthy speeches about the gods are conspicuously absent from Lucretius's account. They are replaced with speeches on astronomical phenomena. Their replacement may be due to prudence on Lucretius's part as they are better suited to achieve happiness amongst "great peoples." Lucretius will explain what force governs the motion of the moon, the stars, and the sun that Memmius does not think "them to revolve by some plan of the gods" (V, 81).

The aim of the refutation of the divinity of the heavenly motions is to introduce a level of rational doubt into deliberations on theology.<sup>14</sup> Lucretius seeks to present an argument that scientific deliberations on what are otherwise considered to be theological matters can in fact reveal the truth about the gods and strengthen our beliefs. By arguing that piety is the ability to look undisturbed at the nature of things, Lucretius suggests that piety does not forbid the rational investigation of the heavens but in fact demands it (V, 1194–1203). Genuine piety demands that one have a proper account of nature to revere the gods properly. Only by way of an investigation into the truth about celestial phenomena can one come to see that they are not the acts of vengeful, or beneficent, gods. Lucretius asks his reader to consider the investigation into astronomy, and the nature of things more generally, as an act of piety, if not piety itself.

Lucretius's account of how men moved from the observation of celestial phenomena to belief in gods concludes with a series of questions that attempt to explain that it is want of knowledge about the beginnings and begetting of the world that leads to terror and confusion, and ultimately impiety. The questions are indicative of the zetetic questioning that best characterizes the philosophic life, and the ability to rest satisfied with the limited intelligibility of the whole. True piety is to look upon the nature of things without dismay. To look upon nature without dismay is to live according to the limitations inherent in all things, which is its own pleasure, albeit a rather austere pleasure.<sup>15</sup>

Lucretius's dissection and redefinition of piety may not account for the possibility that the rational investigation of astronomical phenomenon remains potentially destructive of the virtues necessary for the city. Does Lucretius's piety adequately provide for civic attachment and political virtue as did the procession of the Magna Mater? The Lucretian teaching on genuine piety and the philosophic life argues that genuine piety is only possible by adherence to a rather vigorous, manly ethic. The philosophic life, contrary to popular opinion, is one of courage and moderation.<sup>16</sup> The Lucretian understanding of piety, premised on a rigorous ethic may then deflect hostility to the philosophic life. By arguing that the investigation is only possible given these virtues, Lucretius provides a defense of the philosophic life by drawing upon the very virtues that sustain political life.

Charges of impiety are often linked to accusations of hedonism.<sup>17</sup> Lucretius's ethic seeks to deflect such criticisms. His teaching has consistently been on the side of the limitations of pleasure; our bodies need ever so little to be satisfied (II, 20–33), and tranquility of mind can be found only through reason and the study of the nature of things (II, 34–62). Hedonism is difficult to ascribe to Lucretius, since he has very little to say about the pleasure of philosophy. If Lucretius's teaching is hedonistic, it is an austere hedonism. Body and mind, we are frequently reminded, are satisfied only by way of recognition of and conformity with the essential fact of our existence: that we are fundamentally limited creatures. Happiness is the outcome of an ability to live within those limitations. To live well is to live in accord with one's fundamental limitations. Moderation is thus consistently presented as the essential virtue of Lucretius's hedonism.

What then of courage? The courage of the philosophic life is attested to by the only passage that speaks of Epicurus by name. The passage compares three pairs of men: King Ancus and Homer; Xerxes and Democritus; and Epicurus and Scipio. The juxtaposition of the contemplative life and that of great political action confirms the notion that the courage of poets and philosophers in the face of death can rival that of the greatest warriors

and kings.<sup>18</sup> It is the manner in which the great poets and philosophers meet their death that for Lucretius is most remarkable. The picture provided here of the courage of philosophy is to be compared with the vulgar view that the philosophic life is one of idleness and uselessness.

The fearlessness of the philosopher who willingly “loiters at the gates of death” may display his great courage but this does not settle questions as to the politically salutary nature of the “official” account of the gods. While the new theology attempts to provide a defense of the philosophic life on theological grounds, and the Lucretian ethic may deflect criticism of hedonism and lack of manly virtue, there remains the difficulty as to whether Lucretius’s official teaching can provide for the political needs of the community.<sup>19</sup>

The potentially less than politically salutary nature of Lucretius’s official theology is revealed in the account of lightning that is traditionally understood by most men to be a sign of divine anger. Lucretius proceeds to give an account, the longest of any single phenomenon discussed in Book VI, of the effects of lightning (VI, 219–238), its nature (VI, 239–322), and in which times of year and season it is most likely to occur (VI, 357–378). Lucretius then concludes the account with a series of rhetorical questions that show the absurdity of attributing lightning to the gods and the absence of divine justice in nature (VI, 379–422). Once we understand the truth about the nature of lightning, we have no need of “Tuscan songs” seeking after the hidden intent of gods (VI, 379–382). A rational account of lightning would presumably go some way toward liberating men from the fear of gods (II, 385, 1090–1104, VI, 82–91, 387–422). To liberate man from the fear of gods by way of a rational account of such phenomena as lightning is to release men of the salutary restraint of fear of divine punishment. But why present a teaching on the gods that by Lucretius’s own indications cannot provide what is politically expedient and salutary? Lucretius does not directly address this difficulty.

The rational account of lightning may liberate man from the salutary restraint imposed by fear of the gods. This is, however, just a prelude to a treatment of the irregular and frightening phenomena of nature that concludes the poem. Lucretius’s account of such destructive natural forces reveals the relative powerlessness of man in the face of nature’s strength. Given nature’s destructive power, man’s creative energies seem largely in vain. By presenting the fullness of nature’s power and random destructiveness, Lucretius may be indirectly responding to the potentially politically corrupting aspect of his theology. The full exposition of nature’s destructiveness and indifference to man may temper the political ambitions and desire for glory that Memmius and other political men



have. If the monuments that men seek to create to their glory are not immune to nature's constant generation and destruction, the pursuit of immortality through political glory is foolish. The danger in Lucretius's teaching is that if one accepts the theology but not the ethic, one may be tempted to become a Caesar. To understand the theological implications of the physics and to reject the ethics may provide an incredibly expanded horizon for political action. The physics, free of the ethics, may provide Memmius with a justification of his ambitions and sound support for a necessary ruthlessness in political affairs.<sup>20</sup> The conclusion to the poem is the most pointed of Lucretius's efforts to temper such ambitions.

#### IV

The conclusion to the poem has troubled many commentators. The proem to Book I, together with many indications along the way, leads the reader to believe that the conclusion will be a culmination of a journey from darkness to light. That the poem ends with darkness and bitterness and not sweetness and light has led to the hypothesis that Lucretius died before he was able to complete the poem. Part of this dissatisfaction with the ending is due to a misinterpretation of Lucretius's intention. Many read the poem as his attempt to convert his readers to Epicureanism so as to liberate them from the terrors inspired by religion. Therefore, they assume that to leave the reader with the unmitigated despair of the plague must mean the poem is incomplete. Lucretius's true intention, as mentioned, was to defend the philosophic life against charges of impiety. The difficulty is that while philosophy is endangered by the religious zeal of the community, it is also dependent on that zeal insofar as it is largely responsible for political order and the ability of the community to defend itself. The conclusion is a response to this difficulty.

The promise made at the beginning of the poem to free men of the "night of the mind" through knowledge of the celestial things and thus free men of fear of the gods appears unfulfilled, for Lucretius continues to speak of the fears of children in the proem to Book VI (VI, 35–42). That Memmius will be cowed by the threats of the priests and abandon the study of the nature of things is presented as a near certainty in the proem to Book I: "Even you today at some time or other will be overcome by the fearful words of seers and try to abandon us" (I, 103–104). This general hopelessness remains in the proem to the final book. All efforts to bring his readers' mind to the truth about the nature of things will fail as they "slips back into their old beliefs and take on heartless masters whom they deem almighty" (VI, 58–64).

Lucretius's promise to free his reader from the night of the mind may appear to the reader as having been rescinded by the account of the plague that concludes the poem. The brutality of nature's indifference must leave the reader with the impression that there can be no solace to the essential fact about the nature of things. Whatever comfort maybe derived from the contemplation of the nature of things appears to vanish at the end of the poem. Destroyed with the solace offered by the contemplation of the nature of things must be the likelihood of Lucretius inspiring a movement away from the foundation myths and cosmology of political life. The conclusion of the poem may then be a politically salutary one; it is almost a guarantee that when confronted with this most terrible truth, the reader will return to his previous religious opinions. By driving the sweetness of philosophy underground, Lucretius guarantees that his search for the truth about the whole will remain a largely solitary one. If he wished to gain devotees, the ending of the poem would appear to be a significant obstacle to that wish.

Lucretius's account of the plague is an adaptation of Thucydides's account of the plague that struck Athens in *The Peloponnesian War*. Lucretius's account differs in two significant ways. First, Thucydides places responsibility for the terrible effect of the plague on the choice of the Athenians to remain within the city and not go out to fight the Spartans. The plague is therefore largely a product of the war. Lucretius, by contrast, presents the plague as an entirely natural occurrence (VI, 1259–1263). It is, therefore, not an historical retelling of an event conditioned by particular circumstances, but a picture of the last days of the human species. For this reason, Lucretius's account is far more terrible than this account. Second, Thucydides states that he also suffered from the plague and that, while physicians were initially unable to cure the sick, out of ignorance of what caused it, he suggests that they were not simply helpless: “*At first* neither were the physicians able to cure it” [emphasis added].<sup>21</sup> Thucydides later remarks that it was uncertain how much medicine benefited the patient, as some who were treated fared no better than those who were not.<sup>22</sup> Thucydides's own sickness suggests that he was capable of engaging in his activity despite the plague. While Thucydides was afflicted, his account is such that he does not describe his own ailment but what other men suffered. His recollection of their suffering suggests that despite being ill, he was still able to go about the city to observe and record the suffering of others. Philosophy according to the Thucydidean account is possible under the most adverse circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Lucretius is by contrast much more definitive about the ineffectiveness of medicine.

