An Analysis of Lucretius' Ethico-Theological Solution to the Problem of Superstition

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AN ANALYSIS OF LUCRETIUS' ETHICO-THEOLOGICAL SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF SUPERSTITION

BY

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## PART II

**THE LUCRETIAN SOLUTION**

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VITA AUCTORIS

Edward F. Kennedy, S.J. was born in Long Branch, New Jersey, on August 9, 1919. He received his elementary training at Incarnation Parochial School in New York City, and then attended Regis High School in the same city. In August, 1939, two years after graduating from Regis, he entered the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus at St. Andrew on Hudson, Poughkeepsie, New York. Four years later he began his course of philosophical studies at West Baden College, Indiana, which is affiliated with Loyola University, Chicago. In 1944 he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from that University. For the past three years he has been teaching Latin and English at Regis High School in New York City.
Macaulay has dispatched Epicureanism with the label, "silliest of philosophies." The criticism is patently devastating, and if true, would reflect rather unfavorably on the author whose work is the subject of this thesis. Undoubtedly, if Epicureanism is studied in the popular, but perverted, forms it took in the hands of some of its later proponents, it will appear "silly". But no just criticism can be leveled at a particular philosophy unless it is studied in its pure form and in the context of social, religious, and even political life that gave rise to it. It is the purpose of this paper to make such a study.

The Epicureanism of Lucretius will be thrown against the background in which it was set, analyzed in its purity, and then evaluated in the light of subsequent philosophical progress. This treatment should leave us with a just estimate of Lucretius' attempt to answer the religious and moral problem of his day. Though it will certainly not win our approval of his philosophy, it will at least give us an understanding of his objective and method of reasoning, and will allow us to sympathize with the
author who, limited as he was by his contact with a decadent pagan philosophy, thought he saw in his system a solution for the religious evils that were crushing the Roman people of his day.

Lucretian psychology will not be discussed in this paper. The poet's epistemological theory will be examined only with relation to his theological thought, of which it is a fundamental premise and integral part. Our primary and direct concern will be the ethico-theological structure which Lucretius erected as a bulwark against superstition. More specifically, we shall try to present, first, a clear notion of Lucretius' purpose or objective, the removal of superstition; secondly, an examination of the problem of superstition which occasioned such an objective; and thirdly, in the light of his problem and objective, an analysis and evaluation of the three steps in the solution he proposed. This solution, we shall find, begins with an acknowledgment of the gods' existence; proceeds to a denial of divine participation in the affairs of men; and finally culminates in the rejection of a divine sanction for the deeds of man. This rejection, growing logically, Lucretius felt, from the previous steps, would effectively destroy the foundation of superstition which could not exist when fear of punishment at the hands of the gods had been eliminated.

Early in the first book of the De Rerum Natura, after describing the fear of eternal punishment that crushes the spirit of
man, Lucretius tells us his purpose in writing: "hunc igitur ter-
rorum animi tenebrasque necessest...discutiant...naturae species
ratioque". Release from the fear of the gods, he believes, will
be found in knowledge of nature. Later he will find joy in the
thought that it is his privilege to set the mind free from the
"nodis religionum". We can be sure that the bonds he intends to
break are bonds woven out of fear of the gods.

Such an objective could appear thoroughly iconoclastic to
the reader who neglected to view Lucretius in the light of his
times, and who consequently was not aware of the object of his
attack. Whether in praise or blame, he might be tempted to
charge, without qualification, that Lucretius was anti-religious,
since the poet aimed to abolish the reverence for divinity which
is proper to true religion.

Yet, the fear that Lucretius opposed was not rational, filial
respect for divinity, but rather the superstitious fear that grew
out of a decayed, formalized religion which, even in its period
of vigor, never included a worthy concept of deity. The word
"religio", we must remember, obviously did not have the same
meaning for Lucretius as it does for us: the binding of man to
the one, unchanging, all-perfect Father Who treats His creature
with love and justice. For Lucretius, as for all Romans, the

1 T. Lucretius Carus, De Rerum Natura, transl. by W.H.D. Rouse,
Heinemann, London; Putnam's Sons, New York, 1924, I, 146.
2 Ibid., IV, 7.
word signified the relations of men with a group of 'super-men', with gods who were not above capricious anger and revenge for some minute and indeliberate offense committed against them. Naturally relations with such beings were characterized from the beginning by uncertainty, fear, and, especially in Lucretius' time, by superstitious practices designed to placate temperamental gods.

We see, then, that Lucretius' attitude was one of rebellion, not against Divinity as such, but as conceived in his time. Whether he would have opposed the Christian concept of reverence for God we simply cannot say, though certainly he could not have based his opposition on the same grounds. We can be sure, however, that superstitious fear, in its causes and manifestations, was the evil that accounts for his almost Pauline zeal. It is accountable, too, for many of the weaknesses in his system of ethics and of physics. So overpowering was his conviction that superstition with its excesses contradicted the nature of man, that he seemed willing to put up with less manifest inconsistencies if only he could rid the world of it. He could not see what evils might be generated by the inconsistencies. He could see, and see with a poet's sensitiveness to human misery that left him in anguish, the canker disfiguring and tormenting his people. Potential evil that was uncertain must have appeared slight beside the evil that disrupted Roman religious and social life before his eyes. Like Epicurus before him, he had reason for the philosophy he proposed. "If 'weakness' comes into the reckoning at all, we
should bear in mind the unhealthiness, not of an individual, but of Greece under tyrants, and of Rome in the late Republic."

Some wonder has been expressed that Epicureanism should find its greatest popularity in two periods so unlike as those of Epicurus and Lucretius. One would expect, it seems, that a system adapted to the spirit, or better, to the want of spirit of early third century Athens, stripped of the freedom and power that had been her glory, could hardly suit the temperament of Rome, torn with the pangs of transition and "big with the potentialities of Empire". Yet, is there not a striking resemblance beneath surface appearances? Granted the almost contradictory political status of the two cities, one free and the other in bondage, was there not a similar spiritual destitution, closely connected with political conditions but dependent upon other factors as well, which makes the rise of Epicureanism in Rome quite reasonable? In both cities individual responsibility and duty were being sacrificed before power politics, in one case domestic, foreign in the other, with a consequent loss of the sense of personal dignity. In both cities there was a growing vagueness about God that bore fruit in superstition. Little wonder, then, that two voices should be raised, different in many respects, but alike in these two at least, that they stressed the dignity of the individual, and professed the power to finish the dragon of superstition with one stroke.

3 E. E. Sikes, Lucretius, Poet and Philosopher, University Press, Cambridge, 1936, 64.
How did Lucretius hope to banish this superstitious terror of the gods which he felt to be the curse of Rome? Fundamentally, the answer was to be found in knowledge of nature. The recognition of natural laws was to free man from the anxiety consequent upon belief in capricious, tyrannical gods. His was a perfect confidence, a confidence at times annoyingly presumptuous, that he could educate all men to live a life of tranquility worthy of the gods themselves. No matter what might be the individual differences of men, there was no one whose fear would not dissolve before the power of reason. An optimistic outlook, indeed, and a message of hope for the confused, despairing multitude.

To realize this hope Lucretius employed the physical theory originated by Democritus and slightly evolved by Epicurus. Atomism was not elaborated for its own sake, but was entirely directed to the moral end which Lucretius had set himself. This view seems far more in keeping with the tenor of the whole poem and with the occasional digressions from pure physics for ethical applications, than the opinion that Lucretius did not make such a distribution of emphasis between physics and ethics. Certainly the poet was far more appreciative than Epicurus of the wonder and beauty of nature, but this appreciation pales beside the

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4 D. R. N., III, 322.
6 This second opinion seems to be held by Sikes, 92.
passion he displays in using nature as a foil for superstition.

We are naturally led to ask how reason, exercised through a
knowledge of physical laws, is to liberate man from fear and its
consequent evils. Lucretius argued that just as the atom is free
by a law of nature from the capricious interference of the gods
("quid quaeque queant per foedera natural quid porro nequeant,
sanctum quandoquidem extat"), so, too, man participates in the
same law and the same freedom. If the component parts of man, the
atoms, are beyond the control of the gods, if they combine and
disintegrate without divine interference, then man has nothing to
fear in this life or beyond it. He simply comes into being as an
individual by the collision of tiny particles, and he ceases to
exist and to feel as an individual when the particles disperse.

Consequently, just as crime proceeds from a dread of death's
punishments which drives man to selfish greed for all that life
can offer him licitly or illicitly, so a release from that dread
and its sinful effects will be found in the knowledge that man is
entirely mortal and that the gods must be indifferent toward his
actions. Ultimate liberation will follow upon the realization
that the gods have no power over this world of ours and its
inhabitants.

7 D. R. N., I, 586f.
8 Ibid., III, 40-90.
9 For Lucretius' reasoning here, confer G.D. Hadzits, Lucretius
Lucretius struck courageously at the paramount evil of his time, the inadequacy of anthropomorphic gods. It is regrettable that in doing so he passed to the opposite extreme and destroyed the foundation of true relationship with God and, consequently, of a vigorous code of morality. He simply did not have a positive remedy to function in the place of the evil he deplored.

We can be sure that just as sincere and earnest as his hatred of cant and religious formalism was his hatred of sin. This is manifest from his criticism of greed for power and riches, of dishonesty and infidelity, of lust, pride, selfishness, brutality, debauchery and sloth. Yet, this hatred of sin was a negative affair, characteristic of the whole moral outlook of Lucretius. He knew what to destroy but was scarcely the one to lay foundations for the rebuilding. Consequently, his contribution is, as Fowler has pointed out, only "indirectly a religious one,...a wholesome contempt for superstition and all the baser side of religious belief and practice." Consequently, too, it is easy to see how Epicureanism, more than any other ancient system of prominence, could easily carry the less wary or less virtuous disciple to the opposite extreme, to an apathetic, laissez faire attitude toward the gods and religious responsibility.

