

Bovine Lives and Theoretical Virtue in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*

What Epicurean would not want a tranquil life of bovine grazing? When Lucretius describes cows as living peacefully (*placido magis aere uiuit*) and suffering neither the torch of wrath (*irai fax*) that characterizes lions nor the cold javelins of fear (*gelidis telis pauoris*) that afflict deer (III.302-306), it would seem an image of freedom from violent emotions or ἀταραξία, which is generally taken as the poem's ethical ideal. Yet when Lucretius describes three kinds of humans that parallel these animals, each is held to be potentially excessive. One is too inclined to wrath (*procliuius*), another to fear (*citius*), and a third reacts to anything more gently than is fair (*clementius aequo*, III.311-313). This criticism of the passive cowlike person strikes Nichols (1976) and others as "somewhat surprising," and therefore requiring interpretation. Procopé (1998), for instance, suggests that only one sort of anger is objectionable to Lucretius. But Heinze (1897), citing passages of Philodemus, argued that even Epicurean sages should be angered when they hear or suffer certain things, which is accepted by Bailey (1947) among others. These sorts of arguments, however, fail to account for why insusceptibility to fear, which Heinze sees as the "Hauptstück" of Epicurean philosophy, is also treated as a negative quality, insofar as it is just as much a part of the cow's passivity as its imperviousness to anger.

The fundamental problem with the overly passive person, I argue, is that he is too disinclined to pursue Epicurean philosophy. Lucretius' idea of the philosophical life requires the difficult and long labor of learning the physical *ratio* of Epicurus, as the poet exhorts Memmius, and perhaps also expounding it for others to learn, that pursuit which drives Lucretius himself to suffer constant labor and sleepless nights as he composes the poem (I.141-142). The aim of Lucretius' exhortation is thus not merely for Memmius to be free of anxiety or distress, but to be free of it for the right reasons, namely as a consequence of his understanding of the physical

world through Epicurean teachings. Toward the end of book III, Lucretius in fact depicts how a man who is burdened by a fear of death, once he realizes what is truly afflicting him, is so eager to understand the nature of things that he abandons all other pursuits (1071-1072). If he manages to understand the physical reality of the world, an intrinsically valuable or ‘divine’ achievement, he will be free from fear for the right reason, rather than because of inborn cowlike passivity.

Lucretius thus takes a strong position in the debate on theoretical and practical virtues which recurs throughout the Late Roman Republic, judging from Cicero’s persistent interest, the scattered testimonies of Atticus, and the attestation of Augustine that Varro advocated a third position that mixed the other two (*De Civ.* XIX.3). But despite Lucretius’ marked and extreme preference for theoretical virtue, he is not usually considered within the context of this debate, such that he is only mentioned once, in passing, in Bénatouïl & Bonazzi (2012). Recognizing his commitment to theoretical virtue as a desirable end, however, clarifies questions such as how a human desiring ἀταραξία can be too passive: the excessively cowlike person will never be driven to question and discover the nature of things.

Bibliography

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