In Lucretius's account, medicine is impotent: "Medicine mumbled in silent fear" (VI, 1178). More devastating is our recollection that Lucretius likens himself to a doctor and his poem to the medical art (I, 935 and IV, 11). The impotence of medicine reveals as empty the promise of happiness that began the poem. Unlike in Thucydides, there is no suggestion here that philosophy is possible under such circumstances—the philosopher fares no better than anyone else. Lucretius states that "all" the temples were filled with the bodies of the dead, the temples of the wise (II, 5) apparently no exception. The great bodily suffering of the afflicted is frequently accompanied by terrible mental distress; men suffered from amnesia, all mental powers failed, their minds were deranged, and no man was seen to be untroubled by death, sorrow, and disease (VI, 1159, 1183, 1203, 1233, 1240, 1251, and 1280). Much more than that of Thucydides, Lucretius's account emphasizes that no man, regardless of the completeness of his knowledge of the nature of things, is able to withstand the plague untroubled.

The account of the plague is meant to show us that the fear engendered by the plague is the fear of the end of the world. The apocalyptic presentation of the plague reveals the full indifference of the nature of things to the life of the city. We witness in the account of the plague that fear of the end of the world undermines attachment to the conventions of the city including justice. The breakdown of society is far worse than society itself. Such an outcome could certainly not be said about the fear of gods. If anything, Lucretius's account of the plague reiterates that religion is positively related to the maintenance of justice. The plague suggests that the collapse of religion is far worse than religion itself.

## CONCLUSION

### THE MODERN REVERSAL

As Edmund Burke suggests, the ancient Epicureans were far less enterprising than their modern counterparts. We are now in a position to judge the truth of Burke's reflection and what Lucretius might have made of his more enterprising cousins. The following remarks are intended only as a prelude to a more thoroughgoing investigation of Enlightenment rationalism. What follows is only a thumbnail sketch of what it is that unites the principal architects of modern rationalism, notwithstanding the profound differences and disagreements between them. While one can appreciate the influence of classical Epicureanism in early modernity, there are political, theological, and philosophic motives that lead the moderns to reject the classical understanding of philosophy and modify the original Epicurean motive of sought-after soulful tranquility.

As was briefly seen in the introduction, many early modern philosophers were influenced by the fifteenth-century rediscovery of Lucretius's poem. They found in *De Rerum Natura* the most spirited critique of religion of any classical source. The core of that critique is that the study of the nature of things is necessary and sufficient to liberate man from the fear of gods because it rules out the possibility of divine governance of the world and intervention in human affairs. The critique is tied to, but perhaps not simply dependent on, a materialist physics and its denial of a created universe and the impossibility of creation ex nihilo.

The early modern thinkers do not however adopt what Lucretius argued, and what all classical thought argued, ought to be the human response to the nature of nature. Enlightenment rationalism adopted the antiteleological account of the nature of things but rejected the account of the best life; the life of contemplation. In doing so, the early moderns fundamentally transformed the end of the Lucretian teaching. Their rejection stems in part from what they perceived to be a contradiction between the physics and an ethics of sought-after tranquility. If man is

without divine guidance in an indifferent nature, then the life of tranquility is foolish and dangerous because it leaves man fundamentally exposed. The way of life encouraged by Machiavelli and his modern captains, in contrast to Lucretius, gives full play to and justifies the industrious and acquisitive spirit. Machiavelli drew the conclusion that, because the nature of things is one of constant purposeless motion and man's condition one of perpetual threatened insecurity, the sanctuary of an Epicurean garden is an impossible dream.<sup>1</sup> In this, they were not wrong. We have tried to show how Lucretius's poem is itself a testament to the fact that the philosopher cannot simply retreat behind the well-walled temples of the wise. For Lucretius, to be sure, philosophy seeks a certain withdrawal from political life, a withdrawal not unlike that sketched by Plato's Socrates<sup>2</sup>, while recognizing that no simple retreat is possible. Philosophy seeks to escape the toil of the city behind the "well-walled temples of the wise" but remains aware of its dependence upon those who toil outside its walls. That Lucretius presents his teaching poetically to a man of considerable political ambitions, is but the first hint that there is no possibility of security within some epicurean garden. The philosopher must come down into the city to defend himself against the charges that the philosophic life is useless if not impious and criminal. The scope and purpose of that defense do not however seek more than to convince the city that the philosophers are not a threat to the health of the community and that they may have unorthodox opinions but they are not atheists or immoralists. The poem seeks to defend the philosophic life, aware of man's naturally incurably erotic nature and the hopes and longings it engenders. The poem, while trying to defend the nonerotic life of philosophy, a life that is necessarily solitary, apolitical, and uncommitted to the attachments that maintain the city, recognizes the imprudence of seeking to render anything but a defense of its way of life. There is no attempt fundamentally to remake man or the city, because such a project would require the overcoming of chance and necessity. Such an undertaking would require the abandonment of the philosophic life as understood by Lucretius.

The early moderns appear to be similarly motivated by a wish to defend the life of philosophy. While Lucretius sought to defend the independence of the philosophic life, his early modern counterparts, dealing with significantly different political and theological circumstances, sought the reestablishment of that independence.<sup>3</sup> As Francis Bacon remarks in his essay *On the Unity of Religion*, given Lucretius's revulsion for pagan religious cruelty such as was inflicted on Iphigenia by her father, if Lucretius had lived in Bacon's times and circumstances Lucretius "would have been seven times more epicure and atheist than he was."

Bacon attributes the violence that plagues his time to the introduction of a "third sword" within Christendom. This is "Mohmet's sword," which aims "to propagat religion by wars or by sanguinary persecutions; to force consciences."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Bacon characterized his times as "the dark days of philosophy."<sup>5</sup> The primary problem for philosophy is that "men's minds" have been "pre-occupied for so many centuries now with religion and theology" that men could not get involved in philosophy properly understood without "danger and damage to their fortunes." The circumstances in which the early modern philosophers found themselves demanded greater boldness. As Spinoza remarks, in concluding the preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, his is a book for "philosophical readers." The "rest of mankind" will not find anything within it that will "please" them, and he would prefer that they in fact leave it alone. The nonphilosophic have "deeply rooted... prejudices embraced under the name religion" and "superstitions no less deeply rooted than fear" that leads them to "praise or blame" all things based upon "impulse rather than reason." Such religiously superstitious readers "will gain no good themselves and might prove a stumbling-block to others, whose philosophy is hampered by the belief that Reason is a mere handmaid to Theology." It is those who fight against such errors that Spinoza's work is "especially" intended "to benefit."<sup>6</sup> The boldness of the early modern philosophers was born of a conviction that the classical defense of philosophy was inadequate to their times and circumstances. The changed circumstances may have necessitated a change in tactics when dealing with the predominant religious opinions of the times. Revealed religion demanded greater boldness on the part of those seeking to defend, or liberate, philosophy but the rise of revealed religion does not clearly demand a change in the definition of philosophy or the attitude of the philosopher.<sup>7</sup>

The early modern philosophers were attracted to Lucretius also because they saw in him an unwillingness to make the kind of concessions that the Platonic Socrates or Aristotle had made to the religious opinions of the city. This may explain why Lucretius does not mention either Plato or Aristotle when discussing his philosophic forbearers and limits himself to a few pre-Socratics. While Lucretius may not have made the kinds of accommodations to the city that Plato had, as limned by Montaigne in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, the ancient philosophers wrote some things, "for the needs of society, like their religions; and on account it was reasonable that they did not want to bare popular opinions to the skin, so as not to breed disorder in people's obedience to the laws and customs of their country." This, Montaigne remarks, is true of the "boldest sects," among which he numbers the Epicureans.<sup>8</sup> Despite what might be

regarded as comparatively greater boldness on Lucretius's part, he shares with all of classical philosophy the conviction that the contemplative life is the only (and sufficient) way of life productive of genuine happiness. This conviction necessarily limits the depth and character of his political engagement with the city and the nature of his defense of the philosophic life. Part of Lucretius's restraint in his treatment of religion is the driving motivation to vindicate the philosophic life as most genuinely pious.

The difficulties faced by the more radical Enlightenment may have been because the classical accommodation with the city had been "too successful." Such success may have paved the way for the capture of philosophy by Christian Scholasticism, for example.<sup>9</sup> This would explain Hobbes's fight with the "Schoole-men" of the universities and his characterization of "Aristoteliety" as the subjugation of philosophy to the status of "handmaid to the Romane religion." In the penultimate chapter of *Leviathan*, Hobbes points to the abuse of Aristotle's metaphysics at the hands of the "schools," part of which Hobbes attributes to Aristotle himself. The problem emerges with the term "metaphysics" itself. Metaphysics may be understood, and one suspects that according to Hobbes should be understood, as merely that part of Aristotle's philosophy "placed after his natural philosophy." Not limiting themselves to that definition the schools take metaphysics "for books of supernatural philosophy: for the word metaphysics will bear both these senses." The supernatural aspects of Aristotle's "vain philosophy" are highlighted by Hobbes as the source of the difficulty. The "errors brought into the Church" are a consequence of the "entities and essences of Aristotle: which it may be he knew to be false philosophy; but writ it as a thing consonant to, and corroborative of their religion." Aristotle made this concession to the religion of Athens, "fearing the fate of Socrates."<sup>10</sup>