11 Ibid., III, 83.
12 Ibid., V, 43ff.
We see, then, the contradiction in Lucretius' objective, the contradiction which escaped him as it has escaped many others who, consciously or unconsciously, have followed him down to our own day, because they, too, have had no true concept of God. The poet desired a moral code that would eliminate the vice and crime of his time. Yet, because he was disillusioned with the Roman gods, because he felt that superstitious fear of the gods was the source of all evil, he rejected entirely divine sanction, failing to see that without it there can be no effective code of morality. This basic weakness in Lucretius' system will be examined in the last chapter of this thesis.

In Lucretius' rebellion against the gods of the pagans, we reach the summit of the Epicurean philosophy of Individualism. Man, the poet felt, had been bound by the "knots of religion", had lost his dignity in debasement before false gods. Now he was to seek his end of moderated pleasure, free from the irrational fear that had enslaved him.

Cicero, in the second book of the De Finibus, long ago pointed out the rocks that lurked beneath the surface of such a philosophy. The problem that drove Lucretius into such treacherous waters must have been a great one, and is well worthy of more detailed examination before we consider the solution he proposed.
CHAPTER II
SUPERSTITION IN ROME

Superstition has been well defined as a "belief founded on irrational feelings, especially of fear, and marked by credulity; also any rite or practice inspired by such fear". In Lucretius' eyes this was the blight that brought all evil into the world, all unhappiness and discontent. Because of it man can not find satisfaction or rest in any pleasure. Neither rich nor poor, powerful nor weak are spared. All alike who are ignorant of the causes of things lie in its shadow and consequently look upon the world and the gods darkly as through a glass. How sad the picture of the restless, bored "playboy" who has all this world can offer except peace of mind. His flight from mansion to villa is really but a flight from the self he has grown to hate, and from the vague cause of his disquiet, uncertainty about the future and the punishments it may bring. Lucretius found the mind of man fouled with superstition, and until it was purged the poet felt that man could bring forth fruits neither of happiness nor of

1 College Stand. Dict., Funk, Wagnalls, New York, 1922, 1130.
3 Ibid., III, 1055.
5 Ibid., I, 151ff.
6 Ibid., III, 1053ff.
Here was the problem as Lucretius saw it, and he set himself to his task with a will. We shall best appreciate his efforts by first studying the problem in its causes and manifestations.

These causes were two-fold: one indirect, consisting of the social and political elements of unrest in Rome at the time; the second direct, consisting of the fundamental inadequacy of the Roman religion.

If there ever was a time when political and social trends influenced the spiritual state of a nation, it was in Rome of the first century B.C., particularly in the turbulent days of Lucretius' lifetime, from 99 to 55 B.C. That they produced a profound impression on him is unquestionable. He could well take joy in the thought that his philosophy enabled him to stand off from the stormy sea around him and gaze in tranquility upon the endless intrigues of his country-men. The Roman of this era passed through decades of bloodshed, vengeance, mistrust and uncertainty that almost destroyed his confidence in mankind. Little wonder that he should cast his eyes aloft for courage and hope with unprecedented fervor; little wonder that he should be afflicted with a sense of sin and of the gods' displeasure that drove him frantically to the altar to propitiate them. When the orthodox religion had become

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7 D. R. N., III, 40; V, 45ff.
8 Ibid., III, 7ff.
stagnant and uninspiring, incapable of giving release from the sense of desertion that oppressed the Roman people, it was natural to expect that they would turn elsewhere for relief: to new cults and eventually to superstition.

How significant were these political trends? When accumulated they present a rare scene of social chaos. Lucretius was a child when Rome was forced at the expense of countless lives to defend her prestige and hegemony against the Italian nations, clamoring for franchise in the Social Wars. He was old enough to be horrified by the sight of 10,000 corpses in the Forum, after the followers of the consul, Gnaeus Octavius, butchered the supporters of his colleague, Cinna. This was merely one incident in the Civil War that reached its bitter end with Sulla’s slaughter of 4,000 Samnite prisoners within the shadow of Rome’s walls. Perhaps Lucretius lost close kinsmen in the fearful proscriptions that testify to the treachery and spirit of vengeance which characterized the dictatorships of Marius and Sulla. The political greed of public characters and the luxurious lives of private citizens during the period leading up to the Catilinarian conspiracy in 63 B.C. were eloquent witnesses to the decay of the old Roman spirit. It had been characteristic of this spirit that the citizen place the country he loved above all purely selfish gain. Now the inefficiency and dishonesty of government officials could engender only contempt, or at least distrust, which led to the ascendancy of private over public interests.
The fact that Pompey, invested with extraordinary powers, ex-
terminated in three months the pirate hordes that had made the
seas, the Italian coasts, and the very port of Rome their hunting
grounds, testifies indirectly to the inefficiency in high places.
Previous to his appointment, little had been done to remedy a hu-
miliating state of affairs. Whole tribes had been forced to mi-
grate inland, deserting their cities before they were ravaged.
With almost complete immunity the bucaneeers had kidnapped promi-
nent citizens and even the populations of entire islands, and had
held them for ransom. Corn shipments had been cut off and Rome
threatened with consequent famine. Fleets sent out to meet the
pirates had been vanquished and burnt. No wonder the average Ro-
man felt his doubts growing and respect for his government dwind-
ling when he saw this stain on his public conscience.

The selfishness and corruption of government officials spread
throughout Italy and inundated the farthest provinces and outposts.
Provincial governors generally bled their charges white, offering
them law and order but at the price of economic enslavement. It
is certain that Cicero was not using rhetorical exaggeration when
he described the hatred and grief kindled in the hearts of foreign
peoples by the "unbridled passions and the iniquities of govern-
mental administrators." He vigorously portrays the effects of
the greed characteristic of the new epoch in Rome's history.

9 M. Cicero, De Imperio Cn. Pompei Oratio, ed. by A.S. Wilkins,
The shame for these injustices that cried to heaven could well contribute its share to the sense of sin which made all Rome uneasy.

In private life the same spiritual decay is manifest, probably in no clearer instance than in the effects of slavery. Aside from the moral deterioration of the slaves themselves, the free members of society suffered immensely by this human traffic. The wealthy were introduced to lives of excessive luxury, idleness and consequent vice; the poor found their services cheapened and often undesired. As a result we note a marked increase in the city rabble, living honestly or dishonestly, but generally from hand to mouth, selling their votes to the politician who offered the most frequent panem et circenses, and passing their wretched lives in the crowded insulae, breeding places of crime and vice.

The religious significance of these political and social trends, culminating in the conflict of Caesar and Pompey, and in the Catilinarian conspiracy which capitalized on all the political

abuse and popular discontent of the preceding decades, should be evident to any student of history. This period was the acid test of the orthodox Roman religion. The question that immediately comes to mind is whether or not that religion was vigorous enough to cope with the problem. Other nations have faced similar spiritual crises and their people have found solace, hope and courage in their beliefs. Ireland and Poland, to mention but two, have passed through equal tests. Whatever the political outcome may have been in such cases, one fact has always been clear. Through the material carnage, national humiliation and profound human sorrow has shone the steady light of a deepened faith that the pain of this world has its reason and its comfort in another.

Unfortunately this was not the case in ancient Rome, and here we come to the second and direct cause of the rise of superstition: the inadequacy of the Roman religion. It simply was not able to meet the crisis.

We must recall that the word 'religion' did not have exactly the same meaning for the Romans as it does for the Christian. For the latter the word primarily signifies the acknowledgment of God as Supreme Lord of the Universe, and the expression of conformity of our wills to His, our utter dependence upon and allegiance to Him. These factors are more or less contained in the definition of religion quoted by Fowler: "the effective desire to be in right
relations with the Power manifesting itself in the universe." As he points out, however, the element of conformity to God's will was absent from the Roman concept of religion. All the Roman knew about his gods was that they were powers for good or evil. To be in "right relations" with them meant the ability to placate them.

A pretentious body of rites, therefore, grew up around these deities. In fact, the Roman gods were deities of cult only. Dogma was unheard of. The only attitude with which the Roman approached his gods was one of fear, a fear which their very obscurity accentuated. It is easy to see how such ignorance would lead to superstition. When people do not know what to believe about their gods, they are ready to believe anything. The Roman's ignorance of natural causes did the rest. The slightest rumbling in the sky was a manifestation of divine pleasure or disfavor. No event, however insignificant, was without divine significance. The people were literally hounded by the gods. In an agrarian society the weaknesses of such a religion would not be manifest, but in the complex urban society that was Rome in the first century before Christ, disturbed as it was by social and political upheavals, it reduced the people to a state of near hysteria.

In such a degenerate condition Rome could not withstand the current of Greek thought and philosophy that swept into it. Unbelief took hold of the upper classes. They were always careful

12 Fowler, 8.
to confine their ridicule to private conversation. Whatever their private opinions might have been, they did not air them in public. Religion was the bulwark of the state. So dependent was the state upon it that a scrupulous fear of the gods was the only thing that kept the Roman commonwealth together.

The patrician class used religion as a tool to exploit the people. Polybius, prompted by the experience of his own lifetime, had been able to say that religion originated out of a desire of politicians to attain their objectives. It had been largely by means of clever appeal to religious feeling that the government encouraged the people, already exhausted from the conflict with Hannibal, to contribute their funds and their man-power for the campaign against Macedon. Convenient manipulation of auspices by hired Etruscan seers, and speeches by consuls professing to reveal the will of the gods in favor of the campaign, broke down the resistance of a people who had grown accustomed to having their religious fears and scruples allayed by public officials. The same successful process had been used to promote the less reasonable war with Antiochus of Syria.

With the development of this policy in religious affairs and

14 Ibid., VI, lvi, 9-12.
16 Ibid., XXXVI, 1.
the proportionate loss of respect for old beliefs went an increasingly pragmatic attitude toward religion in the minds of prominent men. Eventually, in the age of Cicero, we find some of the most outstanding men in public affairs estimating the worth of the *jus divinum* by its utility in maintaining public peace and patriotism. Its entire value for them seemed to be that of a safeguard for the constitution. Scaevola, himself a *Pontifex Maximus*, could speak of three religions: the poet's, the philosopher's and the statesman's. The last was the only one to be observed, regardless of its objective truth and validity. Cicero, a duly elected augur, seems to have been of the same mind when he suggests that augury as a means of prophecy, though an illusion, was to be retained: "retinetur autem et ad opinionem vulgi et ad magnas utilitates rei publicae mos, religio, disciplina, jus augurium, collegii auctoritas". Undoubtedly the same utilitarian motive accounted for much of Augustus's zeal in the resuscitation of the orthodox, indigenous Roman religion.

The decadence of Roman religion reached its low-water mark in the period of Lucretius. External disregard for what once had been held sacred became manifest in many ways. Temples were neglected to such a degree that Augustus soon after admits having

Sacrileges became more and more frequent, as may be gathered from the thefts of temple statues and sacred articles. By Lucretius' time the priestly office, to a great extent, was an organized hypocrisy, ready to use its sacred functions, such as divination, for material and political advantages.

Such is the picture of the religion that was to sustain the Roman people in the hour of their greatest need, when political and social revolution shook their moral structure to its very foundation. Can we wonder that such a religious state drove them to superstitious beliefs, in the hope that they would find some solace for their souls?

Having seen superstition, then, in its causes, let us now inquire briefly into its manifestations, thereby completing our examination of the problem that motivated Lucretius' passionate outburst.

The first sign, and perhaps the most significant, of the trend toward superstition was the acceptance of Greek and especially of Oriental forms of religion with their emotional

20 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, transl. by H. Rackham, Heinemann, London; Putnam's Sons, N.Y., 1933, I, xxix, 82.
expressions of expiation. As far as the general public was concerned, the advent of the foreigner meant contact with new gods and new religions. If anything, it gave impetus to their superstitious practices. The religions of Greece and the Orient were even more degraded than that of the Romans. The average Roman began to shop around in these foreign cults for gods who could satisfy his wants when the old Italian deities failed. Frequently enough he would find them even more cooperative. The foreign gods were much less lofty personages than the old Italian deities had ever been, and the Roman would find them just as ready to connive at vice as they were to assist in more virtuous enterprises. Their cults, too, were much more appealing, being little more than drunken and sexual orgies.

From the time of the Hannibalic crisis on, instances of official suppression of these cults became increasingly frequent. Private interpretation of prodigia, when the people lost confidence in the ability of the state to win the benevolence of the gods, reached such a point that quite early the authorities had to issue an edict for the confiscation of private forms of prophecy and prayer, as well as rules of sacrifice. Yet the government realized that the religious fears of the people had to be allayed for the public welfare, and so we find, first, the celebration of festivals under the names of Greek gods, then the official

22 Fowler, 325.
23 Livy, XXV, 12.
reception of the **Magna Mater** cult, and eventually, when the tide was too strong to be checked, even connivance at the formerly suppressed religions. The old *jus divinum* was swallowed in eastern mythology as the people sought an emotional catharsis for their pent up religious fears and scruples.

It may well be that these foreign rites are accountable in part for Lucretius' strange conception of superstition as the source of all crime. The *Bacchanalia*, which in time enrolled a large number of Romans, including much of the youth of noble blood, certainly bred an unrestraint altogether at variance with the old Roman character. The drunkenness and excesses of these orgiastic rites were indulged in the name of religious ecstasy, the whole object of which was to attain communion with the divine nature. Characteristic of all these cults was an appeal to the emotions rather than to the intellect and will, as the religiously starved people sought in ceremonial purifications and symbolic initiations true purity of heart which orthodoxy could not furnish. It was only to be expected that as the old morality broke down, this laudable objective would find perverted expression in the superstitious rites brought in through Etruria and Campania.

Another manifestation of increasing superstition was the exaggerated attention given to omens. Lucretius was not indignant

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24 Ibid., XXIX, 10.
25 Ibid., XXXIX, 18.
26 Fowler, 345.
without reason when he spoke of enslavement to the seers who could concoct dream interpretations to fill any man with dread. Cato expresses the extent of this evil when he wonders ironically how one soothsayer could keep from laughing upon meeting another.

Men believed that the outer World was the scene of constant Divine interference. They held, with more or less conviction according to temperament, that every phenomenon of nature—for example, the failure of the harvest, the flooding of a river, the rising up of a headwind on a voyage—was due to the caprice of one or other offended god.

It was not uncommon that civic business of moment be suspended because the augur maintained that the sky or the entrails were not auspicious. Nor can we believe that the credulity was limited to the ignorant. Sulla, who carried about an image of Apollo which he kissed and otherwise worshiped, was of the opinion that no plan was so safe as the one which came by night. Cicero, too, tells how terrified he was by the prophecy of a rower who foretold, before Pharsalia, that the land of Greece would be a welter of blood. Crassus' defeat in his war with the Parthians was attributed to his neglect to follow the auspices. Pompey was morally forced to engage in battle at Philippi by 'favorable'

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27 D. R. N., I, 104ff.
28 Cicero, De Div., II, 52.
29 Masson, 30
31 Cicero, De Div., I, 68.
auspices. All these practices tended to give deeper roots to the vague conception of the gods as revengeful, jealous, even treacherous.

Superstition manifested itself in a third way in vague thought about future life. Some have been inclined to the opinion that Lucretius’ attack on the notions of the punishments of Tartarus was exaggerated and unwarranted in view of contemporaneous beliefs. Caesar and Catullus are offered as more representative of a common agnostic attitude. The poet’s abnormal emphasis on the evils of belief in Hell they would attribute to some childhood impressions derived from Etruscan influences and so vivid as to leave him almost obsessed. However there does seem to be evidence of religious terrorism based upon Roman conceptions of the afterlife. As Masson points out, this terrorism would more than likely be expressed in the folk-lore since lost. Even so, Cicero tells us how deeply moved the audience was by the briefest mention of the gloom of Tartarus in the lines of a play. Tyndarus, in the Captivi, mentions the number of pictures he has seen of the torments of Hell. There does seem to be reason, in the light of this evidence, for admitting the existence of such foreboding

33 Masson, 402ff.
34 Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, transl. by J.E. King, Heinemann, London; Putnam’s Sons, N.Y., 1927, I, xvi, 37.
35 Plautus, Captivi, ed. by W.M. Lindsay, Methuen & Co., London, 1900, V, iv, 998f.
about the future life, a dread which certainly makes more reasonable the wide spread of Oriental cults with their emphasis on rites of purification. Perhaps Lucretius does exaggerate the evil, but there seems to have been a firm foundation for his ideas.

Naturally this concept of the anguish of Hades would be closely connected with another manifestation of superstition, an exaggerated sense of sin and of the wrath of the gods. Lucretius was conscious of the significance of this factor when he exclaimed:

O genus infelix humanum, talia divis
cum tribuit facta atque iras adiunxit acerbas!
Quantos tum gemitus ipsi sibi, quantaque nobis
volnera, quas lacrimas peperere minorbu' nostris. 36

Livy points out in his Proemium the unbearable burden of sin that oppressed his people, and Horace, too, refers to the evils that had come upon his times. Certainly this feeling was strong during the lawless days through which Lucretius lived. It would be most natural for Romans to believe that the gods had deserted their fatherland because of their social and political offenses, their fratricidal warfare, and their general neglect of the ancient pietas. Such a troubled public conscience would not necessarily imply the influence of superstition, but when coupled with Oriental expiations it took a definitely superstitious turn.

36 D. R. N., V, 1194ff.
This conclusion is made evident by the last manifestation of superstition that we shall consider, the brutality and human sacrifice involved in some expiatory rites intended to avert the wrath of the gods and thus to purge man of his sense of sin. A realization of the significance of this element in Roman religious life will clarify the reasons for Lucretius' condemnation of the turpis religio of his times. Was he merely waxing poetical when he described so tenderly the pitiful figure of Iphigenia as she was led like a ewe to the altar of sacrifice? Was he resting his opposition to religion solely on a legend, perhaps with the intention of forestalling such savagery in the future? The facts of Roman history make Lucretius' passionate outburst easier to understand, nor need we believe that he was merely anticipating a potential problem.

A "savage sacramental act" was part of the Dionysiac ritual. Furthermore, human sacrifice is mentioned a number of times from the period of the Punic wars on. Two Greeks and two Gauls had been entombed in the Forum Boarium, where human sacrifices were repeatedly performed despite Livy's condemnation of such procedure as a most un-Roman rite. Shortly after Lucretius' birth the Senate was forced to pass a decree prohibiting these brutal rites, but evidently the decree had little effect. For in

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38 D. R. N., I, 84ff.
40 Livy, XXII, lxvii, 6.
the next century Pliny tells us that they still occurred in his time. Despite Hadrian's effort to abolish human sacrifices throughout the Empire, Pausanias hints rather clearly that they still went on secretly in Greece. We have good reason, therefore, to believe that the superstitious Oriental rites, which, after all, were popularized because of the innate though perverted religious sense of the Roman people, did not rest satisfied with an expiatory sacrifice that left the victim still living. We can be sure that if the authorities had to publicly forbid human sacrifice, there must have been reason for their action.

Thus we have the completed picture of the problem as it faced Lucretius. The critical issues of the times threw the people frantically back upon their traditional religion. This in turn, being little more than the embodiment of ritualistic minutiae and formalized procedure, gave free rein to individual tastes and beliefs which, coupled with fear and ignorance, degenerated into the worst kind of superstitious beliefs and practices. Hence, though we cannot condone Lucretius' solution, we can at least understand the reason behind the direction it took and sympathize with the author who was painfully aware of the evil he was fighting, though perhaps just as woefully unaware of the inadequacy of the solution. That solution we shall now examine and evaluate.