Such classical concession-making is a subject of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary* article on Lucretius. Bayle begins by saying that he does not trouble himself "to enquire whether Epicurus might not pretend to honor the Deity, only to secure himself from the punishments established against Atheism," but shortly thereafter he does in fact so "trouble himself." Bayle draws attention to the "political" conformity of Epicurus to the religious opinions of the Athenians. Compared with Epicurus, Lucretius appears bolder insofar as he combats providence "without any subterfuge or equivocation or leaving any room for such apologies, as are made by Epicurus." This is despite the fact that the Romans, Bayle says, were "no less jealous of religion nor less severe against impious men than the people of Athens."<sup>11</sup> Lucretius, Bayle continues, may have sought to combat the belief in providential gods but argued for the "holiness, goodness, immortality of God." Lucretius's invocation to Venus could

not however have been sincere according to Bayle because that would have caught him in a contradiction “unworthy of a Philosopher.” Such insincerity leads Bayle to a refection “upon the conduct of the Athenian priests with respect to Epicurus.” It is a curiosity, as previously noted by St. Augustine, that Anaxagoras was harshly treated while Epicurus was left unmolested. Epicurus’s safety was a consequence of his “political” accommodation to the religious devotion of the city. Returning to consider the case of Lucretius, while Lucretius was decidedly bolder than his master he often “adapted his language to popular opinions.” The apparent contradiction of the invocation can therefore be resolved by the fact that “it may easily be showed that he has, on several occasions, adapted his style to the common way of speaking, and to the opinions which he accounted vulgar errors.”<sup>12</sup>

An appreciation of why the classical philosophers accommodated themselves to “popular opinions” can be glimpsed in Montesquieu’s *Pensées*. There Montesquieu describes Plato’s metaphysics thus: “*La doctrine d’un être intelligent n’a donc été trouvée par Platon que comme un preservatif et une arme défensive contre les calomnies des payens zeles.*”<sup>13</sup> Pierre Gassendi, chronicling the life of Epicurus echoes Montesquieu by remarking: “*Je dis seulement que si Epicure a participé à certaines cérémonies de la religion de sa partie tout en les désapprouvant mentalement, il semble qu’on puisse le mettre hors de cause par quelque apparence de justification. C’est qu’il y prenait, parce que le droit civil et tranquillité publique l’attendait de lui : il les désapprouvait parce que rien ne contraint le coeur du sage a adopté le point de vue de la foule . . . C’est alors la part de la sagesse que les philosophes soient du meme avis que le petit nombre, mais parlent et agissent avec le grand nombre.*”<sup>14</sup> The danger to philosophy presented by zealous citizens is not lost on René Descartes. In the sixth part of his *Discourse*, he begins by pointing out and attempting to shield himself from the fate of “someone else” who had written on physics.<sup>15</sup> Descartes does not name that “someone else,” does not say what the nameless man’s fate was, or the hands at which he suffered, but his readers were certainly aware that it was Galileo to whom he was referring. Descartes’s proposed science will succeed and bear fruit only if the theological-political situation changes. That change is perhaps the driving motivation of the *Discourses* and explains their structure and rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> The danger to those who write on physics is similarly articulated by Francis Bacon in the *New Organon*. Bacon’s science seeks the separation of philosophy and theology partly because “in every age natural philosophy has had a difficult and troublesome adversary, namely superstition and the blind, immoderate zeal of religion.” The consequence of their union has always been that those who proposed natural explanations for “lightning and storms to men who had never heard such a thing were found guilty



of impiety against the gods.”<sup>17</sup> For Bacon, as for Hobbes, such a situation can be traced back to the ancients such as Plato who “infected and corrupted natural studies by his theology.”<sup>18</sup> The corruption of philosophy by religious superstition and theology found in Plato is at large among Bacon’s contemporaries who foolishly try to find natural philosophy in Genesis and the book of Job. It is therefore essential to “give to faith only what belongs to faith.”<sup>19</sup> Part of the difficulty is that civil governments have entertained a general hostility to “novelties of thought.”

The transformation of the theological-political situation is to be effected by the modern turn from, or transformation of, the Epicurean ideal of philosophic tranquility. This transformation may begin with Machiavelli’s suggestion in the *Discourses* that there is no middle course between complete resignation from the political machinations of the city and political action. The accommodations made by the classical philosophers must be eschewed because the man who says that he “wishes to live quietly and without quarrel” will not be believed. Machiavelli’s counsel is the abandonment of the life of contemplation, given the fact that the life of quiet contemplation is for a man “notable for his quality” to live in “continual danger.”<sup>20</sup> For Machiavelli, tranquility as a reasonable personal goal of philosophy must be rejected.<sup>21</sup> The rejection of the middle course is a rejection of the contemplative life for the active life. This is simultaneously to reject what for Lucretius were the fundamental limits of philosophy given the gulf that separated the many from philosophy. Lucretius and the classical tradition are in line with the suggestion of Maimonides that the thought of the perfect man “be detached from the spurious kinds of rulership and that his desire for them be abolished—I mean the wish to dominate or to be held great by the vulgar and to obtain from them honor and obedience for its own sake—but rather regard all people according to their various states with respect to which they are undoubtedly either like domestic animals or like beasts of prey. Concerning these the perfect man who lives in solitude, if he thinks of them at all, does so only with a view to saving himself from the harm coming from those among them who are harmful if he happens to associate with them.”<sup>22</sup> Such sentiments capture Epicurus’s own motto: *lathe biosas*. While this most surely leaves philosophy exposed to the perennial criticisms and dangers that Machiavelli directs our attention to, by its abandonment of the middle course philosophy begins to entertain the erotic expectations and hopes of the nonphilosophic.

According to Lucretius, philosophy is not an erotic activity but the philosopher has need of knowledge of erotics—if only to understand and hence communicate to those with whom he must live. Knowledge of erotics is knowledge of human neediness. This erotic neediness manifests

itself most powerfully in fear of death and love, the desire to have the eternal for oneself always. As presented by Lucretius, man's erotic neediness often reveals itself as a desire to overcome the limitations imposed on man by nature. Eros is a rejection of, or unwillingness to abide by, necessity. The erotic life is not lived in accord with the fundamental limits imposed by nature but in some fashion in revolt against nature. While these erotic longings are what most stand in the way of genuine happiness made possible by the study of the nature of things, it remains the case, at least in political life, that the majority of men cannot free themselves from this eroticism and therefore are destined to continue their erotic revolt against nature. It is man's attachments and hopes born of eros and fear that drive, and even sustain, political life and the development of those arts necessary for the defense of the community (V, 1281–1349). As the life lived in accord with nature's limits and necessity rejects such hopes as ephemeral, it can never give anything but a very qualified endorsement to the life of the city.

There is then an irresolvable disjunction according to Lucretius between the needs and requirements of political life and those of the philosophic life. This disjunction points to an unbridgeable gulf between the philosophic and the many who will never be led by way of reason and enlightenment toward the philosophic life. The unstated truth is that the philosopher cares only for himself, and perhaps a few potential philosophic souls and given the rarity of the genuinely philosophic, those potential souls may not be alive for the philosopher to communicate with directly. Philosophy must take an active interest in political things and the life of the city insofar, and only insofar, as the philosophic life is both physically and intellectually dependent upon the city (I, 41). Given that the city is necessarily an erotic community there can be no true, or genuinely fruitful, link between philosophy and political practice (II, 1–19). Every regime will therefore necessarily and justifiably view philosophy as parasitic (or with cruel envy) (III, 75–78, and V, 1127–1128) and no regime can be made to be the perfect home for the philosophic life (V, 1144–1151).<sup>23</sup> It is this conclusion of classical political philosophy, and the limits it places on philosophy, that is the essential difference between it and modern political thought. In addition, it is this irresolvable tension that modern political thought refuses to accept and thus sought to overcome.

The modern project's catering to and cultivation of wayward eroticism has as its immediate object the lowering of the erotic horizon of human life from immortality to longevity, to sever eros from the longing for eternity. This can be accomplished by first reducing the erotic desire for immortality to comfortable self-preservation, and then satisfying

those lowered concerns through the emancipation of the passions that would make possible, and desirable, the conquest of nature by the arts and sciences. The moderns seek reconciliation with the city by the fruits and promises of productive reason's satisfaction of man's most immediate bodily desires. Philosophy then no longer aims to purify erotic desire but serves such desire by its promise of the conquest of nature "for the relief of man's estate." The success of that project demands the lowering of man's vision, his eros, to the more immediately available objects.

Machiavelli's rejection of the middle is then the necessary first step toward the enlistment of philosophy for the production of the useful arts and inventions.<sup>24</sup> The modern defense of philosophy is advanced as an honest charitable desire to do well by the many by enlisting philosophy in ministering to man's naturally miserable condition.<sup>25</sup> To provide for those immediate needs, and in the interest of weakening man's religious attachments, it was necessary for philosophy to abandon the end of private tranquility.<sup>26</sup> Moderation is therefore not a virtue according to Enlightenment rationalism while acquisition and daring are. One can glimpse this in Machiavelli's taxonomy of regimes defined by how they are acquired; by the fact that in his account of the various sets of princely qualities, only avarice has no counterpart as all men are necessarily driven by nature to acquire; in his suggestion that it is a "natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and always, when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed"; and most pointedly in his claim that fortune like a woman who is a "friend of the young, because they are less cautious, more ferocious and command her with more audacity."<sup>27</sup> From there it is no great intellectual leap to Hobbes's definition of felicity as inconsistent with "the repose of the mind satisfied" but as a "continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later." Life is therefore characterized as an unceasing "desire of power after power" as man can never be assured that he has the means to live well "without the acquisition of more."<sup>28</sup> If such is the truth of man's condition, then John Locke's teaching on property, with its justification of unlimited acquisitiveness to turn the "waste" that man receives by nature into that which can sustain life would seem perfectly reasonable.<sup>29</sup> The poverty of man's natural state demands that he seek nature's reorganization. The attempt to overcome natural necessity would require fundamentally changing the meaning of philosophy as a way of life into a faculty for the extension of man's power and control over nature. This demands the eroticization of philosophy by divorcing wisdom from moderation.