41 Caius Plinius Secundus, Historia Naturalis, Tauchnuitius, Lipsig, 1830, XXX, 3.
PART II

THE LUCRETIAN SOLUTION

CHAPTER I

THE EXISTENCE AND NATURE OF THE GODS

When we speak of the 'Lucretian solution' to the problem of superstition, of course we do not mean to imply that the poet originated the tonic that he thought would revive afflicted Rome. A critical comparison of the De Rerum Natura with our other sources of Epicureanism reveals his close adherence to the doctrines proposed by his Greek Master. Nor did Lucretius ever intend to take credit for the discovery of his remedy. The fact that he all but deifies Epicurus in the introduction to the third book of his poem, and rejoices that he may follow the firm footprints first left upon the sands of Philosophy, as well as the explicit acknowledgment that "the man of Greece" first lifted the scales of superstition from the eyes of mankind, reveal that Lucretius laid no claim to originality.

Yet, we can speak of the Lucretian solution in as much as he keenly perceived, with all the passion of personal conviction, the

1 D. R. N., III, 4; I, 63ff.
source of his nation's distress, recognized a cure which, in his opinion, had not yet been given a fair trial, and then presented it with a vigor that captivated the confused minds and hearts of countless Roman citizens. In the truest sense of the word he was a missionary of Epicureanism, an evangelist who implanted the roots of this philosophy where previously they had taken little hold. To this extent we may speak of the Epicurean solution as 'Lucretian'.

The task facing Lucretius, then, was to banish the fear that was the source of the world's sin and unhappiness. To do this he had to start at rock-bottom, with the very concept of the gods' existence and nature. Having stabilized this fundamental notion, he advanced to a denial of Divine Providence and causality in the world - a denial, however, which strangely enough still left room for a cultus peculiar to Epicureanism. Finally, with the foundation and lower structure in place, he raised the tower for which the whole edifice had been planned, his denial of Divine Sanction. This was the apex of the system, the ethical goal toward which the theological steps had been taken. These divisions of the process are not so nicely made in the poem, but their logical sequence may be deduced from a careful reading, and hence they will constitute the skeleton of our treatment of the solution as Lucretius saw it.

How precisely did Lucretius justify his belief in the gods? To present a complete picture of Lucretius' reasoning on this
point, we shall have to supplement his statements with data taken from other sources of information regarding Epicureanism. The disciple sometimes takes a poetic leap and omits premises which the Master and others preferred to treat explicitly. Consequently, we shall occasionally draw on other documents with the purpose of gaining a clearer and more coherent notion of the poet's doctrine.

Lucretius considered the existence of the gods so certain on a basis of the Epicurean theory of cognition that he nowhere gives us a formal proof for it as he does for the denial of Providence. After treating this general theory of cognition at some length in his fourth book, he rests content to describe most briefly the way in which men came to a knowledge of the gods, passing on immedi-
ately to his denial of divine intervention in the world. We should note in this passage that after describing the double ori-

2 D. R. N., V, 1161ff.
3 Ibid., V, 148f.
The primary proof for the existence of the gods in this system rests on its theory of cognition. Epicurus begins with the fact that all men have a notion, constantly abiding though not always actual, of the existence of the gods. This notion, according to Cicero, is innate in man, not, however, in the technical sense of later philosophy, as an idea which is imprinted on the mind at birth and then is actuated when a suitable stimulus occurs.

Rather, the word 'innate' describes a deposit of actual cognitions which occur with such consistency and frequency as to leave an unmistakable image in the mind. These cognitions, which come to the mind especially during the untroubled and undistracted hours of sleep, when it is most attuned to delicate stimuli, reveal gods of great power and beauty.

How do these concepts of the deities prove their existence? In the Epicurean theory all concepts are formed by reception of images (idola) which we can best describe as films which detach themselves from their source and fly about with incredible speed. If the atomic structure of the object is of an especially refined nature, its idola cannot affect the senses, but make their impression directly upon the mind. Such is the case in forming the

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4 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, transl. by H. Rackham, Heinemann, London; Putnam's Sons, N.Y., 1933, I, xvii, 42-45.
5 Cf. R.D.Hicks, Stoic and Epicurean, Scribner, N.Y., 1910, 289.
6 D. R. N., V, 1170.
7 Ibid., IV, 35ff.
8 Ibid., IV, 722-822.
idea of the gods. The concept of them is formed by a constant stream of extremely subtile idola. These, being of similar representative nature, leave the form of the image unchanged despite the physical succession.

Now it may happen that there is a confusion of the idola before the faculty is affected. Thus Lucretius accounts for fictitious ideas - ideas which are objectively real only per partes. Immediately, then, the question arises: why may not the images of the gods be purely subjective? Cicero poses the problem more concretely: "Quid interest utrum de Hippocentauro an de Deo cogitamus? Omnen enim talem conformationem animi ceteri philosophi motum inanem vocant, vos autem adventum in animos...dicitis." Epicurus's answer is to appeal to the constancy of the concept. The object of such 'clear vision' must be verified in reality. If it were fictitious it would be occasional, sporadic, dependent upon chance combinations of the idola. There would be no sufficient reason for the fact that an 'anticipation' (prolepsis) is formed - this is one of Epicurus's norms for judging truth - unless this 'anticipation' had been built up by a number of similar images derived from real beings.

9 D. R. N., V, 1175ff.
10 Ibid., IV, 735ff.
11 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, I, xxxviii, 105.
Thus we find in the system of Lucretius what we may call a materialistic ontologism. The gods are perceived as they are in themselves, through physical media which are exact images of their natures. Analogous knowledge, in the strict Scholastic sense which would mean knowledge derived deductively from creatures, is definitely discarded because it would imply Divine causality, Divine creation. Lucretius in a passage previously mentioned violently attacks a popular form of the argument from causality. Epicurus brands it as a "false supposition", an unjustified inference which is not based upon the repeated imprint of idola, but goes beyond the data supplied by them and consequently is fictitious. Of course, the reason for the vehement rejection of the argument is clear: the conception of it as a basis for superstitious fear. This point will become more manifest in the following chapters.

A second argument for the existence of the gods is the a priori one explicitly mentioned by the Epicurean Velleius in Cicero's dialogue. It is based on the theory of isonomia or equal distribution of opposites within an infinite number, so that there must be as many immortal beings as there are mortal. Bailey, in discussing this argument, gives several passages from Lucretius where the principle of isonomia is used in other propositions, for

14 D. R. N., V, 1161ff.
15 Epicurus, To Menoecheus, #124.
16 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, I, xix, 50.
example, to show that there are equal numbers of animals of dif-
ferent species. However, since this argument, with reference to
the gods, is only virtually contained in the poem, and since the
Epicureans themselves do not seem to have proposed it very vigor-
ously, it need not detain us longer.

In determining the nature of the gods, Lucretius is, of
course, guided in his theology by the ethical goal he has set him-
self - the elimination of fear that springs from superstition.
The statement that Zeller made of Epicurus could equally well be
made of the Roman poet.

Epicurus had also another [reason], half aesthetical, half religious - the wish to see his
ideal of happiness realized in the person of
the gods, and it is this ideal which determines
the character of all his notions respecting
them.18

Just as the universal 'anticipation' of men proves the exist-
ence of the gods, so too it reveals the characteristic attributes
of their nature. Epicurus advised his disciples through Menoeceus
to believe in the blessedness and immortality which common opinion
associated with deity, to predicate of it all that is in harmony
with these two attributes, and deny of it all that is alien to
them. Herein is contained the simple formula that makes all the

17 D. R. N., II, 532-540. Confer C. Bailey, Greek Atomists and
Epicurus, 461ff.
18 E. Zeller, Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics, transl. by O.J.
Reichel, Longmans, Green & Co., London and N.Y., 1892, 466.
19 Epicurus, To Menoeceus, #123.
ethical and theological doctrines that depend upon it quite easy to understand. The whole logical process springs from the ontological vision of the gods and the primary notes of unending bliss contained in that vision. Lucretius echoes the opinion of the Master when he says that it is necessary that a god "immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur", and again when he asks "quid enim immortalibus atque beatis gratia nostra queat largirier emolumenti?" In an analogous sense these two attributes are for the Epicureans what Ipsum Esse is for many Scholastics - the metaphysical essence which distinguishes the Divine Being from all others, and is conceived as the prima radix from which all other attributes are derived.

What are some of the qualities which the Epicurean predicates of his gods in virtue of these characteristic attributes of immortality and perfect happiness. First of all, since his concept is thoroughly anthropomorphic, the gods must have bodies, yet not of the same atomic density as man's, for this would involve many imperfections. Therefore, they will be constituted of the finest atoms conceivable in order to preserve their indestructability. For the same reason - that they may not suffer fatal blows and that they may have a supply of new constitutive matter - they are placed in the intermundia, the regions between the worlds, where

20 D. R. N., II, 647; V, 165f.
21 Ibid., V, 148.
the flow of basic atoms is sufficient for their maintenance, thus relieving them of all the fear that is consequent upon the possibility of death. 

Here, in abodes suited to their refined nature, they dwell immune from wind and rain, snow and frost, amid smiling, cloudless skies where nature supplies their every need. The whole description is clearly reminiscent of Homer's Olympus.

The same two basic attributes, since they eliminate anything like trouble or care, preclude all Divine intervention in worldly affairs. This point will be treated more fully in the following chapter. Cicero pithily summarizes the whole Epicurean doctrine on the gods.

Nihil enim [deus]agit, nullis occupationibus est implicatus, nulla opera molitur, sua sapientia et virtute gaudet, habet exploratum fore se semper cum in maximis, tum in aeternis voluptatibus.

Such is the ideal that Lucretius sets up before men - to inspire them, to free them from fear. Such is the god they are to approach in prayer with hearts untroubled. Contemplating the tranquility of Divine life, man sees the wisdom of detachment from the sordid business of the world and seeks his happiness in ataraxia, complete freedom from trouble and social strife in

23 D. R. N., V, 153; III, 18ff.
24 Ibid., II, 646; VI, 57ff.
imitation of the life of the gods. Lucretius' reaction to the social confusion of his age seems to have been one of despair, for his whole ethical solution, from its theological foundation upwards, places the premium on passivity, inaction.

How are we to evaluate this theological foundation of Lucretius' solution? Clearly, the entire validity of the Epicurean proof for the existence of the gods depends upon a factual premise - the universal concept of the gods, which, be it noted, is not an analogous concept, but a proper one. In other words, the notes contained in that concept represent the gods as they are in themselves, and are not derived deductively from other creatures, but from a direct vision of the gods themselves. This fact immediately places the Epicurean in a delicate and dangerous position. If it is shown that he has no grounds for positing such a vision of the gods, he is left without a proof for their existence, since there remains only the argument from isonomia, or counterpoise, which is a weak and arbitrary one to say the least, and is not used by Lucretius himself to prove the gods' existence.

Now, we know that in our day absolutely no value would be placed upon Lucretius' premise, since on a basis of it the vast majority of men would logically have to be agnostic. Such vision is simply contrary to ordinary experience. Are we to think, therefore, that the poet was insincere or deceptive in speaking of the universal vision of the gods? In other words, what factual
grounds did he, and especially Epicurus before him, who spoke explicitly of 'clear vision', have for building upon this basic supposition?

The truth is, probably ninety-nine out of a hundred Romans in Lucretius' time would have laid claim to divine visitations in dreams. Consequently, he certainly was not wrong regarding the fact of such concepts. But what he and his predecessor did not see, and could not see because of the primitive psychology of their times, was that these concepts had a simple explanation in the presence of remembrative species which, when actuated, were combined to form images of powerful and beautiful beings (anthropomorphic, of course) who performed marvelous deeds in keeping with their extraordinary natures. We need but recall that the ancient pagan lived in the midst of his gods - beheld their statues on every side, felt their presence in every phenomenon of nature - and we can understand how easily and readily these naturally acquired images would come to mind when it was relaxed in sleep. Today only the abnormal person would consider such imaginative representations to be real visitations, while the true and saintly mystic would call them such only when they were tested by a competent judge of the spiritual life. In Lucretius' time, however, psychology had not advanced sufficiently to furnish men with a knowledge of the operations of the imagination in forming dream images, while their natural religious temperament left them only too ready to attribute such images to direct divine activity.
Here lies the basic weakness in the Lucretian theological system. Factually, his religious structure was built upon sand, for he is exposed to the primary objection against all Ontologism: direct cognition of divinity is contrary to experience.

Secondly, Lucretius' philosophical footing is most unsteady when he tries to divorce the concept of Divinity which he considers legitimate from the concept of Divine causality which he brands as fictitious. It will be remembered that the reason he justified the objectivity of the first concept was that it was founded on an 'anticipation' which had to have its sufficient reason in repeated impressions derived from real beings. He notably omits to speak of any 'anticipation' which would seem to be connected with such a constant concept as that of Divine causality, contenting himself with the arbitrary charge that it was due to false inference. As a matter of fact, the whole theory of 'anticipations' is definitely arbitrary, since it certainly seems that even a fictitious idea of a Centaur, for example, produced a clear 'anticipation' in the minds of the ancients, and therefore would logically have to depend, in Lucretius' system, on an existing being. Whether or not a person has a true 'anticipation' in a given case would, to all appearances, rest upon mere subjective opinion.

This subjectivity is present in the rejection of the validity

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26 Masson, 271, may be conferred on the matter of this paragraph.
of inference regarding Divine causality. Why is Lucretius more justified in deducing his secondary attributes of the gods than is the non-Epicurean in deducing the need of Divine activity to explain phenomena. Of course, Lucretius would reply that his secondary attributes are in harmony with the primary notes of perfect Divine happiness contained in his 'anticipation', whereas Divine operation is not. The answer to this distinction involves a brief discussion and definition of the nature of Divine operation and will best be reserved to the last part of the following chapter.

What Sikes has said of the Master holds equally true for the disciple: "no doubt Epicurus, if he failed to understand the nature of the imagination, had at least an ideal which he wished to see realized in the complete happiness of the gods". The Epicureans erred in their speculations because they were aiming at an ethical goal - the liberation of man from superstitious fear - which, we may almost say, determined a priori their theories on the nature of the divine beings. The concept of the gods outlined in the preceding pages was the first step taken in the elimination of that fear because it made it possible for man to believe in the ancient deities without at the same time being inconvenienced by the superstititious implications of the ancient belief. This belief had sprung from the notion of Divine action

27 Sikes, 109.
in the world. We shall now consider Lucretius' disposal of such an idea - the second step in his program for destroying superstition.
CHAPTER II

THE DENIAL OF DIVINE CAUSALITY AND PROVIDENCE

Long before Lucretius' day Democritus had sounded the theme of the De Rerum Natura when he said that the men of old had been struck with awe and dread at the sight of thunder, lightning and other portents of nature, assigning them to the agency of the gods. To this fear Lucretius attributed the rise of religion as the ancients knew it, with its solemn rites, its shrines and sacrifice, its pomp of ceremonious processions and elaborate ritual.

In all this the poet saw nothing but seeds of fear and human anxiety. If he was to banish these once and for all, he must banish the cause, unreservedly and unflinchingly. Time and again he reveals his consciousness of the fact that it is a 'harsh doctrine' he proposes, a doctrine that smacks of impiety, but there is no other course left but to drink the bitter cup, sweetened at the lip with the honey of his song.

For a proper understanding of Lucretius' position we must recall the mistaken ideas that were popular regarding the influence

2 D. R. N., V, 1161.
3 Ibid., III, 18; I, 936ff.
of the gods in worldly affairs. There was no true concept of the
dignity and purposiveness of Divine activity in the universe. The
gods, being anthropomorphic, were subject to human whims, and mani-
ifested the fact in their capricious, tyrannical manipulations of
nature. Stoicism undoubtedly attempted to counteract this defi-
ciency with its notion of the all-pervasive world spirit, inform-
ing all things with some degree of divine dignity. But here, too,
there was another evil, that of fate relentlessly dooming all
creatures to their appointed ends. This was no doctrine to free
the common man from his fear of a cruel taskmaster ready to sweep
down upon him with avenging whip if a small item in his rigid
ceremonial was inadvertently omitted. The Stoic ideal of co-oper-
ating with destiny rather than being dragged to the same end by
it, did not make it any less depressing in the eyes of Lucretius.
He preferred freedom from all coercion, physical or moral, and
chose to find it in the same solution that Ennius had voiced
before him: "Ego deum genus esse semper dixi et dicam caelitum,
sed eos non curare opinor, quid agat humanum genus".

Of the two species of Divine operation in the world, one,
Divine craftsmanship, had been particularly championed by Plato
in the person of the Demiourgos; the other, Divine Providence,
was contained in the Stoic doctrine of Divine 'forethought' (pro-
noia). Against both of these notions the Epicureans, as testifies

4 Cicero, De Divinatione, I, lvi, 132.
their spokesman Velleius, were implacable enemies. They felt that any freedom that may have been left to man by the first was utterly destroyed by the second. As Lucretius saw the world, there was no need of either expression of Divine operation. Nature, operating through the chance collisions of prime bodies, sufficed to explain all beings, probably even the gods themselves who also were of atomic structure. Ignorance of this power of nature was the very cause of man's blind attribution of all events to the power of the gods. From this spring welled up all the evils of superstition, with its brutal rites and anxious searching for new forms of expiation and propitiation.

The first argument offered by Lucretius against Divine providence is based on the same observation that Ennius made before him: "Nam si dei curent, bene bonis sit, male malis, quod nunc abest". How can we attribute to the gods, asks the poet, a world so full of imperfections, evil and pain? Man has only to look about him to see what poor workmanship he calls divine. How much of this immense world of ours is sheer waste, rendered impassable by its greedy mountains, rocky expanses and unhealthful marsh-land, inhabited only by beasts hostile to man. Scorching heat and penetrating cold drive man to a comparatively small section of the earth's surface where he must struggle against bramble and weed to

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5 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, I, viii, 18.
6 D. R. N., V, 1186f.
7 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, III, xxxii, 79.
raise his scant crop, often only to see it withered by the sun or blighted by the frost. How wretched compared with the dumb beast is the lot of man who is brought forth amid mother's pain and depends so long on the indulgent care of parents; who must endure disease, hostile seasons, and untimely death; who must build his weapons and walls to protect his dear possessions, while nature supplies the animals, often his cruelest foe, with all they need from their birth.

What kind of Divine goodness does that god manifest whose fatal lightning bolt envelopes the innocent in flames and leaves the wicked untouched? Or what Divine wisdom is Jupiter's when he spends his strength in the bolt that strikes the empty desert sands or the unoffending waves of the sea? What holiness is there in shattering his own temples, shrines and images?

The second argument of Lucretius is implied in the last passage cited. He asks triumphantly why Jupiter never shoots his lightning bolt when the sky is clear and why he must always use thunder when he decides to strike. Stated more abstractly, his argument would seem to be that the very order and consistency in natural phenomena prohibits the notion of Divine causality, since it would involve the limitation of Divine power. This position

8 D. R. N., V, 195ff.
9 Ibid., II, 1102ff.; VI, 417ff.
10 Ibid., VI, 400ff.
of the poet is significant not only because it stands in such strong contrast with the convictions of other philosophers who have used the same premises to prove the necessity of Divine operation, but also because it reveals so clearly, as we shall see, Lucretius' preoccupation with the idea of capricious gods.

In his third argument the poet asserts that the creation and regulation of the world would be above and beyond the power of the gods. Whatever other attributes or perfections he may have given them, he did not see fit to assign to one or all of them omnipotence, though certainly this would be in perfect harmony with the happiness of Jupiter, god supreme. Once again we see how Lucretius' ethical objective crippled his theological speculation.