The additional modern transformation of man's erotic neediness can be clearly seen in Hobbes's limiting and focusing of man's fear upon that of

violent death, thereby truncating man's concerns to those of the body. The underlying premise is that man's erotic neediness, once redirected away from the eternal, could be satisfied by the promotion of self-preservation and commodious living. Philosophy would thus prove its usefulness and necessity by first dampening those erotic hopes that lead to religious zealotry and political instability and then heightening those lower erotic attachments that lead men to cling to this life. The ancient Epicurean ideal of personal tranquility is transformed and transferred to political life.<sup>30</sup> Philosophy must then become politically active—it must seek to govern, if only indirectly.<sup>31</sup> For philosophy to engage in such governance in part through the direction and promotion of artistic, technological production would for Lucretius not only constitute the abandonment of philosophy properly understood but also propose the impossible.<sup>32</sup> According to Lucretius, man's technological and artistic productions are no match for the power of nature. Thus the account of the development of the arts that concludes Book V is corrected by the finale of Book VI, which speaks of natural cataclysms and plague. The idea of the conquest of nature or becoming the master and owner of nature is born of an erotic desire to overcome necessity and is fundamentally Sisyphean (III, 995–1010). While the advancement of the arts is necessary for men to provide for themselves, given the niggardliness of nature, and to shield themselves from its indifference, there is a limit to our ability to overcome necessity and so shield ourselves. Lucretius's presentation of the development of the arts reveals that their "progress" and development are driven by desire rather than reason. The rule of the passions in directing reason when it comes to artistic and technological production is not to deny that there has been progress and development in the arts, as is revealed by the fact that philosophy is a new discovery and is dependent on the previous developments in the arts (V, 1451, and III, 1024–1044). Lucretius may even go so far as to suggest that the late arrival of philosophy is dependent on the vulgar desires for everincreasing pleasure and novelty that marked the progress of the arts. Lucretius's final teaching, however, is that there is a limit to that development or progress. He argues that the progress of one desire to another is the source of the majority of men's misery, it is this unending desire for novelty that explains why "the majority of men toil in vain... since it does not know the limit of possessing things and in general how far true pleasure increases" (V, 1430–1433). The central teaching in the account of artistic development is that it cannot remedy, and must aggravate, the desire to overcome man's irremediable position in the nature of things. Lucretius posits an intense hubris in the belief that man can rival nature's power: "Who," Lucretius asks, "is powerful enough to rule the totality of the boundless universe, who to hold fast in

hand the powerful reins of the deep, who to rotate all the heavens at once and to warm all the fertile worlds with ethereal fires or to be present in all places and times?" (II, 1095–1099)

The modern response to nature's indifference is to promote a way of life that Lucretius maligns. Such a life, most powerfully depicted at the end of Book III, is driven by an erotic attempt, a necessarily futile attempt, to escape from the truth about the nature of the eternal. In becoming directly involved in technological and artistic development, philosophy must become the advocate of the passions. Early modern philosophy thereby demonstrates its wish to be more than tolerated. It desires to be desired. Philosophy begins to entertain the very erotic hopes of the many that Lucretius had argued makes the philosophic life unavailable to the many. Philosophy conceived of as learning how to die must therefore be attacked and abandoned.<sup>33</sup> Hobbes's political edifice built on the foundation of fear of violent death, rather than death itself, ought to be understood in this light. Fear of death leads men to hopes for immortality; fear of violent death leads men to become increasingly attached to the promises of politics and science. This replacement of immortality for longevity and safety is achieved by redirecting the expected source of erotic satisfaction to the realm of bodily health and material acquisition. This in turn leads men to depend on philosophy united with industry. As Hobbes explains, "The end or scope of philosophy is, that we make use to our benefit of effects formerly seen; or that by application of bodies to one another, we may produce the like effects of those we conceive in our mind, as far forth as matter, strength, and industry, will permit, for the commodity of human life...the scope of all speculation is the performing of some action, or thing to be done." Philosophy is not to be valued for the "inward glory and triumph of the mind" but "the utility of philosophy, especially natural philosophy and geometry, will be best understood by reckoning up the chief commodities of which mankind is capable, and comparing the manner of life of such as enjoy them with that of others which want the same."<sup>34</sup>

The expected fruits of the shift of man's erotic horizon from immortality to longevity can be glimpsed in Descartes's expectation that, by rejecting speculative philosophy, an "infinity of devices" will solve the various temperamental and dispositional problems within man, and "make men generally more wise and competent than they have been up until now." Descartes believes that the spread of enlightenment can rid us of "an infinity of maladies of body and mind" and ultimately the "enfeeblement brought on by old age."<sup>35</sup> As Descartes makes plain, the rejection of speculative philosophy is the rejection of the necessity of death. Descartes's hopes for science ought to be contrasted with Lucretius's

attempts to argue for nature's instruction in the speech by Nature herself about the proper disposition toward death.

Philosophy for Francis Bacon and his modern progeny is advertised as the most productive means to power, the preservation of life, and the satisfaction of desire. Speculative philosophy is denigrated as useless, "barren of works," and juvenile.<sup>36</sup> Bacon's solution to the tenuous and dangerous place of philosophy in the city is to serve man's immediate, lower desires through the development of "instruments" and "inventions" as a replacement for man's metaphysical speculation.<sup>37</sup> Bacon's judgment about the fruitlessness of classical philosophy precluded him from praising the delight in knowledge for its own sake. In *The Advancement of Learning*, Bacon quotes the proem to Book II where Lucretius praises the tranquility found in the well-walled temples of the wise. Bacon tellingly omits the final lines where Lucretius criticizes the folly of those who seek mastery and power.<sup>38</sup> In the *New Organon*, Bacon again uses Lucretius to advance his own agenda of the union of contemplation and action. Again he does so by omission: quoting Lucretius's high praise of Athens in the proem to Book VI, Bacon omits that Athens's glory was having been the home to the man who taught that contemplation alone is the path to tranquility. Lucretius's praise of the man from Greece is that he taught that happiness is secured through knowledge of the true limits to desire and fear; contemplation is intimately tied to moderation. Bacon's omission thus praises Athens exclusively for the works that recreated life for man.<sup>39</sup> The classical idea of contemplation is transformed by the addition of a practical, productive end to which it must be directed. According to Bacon, philosophy that is not tied to this productive end is not really philosophy. For this reason Bacon refers to Lucretius dismissively as "the poet."<sup>40</sup>

The hopefulness and promises of science and philosophy advanced by Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, and others would be according to Lucretius the eroticization of philosophy insofar as it is driven by the erotic hope that man may overcome, by way of technology and political institutions, the fundamental limits imposed on him by nature. The impossibility of overcoming natural necessity and chance through political and technological means leads to fundamentally different approaches to the challenge that religion presents to the security of philosophic life. While Lucretius has been rightly understood to be offering one of the most pointed critiques of religion in the classical tradition, he does not share the antitheological animus of the early moderns. Lucretius shares with Enlightenment rationalism the view that religion is a response to something fundamental in the constitution of man, and that it is best understood through a psychological analysis of man's fundamentally

passionate nature. Despite this shared understanding, Lucretius takes more seriously the extent to which religion serves to calm man's desire for justice and revenge and can render men more accepting of the injustice inevitable in political life. More importantly, Lucretius's account of religion is meant to show its relation to man's most fundamental erotic longing. Contra Hobbes, neither is religion simply reducible to the anxiety man feels when confronted by the indifference or hostility of nature<sup>41</sup> nor is every desire given expression in religion reducible to "vainglory."<sup>42</sup> Finally, neither is one likely to suppress that religious longing by trying to convince men of a shallow source of those longings nor is it possible to find some similarly shallow substitute for such longings, such as the comforts born of commerce.

The Enlightenment attempt to refound political life on the basis of the desire for comfortable self-preservation as a means to thwart or even replace religious longing is to entertain expectations of political life satisfying what men most truly desire. To effect such a replacement, one must begin by constricting the horizon of political life, and with it what men are given to believe is required for a good life. That having been accomplished, it is then necessary to create a state capable of physically, and more importantly, psychologically attaching men to it. The example of Montesquieu is particularly useful in this regard. In the first paragraph to the Preface to the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu expresses gratitude for having been born in the times he was and compares the reasons for such gratitude with Plato. Whereas Plato was appreciative to have been born with the opportunity to be Socrates's student, Montesquieu is thankful for the fact that he has been born under the regime in which he lives. It is the regime that has made him who he is and has defined his loves. Politics and its rather narrow concerns (narrowed thanks in part to Montesquieu) would appear here to be everything.<sup>43</sup> Later in the chapter "On Contemplation," Montesquieu defines man as a "being made to preserve, feed and clothe themselves and to do all things done in society."<sup>44</sup> Montesquieu's philosophy seeks to make men exclusively of and for society. The principal thing that severs man from society is contemplation. According to Montesquieu, it is religion that unduly gives men over to contemplation. Montesquieu, for example, argues that the best manner of combating religion, of "detaching the soul from religion," is to inspire indifference to religion by offering the comforts produced by commerce.<sup>45</sup> For Lucretius, although religion may be "far from truth and reason" it sees that man's good lies beyond mere security and bodily pleasure. For this reason, Lucretius does not invest the progress of the arts and science with the same transformative and satisfying power. Religion is guilty of falsifying the truth about nature so as to make man perfectly at home in

the world. A similar illusion is to be found in the Enlightenment faith in the progress and fruits of science. The Enlightenment project is the secular equivalent of the religious desire to make man perfectly at home in the world. Lucretius's account suggests that the development of the arts cannot help but render us ultimately more anxious and unsettled. Any project to conquer nature will inevitably obscure man's true condition and render it more difficult to understand and be reconciled to it. Human life cannot secure genuine happiness in restless movement from one object of desire to another, or by rendering the objects of no concern.<sup>46</sup>

To suggest, with Hobbes, that the objects of the passions are of no concern is to obliterate the distinction at the heart of the philosophical question of how one ought to live. Religion, like philosophy, contains within it an awareness of the distinction between necessary and unnecessary, needs and desires. Religion may not properly identify the content of the categories, but it nevertheless accepts the existence of such categories. Lucretius is sympathetic to religion because the distinctions serve as an entry to the question of what is a good life. Enlightenment rationalism succeeds by its ability to ascribe that question, and the aforementioned distinctions, to the realm of metaphysical uncertainty and political irrelevance.<sup>47</sup> Lucretius would likely regard the replacement of the question of how one ought to live, alive within the religious account of the whole, with Enlightenment rationalism's security and commodious living, not as a deepening of man's awareness of his humanity but as a barbarization of man. It is after all prepolitical men who are driven exclusively by fear for security and bodily pleasure, in both Lucretius and the state-of-nature theorists. Enlightenment rationalism's advancement of a hypothetical state of nature may in fact succeed in creating (and may be intended to create) a mind reduced to and fixated on those concerns that governed it in the (once hypothetical) state of nature.

That such may be the case leads to the question of Enlightenment rationalism's effect on philosophy and the philosophic life itself. For Lucretius, philosophy originates in contemplation of and confrontation with the prephilosophic and religious account of the whole. The Enlightenment strategy of the destruction of and refusal to honestly engage that perspective would be destructive of genuine philosophy for Lucretius. It is reflection upon and confrontation with the religious account that gives rise to the philosophic investigation of the question of how one ought to live. The existence of this prephilosophic, religious perspective is seemingly necessary for the coming into existence of philosophy and its possibility. This is one reason why Lucretius seeks to defend the philosophic life as one that is most genuinely pious and why he would reject the Enlightenment solution to make society decidedly less religious.



This is not to deny that Lucretius wishes to reform men's religious opinions. His official theology is, however, directed at defending the philosophic life against the charges of impiety and not advanced as part of a much larger project of political, cultural, or social reform. It is not meant permanently to alter the relationship between philosophy and politics, or offered as a first step toward making philosophy politically active. Nowhere in the poem does Lucretius make a claim that his philosophy can secure a lasting peace for Rome.<sup>48</sup> Philosophy is consistently depicted as a private matter rather than a public one. The philosopher must move from behind the well-walled temples of the wise into the city to defend himself, but that defense can never amount to, or seek to amount to, a complete and final reconciliation with the city. To achieve such reconciliation, Enlightenment rationalism must fundamentally transform the nature of philosophy itself. It must eschew the contemplative life and become what Burke decried: it must become "active, designing, turbulent, and seditious."

Lucretius, by contrast, appears primarily concerned to relate the nature of the philosophic life and justify the choice of that life. Philosophy according to Lucretius, is, as noted, a life that "loiters at the gates of death"; it is a life spent learning how to die. Philosophy must remain exclusively contemplative and speculative to fulfill this task. Put into service of the conquest of nature, philosophy is no longer learning how to die but striving to overcome death. Lucretius rejects in advance the attempt at conquest because philosophy properly understood is the attempt to come to terms with man's ultimate fate. He reveals that the true ground of the conquest of nature is fear of that fate. Belief in the possibility of the conquest of nature is belief that true happiness can be achieved without reconciliation to this fate. To refuse death as intrinsic to life is, for Lucretius, to surrender philosophy to the passions and a betrayal of philosophy as such. The Lucretian account of the philosophic life approaches death and love in a fashion that would allow the reader to appreciate the narrowing confines of concern for the body and political life in such a way that could prepare the ground for the perpetuation of the philosophic life among a select few.

Given their denigration of the contemplative life (a life that modern enlightenment thinkers themselves lived), it is difficult to fathom how their philosophy prepares for minds of their own order, or can explain their own activity.<sup>49</sup> While the modern project has achieved unimagined scientific and political fruits, its architects leave the reader with profound difficulties. The life promoted by modern rationalism is clearly not the way of life chosen by its architects. One might here cite the tension between Descartes's call for the mastery of nature and his chosen Ovidian

motto “Bene vixit, bene qui latuit” or “He has lived well who hid well.” One might also cite the life promoted by Machiavelli’s *Prince* and compare it to “the food” he remarks to his friend Francesco Vettori “that alone is mine and that I was born for.” Namely, to study, and converse with, the great thinkers of the past. The modern constriction of political life involved a profound lowering of man’s intellectual horizon. We see for example a great movement toward freedom of thought and conscience in Hobbes but a simultaneous attempt to reduce the categories in which men think.<sup>50</sup> One cannot but wonder whether the hard-won intellectual and philosophic independence has resulted in a profound constriction of intellectual life.

A reconsideration of Lucretius may offer a means of seeing behind the modern world and offer something of a corrective for its excesses. Lucretius’s appropriation by our contemporary atheists is a product of their failure to appreciate his insight that religion is a natural expression of man’s most fundamental longing. Both our contemporary atheists and Enlightenment rationalism therefore fail to recognize that those longings cannot be satisfied by making man more for and of the world. If, however, we accept Burke’s insight into the distinction between modern and ancient Epicureanism, Lucretius’s corrective is useful and even necessary. His account of the nature of things may have served as an invitation to the more enterprising atheists to try to ennoble their zeal with the patina of a more or less respected tradition, but that should not blind us to what has been lost in the modern appropriation. Some who see Lucretius as a progenitor of our distinctly modern life may find that this makes Lucretius more interesting. Perhaps it is so. Such a conclusion however blurs the distinction between classical and Enlightenment rationalism and therefore fails to learn what is most important from Lucretius.

## NOTES

### Introduction: Designing and Turbulent Epicureans

1. Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 237.
2. *Ibid.*, 197–198.
3. *Ibid.*, 195.
4. See Catherine Wilson's wonderful study, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008); Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); W. R. Johnson, *Lucretius and the Modern World* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000). See also, "Part III: Reception" in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Gillespie and Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 205–324. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2011).
5. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cross (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), 33. See also, Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 36.
6. All references to Lucretius's poem are by book and line number. I have relied upon W. H. D. Rouse's translation *De Rerum Natura* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992) and occasionally Walter Englert, *Lucretius On the Nature of Things* (Newburyport: Focus Philosophical Library, 2003), with infrequent minor alterations.
7. Helvétius, *De L'Esprit* (London, Dodsley and Co., 1759). The original reads "unde animi constet natura videndum, quae fiant ratione et quae via quaeque gerantur in terris." Translation my own.
8. *Ibid.*, iv.
9. *Ibid.*, v.
10. Paul-Henry Baron d'Holbach. *The System of Nature*, trans. H. D. Robinson (New York: G.W. & A.J. Matsell, 1835).
11. See Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.
12. Paul-Henry Baron d'Holbach, *Good Sense* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 96–97.
13. D'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 309.
14. *Ibid.*, 311–312.

15. *Ibid.*, 313.
16. Pierre Bayle, *Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14:23 "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full,"* ed. John Kilcullen and Chandran Kukathas (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), 67–68.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary of Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, trans. Pierre Des Maizeaux, vol. 3 (London: J.J. and P. Knapton, 1735), 923.
19. See Robert Bartlett's excellent treatment of Bayle's project "On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (Feb. 2001): 1–28.
20. Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert Bartlett (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 221–222.
21. *Ibid.*, 223.
22. *Ibid.*, 215.
23. *Ibid.*, 237.

## 1 The Proem to Book I: Philosophy and the City

1. See Leo Strauss, "Notes on Lucretius" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 76–80.
2. See Cyril Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 588–591, for a variety of standard interpretations of the invocation of Venus.
3. Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, trans. Pierre Des Maizeaux, vol. 3 (London: J. J. and P. Knapton, 1735), 922.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 923.
6. *Ibid.* See Cicero's confirmation of this view in *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Horace C. P. McGregor. (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 193.
7. Bayle, *Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 3, 922.
8. *Ibid.*, 924.
9. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 379–380.
10. Bayle, *The Dictionary of Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, trans. Pierre Des Maizeaux (London: J. J. and P. Knapton, 1735 vol. 3, 923).
11. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King, vol. XVIII, (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2001) ii, 1, 4. See also St. Augustine, *City of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), VI, 10 and IV, 31. Augustine's account of Varro and Seneca reveals that they too had to take measures to hide their true opinions from the multitude. See Ernest Fortin, *Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 11.
12. Cicero, *Letters to Quintus and Brutus*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 118–119. See also Clyde

- Murley, "Cicero's Attitude towards Lucretius," *Classical Philology* 23, no. 3 (July 1928): 289–291.
13. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 96.
  14. See Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2, 797.
  15. Leonard and Smith note that when Lucretius remarks that at this time of Rome's troubles, he cannot do his part with an untroubled mind he uses an expression that has certain religious connotations: *Agere hoc*. They draw the attention of the reader to a passage in Plutarch's *Life of Numa* where it is remarked that when consuls began to take auspices and make sacrifices they would exclaim these words. It may be that Lucretius, in using such a phrase, invests his own task, the investigation into the nature of things, with a religious sanction. See, Leonard and Smith, *De Rerum Natura* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 41.
  16. Bailey suggests that there is a lacuna before I, 50 as the transition seems rather abrupt. He hypothesizes that the missing line or lines were "probably" an appeal to Memmius to "leave politics and state affairs and devote himself to philosophy." Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2, 605.
  17. Lucretius will later argue that a rational explanation of lightning would go a long way toward liberating men from fear of gods. See *De Rerum Natura*, II, 385 and 1090–1104, VI, 82–91 and 387–422. Lightning is also a phenomenon that Lucretius associates with man's fear for the stability of the world (V, 1204–1221). Fear of and belief in the gods, and fear for the eternity of the world are, therefore, apparently inseparable.
  18. "Gates to nature" is more literal than "nature's gate" and better captures the essence of Lucretius's meaning here.
  19. Leonard and Smith, *De Rerum Natura*, 207.
  20. Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. Betty Rose Nagle, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 639–684.
  21. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 134.
  22. *Ibid.*, 85.

## **2 The Discovery of Nature and the Problem of the Infinite and Eternal**

1. James Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 56.
2. Benjamin Farrington, *Greek Science*, vol. 2 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949) 119.
3. See also, Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans., W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992). V, 1183–1193.
4. Consider Lucretius's repeated use of *necestes* throughout the poem. See especially, I,44,302,385, 399,506,512,539,607,790,795, and 1049 and II,83,231,243,377,442,445,721, and 751.
5. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 90.