At any rate, the poet of Epicureanism can conceive of no god powerful enough to rule and guide this magnificent universe of ours. Little though he may realize it, he voices an implicit protest against the petty, finite gods of ancient Rome.

quis regere immensi summam, quis habere profundi indu manu validas potis est moderanter habenas, quis pariter caelos omnis convertere et omnis ignibus aetheriis terras suffire feracis, omnibus inve locis esse omni tempore praesto, nubibus ut tenebras faciat caelique serena concluit sonitu, tum fulmina mittat et aedis saepe suas disturbet... 12

Furthermore, even granted a god could guide this universe,

11 Ibid., V, 87ff.
12 Ibid., II, 1095ff.
how could he ever possibly have created it? For even a Divine workman must have a pattern, a model for the thing he wishes to make. The world would have to exist as an exemplum before it could be made; otherwise the gods would not know what to desire.

The fourth and last argument offered by Lucretius rests upon the nature of the gods as outlined in the previous chapter. Providence would be out of harmony with the characteristic attribute of Divine happiness which consists in perfect peace, perfect rest. Epicurean ataraxia or tranquility proceeds from the absence of trouble, and more fundamentally from the absence of desire which is the root of trouble. To remove this 'evil of desire' is really the only object of all positive pleasure sought by man, for "the magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain". Simplicity of life, so frequently championed by Horace, is merely the logical and practical application of the Epicurean dogma that the fewer desires a man is afflicted with, the happier will be the life he passes.

Now if the gods ever chose to create and then to govern the universe, it must have been because they had a desire, a pain, which had to be assuaged by Divine operation. But what desire of novelty, asks Lucretius, could be enkindled in the heart of a

13 Ibid., V, 181ff.
15 Ibid., X, 131; 139.
being who had suffered no annoyance, no dissatisfaction in time past? Was his life hid in darkness and sorrow until the light of the world's creation shone upon him, bringing with it relief at last? Surely, too, the gods had nothing to expect from poor, insignificant man, the fruit of this labor. Where then is the reason for such unbecoming trouble?

Thus the Epicurean concludes that since the gods can look for no good in this world of ours, since their nature forbids even the desire for any good, then necessarily there can be neither Divine causality nor Divine Providence. "Omnis enim per se divum natura necessest / inmortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur / semota ab nostris rebus seluncta longe".

One major consequence that follows from this conclusion is that Lucretius must logically deny all finality in the universe. Hicks remarks that the Peripatetics were included among the chief antagonists of the Epicureans, because they maintained that the world was unconsciously working to an end despite the fact that it operated without Providence. Lucretius was logical at least and saw that the rejection of one meant the rejection of the other. To admit finality in the operations of nature would necessarily imply the need of someone to ordain that nature to a particular end rather than to any other, else there would be no sufficient

16 D. R. N., V, 165ff.
17 Ibid., II, 646ff.
18 Hicks, 304.
reason for this precise tendency. Certainly the world could not have established its own end, since this would involve the contradiction of giving itself what it did not have of itself. Consequently there is no course left but to deny the presence of finality entirely. "Nam certe neque consilio primordia rerum / ordine se suo quaque sagaci mente locarunt / nec quos quaque darent motus pepigere profecto".

This denial of finality is particularly stressed with regard to the limbs of the human body and its faculties. Lucretius grants that usefulness determines the nature and existence of many things which man has made, such as utensils and weapons, because they depend on experience and the rational adaptation of means to end. But those things which do not depend on experience ("quae prius ipsa nata dedere suae post notitiam utilitatis") do not have any purposiveness. Again this is logically true if there is no Supreme Designer, with foreknowledge of their utility, to ordain them to their end.

Sikes does not seem to recognize the position of Lucretius when he says:

It is strange that the Epicureans should not have here allowed a purpose for Nature, even if divine purpose was anathema. Their crude ideas on general biology are in stark contrast.

19 D. R. N., V, 419ff.
20 Ibid., IV, 853f.
with their sane conceptions of human development. 21

Yet, if divine purpose in the world is rejected, what other purpose is possible? Whatever else it may be, one thing is certain: it must be above the Nature whose purpose it is, unless we are to admit the impossible situation of Nature giving itself what it does not have. No non-volitional being can determine itself to one end rather than to another without a violation of the basic principle of causality.

With the rejection of design in the world's origin and development Lucretius was forced to propose that only the chance combinations of primordial bodies can account for the order and precision of our universe. The atoms, falling in a straight line, at various times swerved to an infinitesimal degree from their downward course to mingle with one another. This last detail is a departure from the doctrine of Democritus which allowed no lateral motion whatever. 22 This swerve, which proceeds entirely from the nature of the atoms themselves, is the cause of two things: the formation of the world in general and the freedom of the will in particular. 23 For it was inevitable that the repeated experiments of the primordial bodies in one combination after another should eventually result in the structure of the universe as we

21 Sikes, 145f.
23 D.R.N., II, 251ff.
With this statement of Lucretius' dependence on chance to explain the world's origin and activity, our presentation of his doctrines regarding Divine operation is complete. We may now consider the main flaws in this article of his theological creed, so fundamental in his solution of the problem of superstition.

His first argument against Divine causality rested upon the fact that the imperfections in the world's construction and operation were too numerous to admit the agency of the gods. His outlook certainly has not been unique in the history of man. The problem of evil and pain is as troublesome in our own age as it was in his. We should note at the outset, however, the one-sided view which the poet takes toward the world about him, for nowhere in the lines referred to previously does he mention the beauty and fruitfulness of nature in its many aspects. It was a narrow judgment indeed that concentrated on the regions of the earth closed to man and neglected the attractiveness of the land which was altogether sufficient for his needs. How different from the unprejudiced attitude of Virgil, Horace and the many other writers of the time whose simple delight with the charms of nature captivates their readers in every age, simply because it is the natural expression of man's universal observation.

24 Ibid., V, 422ff.
Prescinding from any doctrines based on revelation and discussing the question on a purely philosophical plane, we can say that the primary flaw in Lucretius' position is his failure to realize that even the evils he enumerates may be permitted by the Supreme Law-giver Who draws men, through them, to a higher life hereafter. The physical pain and sacrifice which are so prominent in man's life from the cradle to the grave can be ordered to a good which more than compensates for them. Because man has a free will, he can choose to use or misuse the circumstances of his life, to bear or evade its hardships, and accordingly to merit reward or punishment. He is the prince of all worldly creation, for he has the physical freedom to take pain and use it to glorify and love his Creator, thereby earning his crown. Surely there is nothing unworthy of God in blessing a creature with a quality so closely resembling his own supreme attribute, Freedom. Is God to be limited in the number of ways he may reflect His own Goodness in creatures? With this fundamental point clear, we can say that all physical discomfort can be used by man to wonderful advantage, and therefore cannot be said to be without reason. Of course, those who believe in the original fall of man have the further knowledge that pain was not in the original plan of God but was brought on by man himself. However, this knowledge involves revelation and is beyond the sphere of mere philosophy.

In his second argument Lucretius wondered why Jupiter never shot his lightning bolt when the sky was clear and why he had to
use thunder whenever he decided to strike. He is rebelling against his religious heritage which involved capricious gods who indulged their whims and impulses in the workings of nature. The thought never seems to have dawned upon him that the order of the universe is merely the expression of Divine Wisdom, acting through natural laws implanted in the substances of things. He seems to think that the constancy characteristic of natural phenomena excludes Divine activity, which, it is implied, should exercise itself without law. As though Divine operations could not be orderly, manifesting God's power not through capricious interference, but through the movements of bodies naturally following their laws.

So eager was he to establish the principle of natural law as against the idea of the arbitrary workings of divine beings in the world that he did not stop to ask whether it was not itself reconcilable with a less naive conception of divinity.26

Lucretius attributed to ignorance of the causes of things the belief in Divine creation and providence. His task and glory, he claims, is to cast the light that will dispel that ignorance. Yet, when all has been said, as cogently and passionately as he can, the mystery is still there. True, he has revealed the presence and working of 'law', and undoubtedly has struck a hard blow at the common superstitious notion of capricious deities, but his

25 Bailey, Greek Atomists and Epicurus, 475.
achievement merely clarifies the terms, prepares the ground for the real problem, the explanation of that 'law'. Like many a modern scientist, Lucretius is so enthralled by the progress he has made in revealing the laws of nature that he believes he has eliminated the need of Divine causality when really his need for it, to give reason to his own principles, is greater than ever.

For what are Lucretius' principles? There are fixed laws, he maintains, which reveal themselves in the various aspects of nature. For example, when the atoms unite to form the bodies about us, they do so in such fashion that the bodies are able to resist blows which disintegrate less perfect combinations. Once the bodies are formed, their manner of propagation is so established by law that only bodies of the same structure can be produced by them. Thus a tree begets a tree and a man a man. We do not find monstrosities - men with the shapes of beasts, or with branches instead of arms. When a small body is produced by a large body of the same species, its development is gradual, not sudden, and follows a fixed pattern. The environment for each species is set by law, so that each may find all the material necessary for its growth and progress, the fish in the sea, trees in the fields, mind in the human body. There are inviolable and

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28 Ibid., I, 169ff.
29 Ibid., II, 700ff.
30 Ibid., I, 188ff.
31 Ibid., V, 126ff.
unchanging laws that set limits of growth and decay, change the seasons of the year and steer the sun and moon in their courses.

Now what must we conclude from these facts of experience? There must be some sufficient reason why substances of a determined nature come into being and why they act within such precise limits. Surely Lucretius' blind Chance is not the answer. A chaos of falling atoms is not an explanation for the origin of bodies of intricate and delicate construction. One would have to presume that out of all these types of primordial bodies, those of complementary natures happened to come together, and then, out of an infinite number of possible combinations, by their own power, without any intelligent guidance, took up the exact positions required to form the most complex organisms that operated in the most complex but harmonious patterns. This solution is too much for the human mind to accept. A person could far more reasonably expect that by throwing thousands of tiny metal parts into the air, he would finally see an ordinary machine like a watch ticking upon the ground.