6. The six proofs offered for the impossibility of creation out of nothing do not refute divine intervention, as none can be said to address the possibility that the gods create everything out of something. This possibility was not explicitly ruled out by his initial contention in the proem about the nature of the gods (I, 44–49). The denial of such a possibility will come later in Book II (II, 167). That he chooses not to address that here is in keeping with the spirit of the initial presentation of the first principle. Lucretius presents the belief in the coming into being out of nothing as not only contrary to what we commonly experience, but inherently hostile to life. It is only by positing that all things arise from their own fixed seed that any regularity, stability, and predictability can be discovered in nature. Without such regularity the world would surely inspire fear. See, Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 86, and Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum*, vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 628.
7. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 87.
8. See Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 56.
9. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 12.
10. Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. K. Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 98 and 117. See also, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed., Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 75.
11. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 95.
12. See, Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V, 195–234.
13. The doctrine of the swerve is perhaps the most perplexing aspect of atomic physics. There is no extant writing of Epicurus's that discusses it and in his *Letter to Menoecus*, which outlines the basic principles of his physics, there is no mention of it. Cicero in his criticisms of materialist philosophy in both *De Finibus* (I, 18) and *De Fato* (22 and 46) addresses the doctrine of the swerve. In *De Finibus*, Cicero calls the doctrine a “childish fantasy” and an “arbitrary fiction.” He goes on to suggest that it fails to achieve what it was intended to achieve, the refutation of the possibility of creation out of nothing. He remarks that by positing the swerve, Epicurus has committed “the capital offense” of natural philosophy, which is to speak of something as taking place without a cause. See Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans., J. M. Ross (London: Penguin Books, 1972). Cicero suggests that the swerve is but a bit of trickery employed to escape criticism of an impossible position (I, 70). The position that Cicero most believed they were trying to avoid was that of denying freedom of thought and movement; see Cicero, *De Fato*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press) 10.23. Such a suggestion may be supported by Epicurus's remark in the *Letter to Menoecus* that it would be “better to accept the legends of the gods than to bow beneath the yoke of destiny which the natural philosophers have imposed.” See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), Book X, section 134, 659.

14. The process of thought is part of a larger discussion of sense perception that is largely a passive reception of images (IV, 722–822).
15. Much of the secondary literature seeks to show how the swerve establishes a uniquely human kind of willfulness. Cyril Bailey argues that the doctrine of the swerve is essentially the introduction of chance into the nature of things as an alternative to free will (Bailey, *De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2, 841). Bailey, however, goes on to argue that our ability to act or not act in a given situation is the product of the swerve. The most obvious difficulty with this interpretation is that Lucretius does not speak of such deliberation in his account of the swerve. Additionally, it is difficult to see how such deliberateness can be traced to a source that is anything but deliberate. David Furley argues, the swerve guarantees that we are not simply determined in our character from birth and that we have the ability to change and adapt. See, David Furley, *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 161–237. Aside from the fact that such arguments are not present in Lucretius, he does not provide an account based in atomic principles that would prove that the swerve is within the purview of human control. Absent such a proof, the swerve may show we are changeable but does not provide that such change is willful. We are still left with the determinism that Furley seeks to show we are free of. There are other studies of the swerve similar to Furley that seek to show how the swerve frees man from having a determined character. David Sedley, focusing mostly upon fragments from Epicurus's *On Nature*, which nowhere mention the swerve, tries to argue that the swerve is the source of a willfulness that has nonphysical causes. That the atoms can swerve is, for Sedley, the essential point, it is not that they swerve but the possibility of their swerving that accounts for the voluntariness of our actions, "It will not be so much the actual occurrence of swerves that matters as the mere possibility of their occurrence." David Sedley, "Epicurus' Refutation of Determinism," in *Studi Sull'Epicureismo Greco e Romano offerti a Marcello Gigante* (Naples: Biblioteca della Parola del Passato, 1983), 41. John Masson's account of the swerve is that because we have free will, the atoms of the soul must likewise have free will, "man could not be free unless there exists in the atoms a principle apart from the fall and collision." This of course cannot alone argue for free will so Masson argues that Lucretius distinguishes the world of nature absolutely governed by necessity and the mind of man. Masson, John "Lucretius' Argument for Free-Will," *Journal of Philology* 12, no. 83 (1883): 129–130. Walter Englert in his book length study of the swerve presents the argument that what we find in Lucretius is Epicurus's response to the criticisms of Aristotle and a reply to Aristotle's theory of voluntary action from Book VIII of the *Physics*. Walter Englert, *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). The swerve is, according to Englert's rather complicated argument, able to account for voluntary action, deliberate choice, and moral responsibility. Englert must, however, rely heavily on thinkers other than Lucretius to make his point and

frequently argues that what we find in Lucretius is little more than the thought of Epicurus. That there is no discussion in any of Epicurus's extant writings of the swerve and no discussion of Aristotle in Lucretius are difficulties that appear inconsequential to Englert. That aside, we are again left with the difficulty that Englert cannot explain willful choice originating in random capricious movement. Englert argues that the swerve is akin to Aristotle's suggestion that there must be a third kind of motion in addition to forced and passive motion of the elements, "which *somehow* accounts for the ability of living creatures to initiate action." Englert states that we have to go beyond Lucretius to find an answer to this "somehow," as there is no evidence in Lucretius that man is capable of controlling the swerve. Arguments such as Englert's, that man seizes upon a simulacrum and then the mind sets the swerve in motion, fail to account for how the mind is initially focused and how it can control the swerve.

16. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 96.
17. *Ibid.*, 96–97. While the swerve initially appears to be a source of comfort and human dignity Lucretius's use of examples and following discussion appear to undermine such intentions. See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 41. Strauss states that the discovery of nature must be such that a "soothing regularity and necessity must prevail. This necessity must not tyrannize over us, it must leave us our freedom. Hence the notorious resort to the theory of the arbitrary movements of the atoms, so that human tranquility may persist, even in the face of the otherwise inexorable necessity of atomic events." Lucretius counteracts the notoriousness of the swerve by limiting it in the way that he does and also by rescinding most, if not all, of what it offers immediately afterwards. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II, 295–308. Compare to Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 96. See also, Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 66–67.
18. "Philosophy in the strict and classical sense is a quest for the eternal order or for the eternal cause or causes of all things. It presupposes then that there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History. It presupposes in other words than any 'realm of freedom' is no more than a dependent province within 'the realm of necessity.'" Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 212.
19. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V, 1211–1220.
20. When Lucretius takes up the issue of the world's creation and therefore eventual dissolution he claims that lightening points to the divination of the world's fragility. He remarks that once we come to understand lightening, we no longer need to seek after hidden intent of the gods. In the conclusion of the discussion about lightening, he criticizes certain "Tyrrhenian songs" about lightening that are born of the vain search for divine guarantees that the walls of the world will not collapse. The songs are therefore produced from man's reluctance to accept that the world will inevitably die a natural death (VI, 565–566).



21. Bayle, *Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 2, 786.
22. *Ibid.*, 787.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 789.
25. See Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 69–70.
26. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II, 437, 472, 505.
27. The procession is of great political importance and we will return to it in [chapter 5](#).
28. Bayle, *Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 2, 789.
29. See Nichols for the rather ironic accusations Lucretius levels against Heraclitus. *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 31
30. See Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage and Eric Salem (Indianapolis: Focus Philosophical Library, 1998) 99c.
31. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. by W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992), 76. See Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2, 744, 954.
32. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 101.
33. *Ibid.*, 92.
34. Lucretius uses a similar threat to pursue Memmius in his forcing him into the *reductio ad absurdum* in Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II, 983.
35. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 93.
36. Compare Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, 2.95. The passage in Cicero is taken from Aristotle's nonextant *De Philosophia*. Where Aristotle stressed that the first glances upon the heavens convinced men of the existence of the gods, Lucretius is initially silent about any theological conclusions men may have drawn.
37. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 103.

### **3 Philosophic Resignation: Living beyond Hope and Fear**

1. While Lucretius may simply want to give credit where credit is due and the reader must therefore understand the teaching of Book III is not his own, the strength of the statement is striking. Could it be that Lucretius wishes to attribute the bitterness of what we will be shown to another as it may have some consequence for his own reception?
2. See James Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 75.
3. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 85.
4. *Ibid.*, 107.
5. It is worth mentioning here that this was also true of Lucretius's discussion of the swerve in Book II.
6. Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 1038–1039.

7. James Nichols makes the interesting observation that given that the ideal state according to Epicureanism is perfect tranquility, it is curious that Lucretius should remark that some are too calm. See Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 81.
8. Compare Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1177b 32–35.
9. Nichols rightly points out that the statement is “surprisingly strong” and that it lowers the life of the gods. The argument here is that it elevates the life of man. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 81.
10. In the proem to Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans., W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992) Book V the man from Greece is referred to as a god (V, 8). This praise is however modified and hence corrected by the proem to Book VI where we are reminded that he was a mortal.
11. There is also the question of the desirability of such a universalization of the philosophic life even if it were a possibility. See Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 94. As the pleasure of philosophy is at least partly dependent on observing the pains one is spared one might wonder if such pleasure would be lost by the universalization of the philosophic life.
12. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 82.
13. *Ibid.*, 81–82. Nichols argues that Lucretius must address those that have not as of yet been persuaded of the materialist physics. If such is the case it seems rather unlikely that more arguments for the soul’s mortality will succeed as the proofs are dependent upon a prior acceptance of the material composite nature of the soul.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem (Newburyport: Focus Classical Library, 1998), 70a. There the concern is raised that the soul upon death is scattered like smoke.
16. See also Charles Segal, *Lucretius on Death and Anxiety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 99.
17. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 109.
18. *Ibid.*, 110.
19. This is the rather infamous symmetry argument that has been the subject of any number of articles in classical and philosophic scholarship. See Rosenbaum, “The Symmetry Argument,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, no. 2 (Dec. 1989): 353–373. David Furley, “Nothing to Us?” *The Norms of Nature*, ed. Schofield and Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
20. Compare Plato, *Phaedo*, 65b and 66b–67b. “Therefore it is a necessity,” he said, “that for all these reasons the true-born philosophers would be won over to some such opinion as this and so would say something like the following to one another: ‘It looks like there’s a shortcut that brings us to this conclusion—that as long as we have the body accompanying the argument in our investigation, and our soul, is smushed together with this sort of evil, we’ll never sufficiently attain what we desire. And this,

- we affirm, is the truth. For the body deprives us of leisure . . . and it fills us up with erotic loves and with desires and terrors.”
21. Compare Plato, *Phaedo*, 65a, “And certainly, Simmias, the majority of men are of the opinion that the man for whom none of these things is pleasant and who doesn’t have a share in them doesn’t deserve to live. In fact, the man who thinks nothing of these pleasures that come through the body is pretty much already dead.”
  22. See Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a “Others are apt to be unaware that those who happen to have gotten in touch with philosophy in the right way practice themselves nothing else but dying and being dead.” See also, Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), I, 20: “That to philosophize is to learn how to die” “Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death.”
  23. Compare Plato, *Phaedo*, 95c–96a. That investigation as noted ran up against the obstacle of our bodies, an obstacle that appears insurmountable. See *Phaedo*, 67a–b. The task is to be as free of the body as possible, but the degree of freedom one can hope to attain is questionable.
  24. It may be something of a paradox that fear of death so controls some men (if not the majority of men) that they are completely ignorant as to its control over them. Such a paradox is seen in those who are so frightened of death that they kill themselves (III, 79–82).
  25. As Strauss points out this is a rather curious claim in light of the praise of Empedocles. As our analysis of Empedocles highlighted, the fact that his philosophy collapses into creation out of nothing may disqualify him as having written a genuinely philosophic poem. See Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 91.
  26. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), Vol. 2, 647.
  27. For a discussion of the need for poetry as a consequence of the condition of the human soul see Allan Bloom’s interpretation of Plato’s *Ion*. *The Roots of Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 371–395.
  28. One might wonder if there is more to the vulgar “shrinking” from the truth about the nature of things. Given the accusations leveled against philosophy perhaps such shrinking is not as benign as it may here appear. The frenzy and madness that attend the procession of the Magna Mater may indicate as much. Compare Socrates’ discussion of Corybantic frenzy in the *Ion* (534 a–b) with Lucretius’s mention of the same in the procession (II, 629–635).
  29. See, Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 91.
  30. Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 3, 1241.
  31. One might wonder how the lives of the men in the hills would be different if they were convinced of their isolation. Compare to Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V, 1156–1160.
  32. How much of the soul is forced outside he does not say. The previous discussion of the nature of the soul emphasized how tenuous and slight it

- was and how it could not be held together in the air. Moreover, Lucretius has repeatedly stressed that “that which leaves its bounds is instant death to that which was before” (I, 670–671 and 792–793, II, 753–754, and III, 519–520). It is difficult to see how that part of the soul leaves it “own bounds”, the body, can possibly return.
33. For the other dislocations of the soul in Book III, all of which correspond to some kind of ailment, see, Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, III, 168–176, 487–509, and 526–547.
  34. Compare Aristotle, “Prophesying By Dreams,” *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 463a22–32. Aristotle suggests that not only does our waking concern influence our dreams but in turn such dreams may then determine our waking interests and actions.
  35. It is of interest that Lucretius’s own dream indicates that the quest for the truth about the nature of things is presented as unfinished. It is also of note that does not dream about the composition of verses but simply transcribing his discoveries into Latin. This is an important admission insofar as the tone of the poem as a whole suggests that Lucretius has a completed account of the whole. By claiming here that his quest is unfinished, one is left to wonder whether the general tone is an embellishment and what purpose that would serve.
  36. Compare Aristotle, “Prophesying By Dreams,” 463b12–13.
  37. See H. St. H. Vertue, “Venus and Lucretius,” *Greece & Rome*, 2nd ser., vol. 3, no. 2, Jubilee Number (Oct. 1956), 148. See also Robert D. Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 63.
  38. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 119.
  39. Martha Nussbaum argues that Lucretius wishes to lead his reader beyond erotic frenzy where he may see his beloved more clearly and with genuine affection. Nussbaum argues that Lucretius is engaged in delivering to his readers erotic “therapy.” However, she claims that Lucretius ultimately has not seen his therapy through to its end as Lucretius has failed to see the beauty in our neediness and vulnerability; “In other words, Lucretius fails to ask whether there might not be intense excitement and beauty precisely in being needy and vulnerable before a person one loves.” How far this notion is from Lucretius will be made apparent in what follows. It is not that Lucretius fails to see what Nussbaum accuses him of: the account is largely a warning against what Nussbaum contends is beautiful. Our vulnerability and neediness are not, for Lucretius, a cause for celebration. See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 190.
  40. Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 63. “Sexual desire is reduced to a conspiracy of sight and semen.”
  41. Compare Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 98–99. “What he cannot conceive is that the irrational love of individuals, like the love of life itself, might (through physiological and social evolution) be as ‘natural’ or endemic in human beings as the copulatory urge in animals. Under

- the guise of fear of death and the passion of love it is actually human nature itself which Lucretius finds unacceptable, and it is thus no wonder if he fails to produce convincing arguments against such powerful and basic impulses.”
42. See in particular the discussion of the soul (III, 296–309) and “freedom” (II, 262–284).
  43. Compare Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, IV, 1160–1169 with Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968) 474d–475a. The use of several similar examples may be coincidental but remains striking.
  44. Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 206. See also Victor Brochard, “The Theory of Pleasure According to Epicurus,” *Interpretation* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 81.
  45. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 119.
  46. Compare Xenophon, *Symposium*, ed. Robert Bartlett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 150. Socrates remarks that “there is no more fearsome spark of love than this [the kissing of a beautiful boy], for it is insatiable and supplies certain sweet hopes.”
  47. See *Republic*, 329a–329d. One might compare Lucretius’s account of the effect that eros has on men and their possibility to be initiated into philosophical education with the speech of Cephalus when he remarks about his youth and the degree to which eros was a kind of “mad master” over him. He does not partake of the conversation, and the conversation cannot go forward until he leaves, as he must attend to his sacrifices, as he approaches death uneasily.

#### 4 O’ Mortal, O’ Fool, O’ Criminal, O’ Memmius

1. Suetonius, *On Grammarians*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, vol.2 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1914), 14.
2. Plutarch, *Lives*, trans. Dryden (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 690–691.
3. Cicero, *Letter to Atticus*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, vol. 24 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1999), I.18.
4. Cicero *Letters to Quintus and Brutus*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, vol. 28 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2002), 70; Ovid, *Tristia*, trans. G. P. Gould (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1924), 2, 433.
5. Catullus, *The Poems of Catullus*, trans. F. W. Cornish (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1950), 13 and 33.
6. Smith W., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* (London: John Murray, 1873); Cicero, *Letter to Atticus*, vol. 24, II, 12; Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1914), 15.
7. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, vol. 1, 39.

8. Cicero, *Letters to Quintus and Brutus*, 3, 2; See also, Gruen, "The Consular Elections for 53 B.C." *Hommages a Marcel Renard*, ed. J. Bibauw, (Brussels: Latomus, 1969).
9. Cicero, *Letter to Friends*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, vol. 13 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2001), I, 7, note a.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See Cyril Bailey, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 623.
12. G. B. Townsend, "The Fading of Memmius," *The Classical Quarterly* 28, no. 2., (1978): 267; Walter Allen, "On the Friendship of Lucretius with Memmius," *Classical Philology* 33, no.2 (1938): 181; Duane Roller, "Gaius Memmius: Patron of Lucretius," *Classical Philology* 65, no. 4 (1970): 247; and T. P. Wiseman, *Cinna the Poet and Other Roman Essays* (Leicester: Leicester University Press 1974), 38–43.
13. Benjamin Farrington, "Lucretius and Memmius," *Anales de Filologia* 7, Bueno Aires, (1959): 13.
14. *Ibid.*, 29.
15. *Ibid.*, 21–23.
16. *Ibid.*, 22.
17. James Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 45.
18. *Ibid.*
19. See Strauss's suggestion that Memmius is a new Paris. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989): 89.
20. See also Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans., W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992), V, 1–5, I, 925–929. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 102.
21. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 112.
22. Compare Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10–14.
23. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 127.
24. *Ibid.*, 76.
25. Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Einarson and De Lacy, vol. 14 (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2004), 1126e–1127e.
26. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 107.
27. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1958), 379–380.

## 5 Gods of the Philosophers and Gods of the City

1. This chapter was originally published as "Lucretius on Religion," *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 228–239.
2. The military metaphor is sketched by David West in his *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 57–67.

3. To say that religion is “more commonly” responsible for crime is to say that it is obviously not the only source of crime.
4. For a good historical treatment of the procession see Erich S. Gruen, *Greek Culture and Roman Policy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 5–33.
5. When Lucretius takes up this cosmological teaching later in Book V he appears reluctant to overthrow the pleasing fiction depicted in the procession. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans., W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992) V, 536–564.
6. Compare Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1928), 477. As with much of the classicist writing on Lucretius Bailey’s primary focus is on Lucretius’s physical doctrines. The classicists’ literature treats Lucretius exclusively as a natural philosopher. This focus necessarily fails to justice to Lucretius’s intention. To fully appreciate the place of the physics in Lucretius one must begin with the political and religious difficulties that attend his primary intention. On this score the classicists are not very helpful.
7. Compare the placement of Plato’s elaboration of the theology immediately after the penal code in Book X of *The Laws*. The placement of the discussion, as with Plato, should not lead one to see Lucretius’s interest in the theology as limited only to its political usefulness.
8. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 14.
9. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 131.
10. See James Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 165–166. Nichols’s book is the only other full length study of Lucretius’s poem that argues explicitly that Lucretius’s poem is a work of political philosophy. Nichols rightly argues that Lucretius is more than an elaboration of epicurean physics and is primarily a study of man and society. Nichols, however, remains with the traditional understanding of the address to Memmius as motivated by a desire for philosophic friendship. This limitation in Nichols’ study leads him to overemphasize the didactic and pedagogical nature of the poem and not appreciate the extent of the limitations to leading men towards the truth. Nichols, therefore, does not sufficiently detail the tension between philosophy and the city.
11. See Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II, 1133–1150 and IV where an account of food occupies the center of the two halves. See also Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 117.
12. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 119.
13. Compare Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V, 1210–1217, with 821–827, and 432–454. It is also interesting to compare Lucretius’s own attachment to the man from Greece from the proems to Books V and VI. He begins in V with the statement that “He is a god” (V, 8), but concedes he is a mere mortal in VI, “He is dead” (VI, 7).