Perhaps it was a consciousness of the inadequacy of his argument that prompted Lucretius to speak of Natura creatrix et gubernans as the source of all this order and regularity. This

33 Ibid., II, 1117; V, 77.
poetic symbol covered up, to some extent, the patent weakness of his metaphysics. But when the symbolism is stripped away and the brutal question asked: "Is nature or is it not a being endowed with the intelligence needed to account for phenomena?", then Lucretius would be forced to admit that nature is no more than the very forces of the bodies she is said to construct and guide. The problem remains, clearer perhaps than before he revealed the laws of nature, but just as much in need of an explanation. Lucretius' insistence upon 'law' automatically renders his solution by Chance untenable.

Even so small, yet so fundamental a thing as theclinamen or swerve is incomprehensible without some sufficient reason for this departure from the ordinary downward course of the atoms. If the power for the swerve is contained within the atom itself, then the atom has a determined quality which must have a sufficient reason. Unless it were determined to swerve, it would not do so rather than not. But whence came the determination? Surely the atom alone is no sufficient explanation, for if it were, it would be absolute, uncaused, and we would meet the contradiction of an absolute, finite being - a being sufficient unto itself, but which acquires perfections it did not have before. But since it cannot have given itself these perfections, these actualities of previous potency, therefore they must have been given by some Being who had them in some superior way, and thus was able to share them. Consequently, the atom is shown, by its finite nature,
not to be absolute, but dependent upon and determined by another.

We see, then, that the very premises of Lucretius' second argument, which rested on natural laws, make it imperative that we admit Divine causality, and reject his ultimate explanation by Chance.

The third argument of Lucretius against Divine operation in the world was based on two assumptions: that the universe is too vast for any god to rule, and that the creation of the world would need a pre-existing model. These assumptions would be unjustified if it could be shown that there is an infinite, and therefore, omnipotent God - a thought whose significance does not seem to have registered on the poet's mind. For an infinite God, the task of ruling a finite universe would be no task at all. And certainly the comprehensive knowledge of the infinite perfections contained in His own essence, and of the diverse ways in which these perfections could be participated by creatures, would offer him the exemplary ideas needed in creation. Thus the argument of Lucretius collapses when his assumptions are shown to be invalid.

The fourth and last argument of Lucretius against Divine providence may be stated briefly thus: the perfect happiness of the gods would be incompatible with Divine labor, since this would imply a desire of some good, and the trouble taken to satisfy that desire. Again the poet's over-sight of the possibility of an infinite God lies at the root of his position. The gods as he
conceived them were anthropomorphic. If they act at all, it must be exactly, not analogously as man acts.

With easy but unscrupulous ridicule they [the Epicureans] ignored any notion of Divine action, except the childish one of a man-like artificer toiling with hammer and anvil. 34

Now a God of infinite beatitude, of course, cannot desire to acquire any good, since all goodness is found in His own essence. To this extent Lucretius' reasoning was sound. But he failed to see that God could freely desire not to acquire, but to share His Divine goodness with creatures. This would be perfectly compatible with infinite beatitude, since it would merely mean God's contemplation of His own goodness as reflected in and participated by other beings. This kind of 'desire' is no contradiction because it does not involve an effort to satisfy the pain of longing. Whether or not God, from all eternity, freely decided to create those other beings, His own infinite happiness is in no way affected; it remains equally full whether a creature comes into being or not, for the novelty is not in God, but outside God. He Himself is not changed. The ultimate reason for this quality, altogether peculiar to God, is the infinitude of His goodness which always contains the perfections involved in either of two disjunctive courses of action, no matter which one He decides to follow. Thus, even if God does not create, He nevertheless contains the perfection of creating. Actual creation would not add

34 Masson, I, 272.
to His goodness, but only to the extrinsic, participated goodness now found outside God. Consequently, God is different from man in this, that He can, out of infinite love of His own beauty, share it without any change in Himself, but only in the term which now participates in it. Thus, divine 'labor' is seen to be only analogously like the labor of man, and, therefore, perfectly consistent with divine beatitude.

With his denial of divine providence Lucretius drove a long nail, he thought, into the coffin of superstitious fear. There is no reason to dread a god who cannot harm or even desire to harm you. This was the aspect of providence which Lucretius stressed. Cicero preferred to emphasize another. In his dialogue, De Natura Deorum, Cotta, a contemporary of both Cicero and Lucretius, is replying to the Epicurean Velleius.

Epicurus vero ex animis hominum extraxit radicitus religionem cum dis inmortalibus et opem et gratiam sustulit. Cum enim optimam et praestantissimam naturam dei dicat esse, negat idem esse in deo gratiam: tollit id quod maxime proprium est optime praestantissimaeque naturae. Quid enim melius aut quid praestantius bonitate et beneficentia? Qua cum carere deum vultis, neminem deo nec deum nec hominem carum, neminem ab eo amari, neminem diligi vultis. Ita fit, ut non modo homines a deis, sed ipsi dei inter se ab aliis alii negligatur.35

Lucretius may have attempted to remove the source of fear, but he actually destroyed the source of hope. He did not realize that

35 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, I, xliii, 121.
people will not be any the less fearful when capricious gods are removed. How do they know what the future is going to bring to them? Exile, death of a dear one, ruined crops - all the evils that Lucretius sees in nature, all the miseries will still be there, and, what is most important, men will not have even the remotest possibility or hope of avoiding them. With gods, even capricious gods, men have some hope of averting evil, or at least they think they have. But in the Lucretian system, for all practical purposes, the gods may as well be non-existent, since there is no place left for human relationship with them.

Perhaps Lucretius and the other Epicureans were aware of the spiritual vacuum they had left in the souls of men. At any rate they tried to offer some consolation with the thought that man could derive great good from the contemplation of the gods even though, of course, he could not expect any direct help from them. The vision of beings enjoying perfect tranquility of soul, perfect peace, perfect happiness would be an inspiration, the Epicurean felt, for a man to imitate their mode of life. It is obvious that an ordinary man, afflicted with the multiple tribulations of daily life, could find little solace in this purely speculative form of prayer, which on the admission of the Epicurean teachers themselves was reserved to the select few who would retire from

the world for contemplative purposes. The vast majority of men could not live such a sheltered life, and for them Epicurean prayer could be no enticement. This prayer, with its dubious benefits, was a poor and inadequate substitute for the consolations of the traditional prayer and worship that were based on the notion of divine providence.
CHAPTER III
THE DENIAL OF DIVINE SANCTION

Having considered in the two previous chapters the theological foundation of Lucretius' attack on superstition, we turn now to the culmination of his speculations, the denial of divine sanction. Belief in divine providence was the inner fortification of superstitious fear of the gods. When this had been demolished, the poet was ready to meet the enemy hand to hand. Dread of temporal and eternal punishments for transgressions, Lucretius felt, was the chain that kept man in the dust. When this would be shattered, man could rise and breathe freely. No longer would a shadow fall upon his every pleasure; no longer would he seek in sin an escape from the anxiety that oppressed him. In the poet's plan this liberation was the last step in establishing a proper relationship with the gods, a relationship worthy of their true nature and of man's dignity.

It will be well at the outset to have a clear concept of the meaning of sanction, for we shall see that it was in corrupting its meaning that Lucretius made his initial error. In general, the word signifies two things: reward and punishment. These are proportioned to the magnitude of the good or evil act performed.
If the sanction is considered antecedently to the act, it constitutes a motive which encourages man to good and deters him from evil. If considered subsequently to the act, it is the actual reward or punishment. These two aspects of sanction may be termed efficacious motivation and just retribution. Both must be in the mind of any legislator who seriously intends the observance of a law. Without a sufficient motive, based on a just retribution, no subject will be willing to undertake the sacrifices entailed in abiding by the legal restrictions.

In the case of divine sanction these notes are present in a proportionately higher degree. Even on a basis of natural law, prescinding from any kind of revelation, we can deduce that the God who must have created the world and who is needed as a sufficient reason for its continued existence, intended that His creatures abide by the legislation written in the natures of things. These natures may not be abused, for abuse would be a violation of His manifest intention in making them. Consequently, God, as a most wise and just Legislator, must have a sanction for His law, a sanction which constitutes an adequate incentive and just retribution for the subjects of that law. Yet the rewards and punishments of this life are obviously inadequate, since so often the lot of the criminal is better than that of the virtuous. Therefore, the adequate sanction must consist in reward or punishment to be received in the next life. Only such a sanction can provide a sufficient incentive for a man to forego in this life great
personal satisfactions that are outside the law.¹

This brief outline describes divine sanction as it has been generally conceived by men. All through pagan times these notes have been verified generically, though they may have been more or less confused in different civilizations. Virgil, for instance, clearly makes provision for the condemned and for the blessed in his Lower World. Lucretius himself, if asked for an explicit opinion, would probably have agreed that this is an accurate picture of the popular concept.

But what do we find implicitly in his poem? Whether intentionally or not, he nowhere speaks of the reward which according to the traditional view was reserved for those who abide by the divine laws. This is a remarkable point, though it does not seem to have made great impression on critics through the centuries. Should we attribute it to a deliberate intention of the poet to stress only the depressing aspect of the after-life in order to strengthen his own case? Or is it more reasonable to think that perhaps this was the aspect uppermost in the minds of his superstitious countrymen? If the hope of reward had gradually been overshadowed by fear of punishment, Lucretius would be merely echoing the mood of his times and would be somewhat justified in his attitude toward divine sanction. Certainly a view which makes of

¹ On the subject of sanction confer J. Donat, S.J., Ethica Generalis, Rauch, Oeniponte (Innsbruck), 1920, 112-120.
the gods no more than fierce avengers is enough to drive any man who is solicitous for the happiness of his people to the opposite extreme, a complete denial of divine sanction. As has been pointed out in a previous chapter, it does seem clear that there was a predominant wave of religious terrorism in Rome, due especially to the apparent desertion of the city by the gods as manifest in the political and social distress of the period. This would very well account for the negative viewpoint which Lucretius takes toward life after death.