14. An interesting comparison can be found in Ptolemy, Book I Chapter I of *Claudius*. There Ptolemy argues that by investigating astronomical phenomena one can put theology on a more rational and solid footing without taking away from the dignity of theology.
15. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 85.
16. Compare Plato's *Phaedo*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem (Newburyport: Focus Classical Library, 1998) 68c–d and *Apology*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998) 28b–d.
17. A tradition of the pious labeling atheists and their philosophic opponents as Epicureans is well known. See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 29. See also the understanding of the roots of atheism as professed by Kleinias in Plato's *Laws*, trans., Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 886a8–b2.
18. Compare Socrates's challenge to the life of Achilles in Plato's *Republic*, trans., Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 379a–383c and *Apology*, 28b–d. Compare also the theology of Book X, Chapter 8, 1178b7–22 of Aristotle's *Ethics*, where the notion of the Gods' awareness or concern for man is less than clear. The inactivity of the Gods and the fact that they may not concern themselves with the ordinary affairs of men may begin to suggest the ways in which the contemplative life is most properly divine.
19. See, Eve Adler, *Vergil's Empire* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003). The thesis of Adler's book is that Vergil, while agreeing with Lucretius's account of the nature of things, sought to correct its negative political consequences by creating a new myth of the founding of Rome. The thesis of Vergil as an improvement on Lucretius relies heavily upon the idea that Lucretius is not mindful of his own dependency upon the city's religious foundation. The purpose here is to reveal the extent to which Lucretius is not only mindful of this problem but that the theological-political problem within Lucretius thought emerges out of his awareness of the problem.
20. See, J. D. Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 18. Minyard's thought-provoking book argues that this acceptance of the materialist physics without the ethics can be seen in action through an analysis of the speeches of Caesar in Sallust's recounting of the trial of the Cataline conspirators. Another example of an Epicurean who appears to adopt the physics as it can be applied to politics but not the ethics is Shakespeare's Cassius from *Julius Caesar*. See, Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 75–112.
21. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Thomas Hobbes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959). See Book II, sect. 48 for Thucydides' own affliction and 47 for the effectiveness of medicine. See also Sect. 51 where it is held that medicine benefited some but not others.
22. *Ibid*, Book II, Section 51.
23. *Ibid*.



### Conclusion: The Modern Reversal

1. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 3.2 and *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Ch. xv. See also, Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 307–308. For the transformation, and corruption, of the Lucretian ideal by Machiavelli see Paul Rahe's "In the Shadow of Lucretius," *History of Political Thought* 28, no.1 (Spring 2007): 30–55. What Machiavelli sees as a contradiction in Lucretius's teaching is in fact necessity. Rahe suggests that Machiavelli renders the Lucretian teaching consistent.
2. Plato, *Republic*, trans., Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 496d, given the "madness of the many" the philosopher "keeps quiet and minds his own business—as a man in a storm . . . stands under a little wall."
3. See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Introduction, 10. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 43–44, "By Machiavelli's time the classical tradition had undergone profound changes. The contemplative life had found its home in monasteries."
4. Francis Bacon, *Essays* (London: A. L. Burt Company Publishers, 1883), 49.
5. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.
6. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), 11.
7. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 107, n.33. Commenting on Halevi's perception of Socratic irony in Socrates' polite denial of his grasp of Divine Wisdom Strauss remarks that "the attitude of the philosophers is not altered if the people of Socrates' time are replaced by the adherents of revealed religion."
8. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 379–380.
9. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 127. Christopher Nadon's analysis of this passage is particularly instructive. Christopher Nadon "Leo Strauss' Restatement on Why Xenophon," *Perspectives on Political Science* 39, no. 2 (Apr.–June 2010): 77–81.
10. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 463. Hobbes's confrontation with the "schooles" and their devotion to Aristotle would seem to follow Descartes. See, Descartes *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), Pt. VI, 33, and "Preface."
11. Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary of Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, trans. Pierre Des Maizeaux, vol. 3 (London: J.J. and P. Knapton, 1735), 923. Bayle's characterization of the nature of religious devotion in Rome is shared by Fustel de Coulanges in *The Ancient City* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 138–139.

12. Bayle, *Dictionary Historical and Critical*, vol. 3, 922–923.
13. Montesquieu, *Pensées* (Bordeaux: Imprimerie De G. Gounouilhou, 1901), No. 2097, 491; Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000), 39.
14. Gassendi, *Vie et Moeurs D'Epicure*, trans. Sylvie Taussig, vol. 2, pt. 4.4 (Paris: Les Belle Lettres, 2006), 239–240.
15. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 39.
16. Richard Kennington, *On Modern Origins* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 106–107.
17. Bacon, *The New Organon*, 74.
18. Bacon, “The Refutation of Philosophies,” *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, ed. Benjamin Farrington (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), 115.
19. Bacon, *The New Organon*, 53.
20. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 213–214. See also, Kennington, *On Modern Origins*, 126.
21. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46, and John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 291, 372.
22. Maimonides, “Guide for the Perplexed,” *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Mushin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 204.
23. Compare *Republic*, trans., G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 497b, and *Apology*, 32e.
24. See Bacon, *The New Organon*, 20 and 8.
25. *Ibid.*, 13; Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, pt. VI.
26. See Montesquieu’s advice on how to detach the soul from religion in *Spirit of the Laws*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 489.
27. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 25.
28. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.
29. See Locke’s account of the ratio of what nature gives to what man adds by his own labor. Locke by suggesting the ratio is 1:10, subsequently reduces nature to 1:100, then to 1:1000 and finally refers to nature left to itself as waste. Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, 294–297.
30. See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 86; and *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 35–36.
31. See Bacon’s request and advice to James I in the Epistle Dedicatory to the “Great Renewal” in *New Organon*, 4–5.
32. Machiavelli’s call for the conquest of fortune in the penultimate chapter of the *The Prince* would have been unthinkable to Lucretius. It may not be unthinkable for Machiavelli but only a useful fiction, “And truly anyone wise enough to adapt to and understand the times and pattern of events would always have good fortune or would always keep himself from bad fortune; and it would come to be true that the wise man could control the stars and the Fates. But such wise men do not exist: in the first

- place men are shortsighted; in the second place, they are unable to master their own natures; thus it follows that Fortune is fickle, controlling men and keeping them under her yoke.” Machiavelli, *Machiavelli and His Friends*, ed. James Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 135. Thanks to Robert Bartlett for bringing this to my attention.
33. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XII and LXVI, 459. Uncertainty about what becomes of us after death leads to “perpetual fear” which leads to war. In chapter LXVI, Hobbes suggests that the origin of philosophy is in leisure. He, however, goes on to attack the idea of leisure as it appears to be responsible for increased understanding of our mortal condition. See Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, “The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy,” *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (Sept. 2000): 579–593.
  34. Hobbes, *De Corpore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 189.
  35. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 33. See also the emphasis on the arts of medicine for the prolongation of life, and the resuscitation of the dead in Salomon’s House in Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, ed. Jerry Weinberger (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1989), 73.
  36. Bacon, *The New Organon*, 8.
  37. *Ibid.*
  38. Compare Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2001), 55, with Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans., W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1992) Book II, 1–13.
  39. Bacon, *The New Organon*, 99.
  40. See also Bacon’s essay “On Truth” and Robert Faulkner’s commentary on it in *Francis Bacon and the Project of Progress* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1993), 95.
  41. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 12, 76.
  42. *Ibid.*, Ch.6, 42.
  43. See Thomas Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973), 238.
  44. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 466.
  45. *Ibid.*, 489.
  46. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch.11, 70.
  47. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70, and John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, 296–298.
  48. In Strauss’s correspondence with Eric Voegelin he remarks “I want to say only this about Lucretius today: his poem is the purest and most glorious expression of the attitude that elicits consolation from the utterly hopeless truth, on the basis of its being only the truth – there is no idea of the use of the hopeless, godless truth for some social purpose, as is almost always the case with other fashions and trends; nor is there any aestheticism or sentimentality” in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin 1934–1964*, . and ed. P. Emberley and

- B. Cooper (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 62. These remarks about Lucretius should be compared to what Strauss says about Plato in his review of John Wild's *Plato's Theory of Man*, "Plato composed his writings in such a way as to prevent for all time their use as authoritative texts. . . . In the last analysis his writings cannot be used for any purpose other than philosophizing. In particular, no social order and no party which ever existed or which ever will exist can rightfully claim Plato as its patron." Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13, no. 3 (Sept. 1946): 351.
49. See Robert Bartlett "On Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (Feb. 2001): 25. See also Thomas Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 144–146. "In his fullest statement of the effect of the classical rationalists' open, public insistence on the primacy of the theoretical or speculative over the political or practical virtues, Montesquieu makes it quite clear that he sees in that insistence a slippery slope towards religious asceticism and in particular Christianity. . . . In order to do what he thought he had to do to liberate the life of the mind, Montesquieu found himself impelled to obfuscate profoundly the meaning of the life of the mind."
50. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch.9, 61. An example worthy of note is Hobbes's table of the "Several Subjects of Knowledge" where there is no theology.

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