Whatever the reason may be, the fact is clear: Lucretius twisted the true notion of divine sanction so that it signified only the stern punishment meted out by cruel taskmasters. The picture he paints of Acheron is an interesting though depressing one. How often he speaks, in one way or another, of the tenebras Orci, where in the black pit of Tartarus the pallid spirits dwell. When he offers his own doctrine on death as an endless, impersonal sleep, he asks: "numquid horribile appetat, num tristè videtur quicquam, non omni somno securius exstat?". If the poem were the only extant piece of ancient literature, we would be led to think that there had never been any idea of the Elysian Fields. Certainly the gloomy after-life described by Lucretius leaves no place for them. He never mentions any hope of future happiness.

2 D. R. N., V, 87; VI, 63.
3 Ibid., I, 115, 123; III, 42, 966, 978; IV, 170; VI, 251.
4 Ibid., III, 976f.
There is only: "sci[e] lic[e]t nobis nil esse in morte timendum nec miserum fieri qui non est posse". If his idea of the Lower World was the popular one, then he had reason for saying that the gods of the common people brought only groans, wounds and tears.

Undoubtedly the vagueness of Greco-Roman thought on the subject of the after-life is accountable in large part for Lucretius' attitude. There were probably many in the poet's day who would still prefer with Achilles to be a serf among the living than king among the dead. Although the Romans, in their cult of the Manes, attributed to departed spirits a life more or less happy, still it was a confused, shadowy sort of existence in which no provision seems to have been made even for the retention of personal identity. Such being the case, it would be no strange thing for many pious souls, under the influence of superstitious fear, to accentuate the unpleasant aspect of Orcus.

Scholars seem divided on the question of belief in an afterlife among the Romans of Lucretius' time. Caesar certainly denied future existence, although he consented to the title of Jupiter Divus before his death. It is difficult to say whether men like Lucretius and the Great Dictator were "the exception rather than the rule", or whether they represented "the trend of Greco-Roman

5 Ibid., III, 866f.
7 Fowler, Social Life At Rome, 347.
thought...toward a doubt or denial of future life". Cicero seemed to waver between agnosticism in his earlier years and at least a temporary belief toward the end of his life, when the loss of Tullia drove him to seek consolation in the thought of her survival after death. His attitude is probably representative of many public figures in Roman life who simply did not take time under pressure of their duties to think seriously of the matter. Certainly the common people at least seemed to have suffered from an exaggerated fear of hell and punishment.

Lucretius wished to destroy this fear of Acheron with all its sad consequences, the fear "funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo / omnia suffundens mortis nigrore neque ullum / esse voluptatem liquidam puramgue relinquit". The thunder could not roar, nor the tempests blow without stirring benighted souls to the dreadful thought that the punishment for their sins was at hand. In Lucretius' opinion, not only did this empty fear banish all happiness from its victim's heart, it actually drove him to sin. For to him poverty and humble position seemed to be a foretaste of what death had in store, and therefore they must be avoided by any means possible, even though sinful.

turpis enim ferme contemptus et acris egestas

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8 Sikes, 135.
10 D. R. N., III, 38ff.
11 Ibid., V, 1218ff.
Such being the case, fear of hell must be banished. But first Lucretius was called upon to give some reason for the prevalence of that fear. Surely such a universal belief must have some foundation. The poet reveals this foundation and shows how it has been misinterpreted by men. We recall that according to Lucretius idola or images are cast off by all things. Now it frequently happens, the poet explains, that the images of living bodies retain their form after those bodies have died. When men are touched by these images, especially in sleep, they are led through ignorance of natural causes to believe that the persons represented still exist in another world. Once this true explanation is understood, there is no need to be further disturbed by such visions. In more ways than one we realize how Lucretian psychology was a means to his ethical end.

With divine sanction out of the way, the Epicureans naturally had to propose some substitute which would still motivate men to lead virtuous lives. Here is where we shall find the greatest weakness of the system. For in the last analysis the only sanction offered by the poet is merely a suasive one. It lacks the

12 Ibid., III, 65ff.
13 Ibid., IV, 30ff.
force necessary to move men, under stress of severe temptation, to choose the right course rather than the self-satisfying evil one. The poet must have been conscious of his weakness on this point, for he does not state explicitly the nature of the obligation to do good and avoid wrong. We are forced to deduce it from various passages of his poem.

It is well to note that there was little difference between the actual virtues inculcated by orthodox Epicureanism and Stoicism, though the foundations supporting them were vastly different. Fortitude, temperance, justice and prudence were zealously encouraged by the Master and his disciples. Consequently, since the ideal was a noble one, we are justified in seeking some suitable motivation for carrying that ideal into action.

Immediately we are faced with the startling fact that the only reason for a good life is 'pleasure'. Whereas the Stoic prized virtue for its own sake, the Epicurean, to use the Founder's own strong expression, would "spit upon the Good and those who fruitlessly admire it, whensoever it causes no pleasure". The only good to be found in virtue is its power to produce the tranquility of mind essential to happiness. Of course, we must avoid the crude error of conceiving pleasure as gross satisfaction of

14 Cf. Bailey, Greek Atomists and Epicurus, 509-515.
the senses. Epicurus was careful to guard against such an interpretation which was commonly applied by his enemies. A happy life, according to him, consisted in the perfect harmony of the whole man. An excessive indulgence of the lower impulses would only lead to pain. Hence the necessity for temperance, which, though an evil in itself, was, as Bailey well puts it, "derivatively worthy of choice because it contributes to the highest pleasure of body and mind".

Pleasure and the loss of pleasure in this life, therefore, constitute the only sanction proposed by Lucretius. It is at one and the same time the norm and the motive of right action. If the soul that is in the darkness of superstition will only look for this light it will find the panacea for all the troubles that beset its path through life.

What will he see? What is the moral standard that will become clear to him, the sanction of right living that will grip his conscience? It is simply the conviction that as this life is all we have in past, present, or future, it must be used well.

The Epicurean sanction as here stated by Fowler is rather vague. Lucretius is somewhat more specific in his poem, though never sufficiently so. As he conceived it, the great manifestation of the good, and consequently, of the happy life is a mind

16 Bailey, Greek Atomists and Epicurus, 510.
17 Fowler, Social Life At Rome, 330.
at peace. The wicked will never enjoy the tranquility which we have seen is the very essence of beatitude. The reason is twofold.

First of all, his excesses will be in themselves a source of pain, since the more a man indulges his passions, the less satisfaction he finds in the disordered pleasure he enjoys. In truth, he becomes the slave of his desires. In a remarkable passage Lucretius dwells vividly on this point. The victim of lust and passion is like Tityos with the birds of prey gnawing at his belly; the power-mad politician is another Sisyphus rolling a huge rock uphill and never reaching the top; the ungrateful mind, never satisfied with life's simple pleasures, is no better off than the maidens pouring water into riddled urns. If there is a hell, it is not hereafter, but prepared for the sinner in this life.

In the second place, the conscience of the sinner will never be at rest but will torment him with remorse for his crimes. We are naturally led to enquire what is the nature of this troublesome conscience. Does it consist in the sad remembrance of having failed in our obligation to abide by an objective order of right and wrong? Nowhere does Lucretius lead us to believe so. In fact, as Bailey points out, in Epicureanism there is no such thing as real obligation. Man need only be true to himself and to his

18 D. R. N., III, 984ff.
19 Ibid., III, 827.
20 Bailey, Greek Atomists and Epicurus, 486.
own instinct for personal well-being. Whence, then, the remorse?
It rises from the fear of punishment for crime, the fear of eventual discovery.

sed metus in vita poenarum pro male factis
est insignibus insignis, scelerisque luella,
carcer et horribilis de saxo iactu' deorsum,
verbera carnifices robur pix lammina taedae;
quae tamen etsi absunt, at mens sibi conscia factis
praemetuens adhibet stimulos terretque flagellis
nec videt interea qui terminus esse malorum
possit nec quae sit poenarum denique finis...21

There is no assurance that the sinner will keep his crime
locked in his own mind. Even if no one else discovers it, he himself may reveal it when off his guard, speaking in sleep or delirium. The poet is here following Epicurus exactly, for the Master had said:

Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which attaches to the apprehension of being unable to escape those appointed to punish such actions. It is not possible for one who acts in secret contravention...to be confident that he will escape detection, even if at present he escapes a thousand times. For up to the time of death it cannot be certain that he will indeed escape.22

We see, then, that the strongest motive for a good life is no more than the fear of enslavement to one's desires, and the

21 D. R. N., III, 1014ff.
22 Ibid., V, 1156ff.
fear of discovery and punishment. Tranquility of mind is incompatible with such fear, so the wise man will avoid it by leading a good life. Beyond this there is no sanction.

What are we to say in criticism of this ethical apex of the Lucretian system? Our judgment will rest only on ethical and theological grounds, since the poet's psychological argument against divine sanction, based on the mortality of the material soul, is subject in itself for another thesis.

In the first place, the Lucretian denial of divine sanction falls apart with the rejection of his doctrines on the nature of the gods and on divine causality and providence in the world. As we have seen, his belief that the world came into being by chance is thoroughly inadequate, since it violates the fundamental principle of causality. If God is Creator of the world, it follows that He is its Lord, Master and Legislator. When the natural law He promulgated is violated, then account must be rendered to Him. He would be truly an unwise Law-giver if He did not intend a punishment that would motivate man's observance of His law.

It is unfortunate, but understandable in the light of his times, that Lucretius did not see the possibility of divine Love behind the notion of divine Justice. If God decreed, in the very establishment of the natural law, punishment for the sinner, it was not with the primary intention of damning men, but that men might earn the reward of union with Him in everlasting bliss. The
reward of heaven is what God wishes to bestow on his creatures if they will only take it. Hell is man's choice, not His. Lucretius was blinding himself to the ancient conviction of mankind when he dodged the thought of divine reward for the virtuous life. If his theory did away with the fear of punishment, it also frustrated the instinctive hopes of man for complete happiness.

In this regard, it is interesting to see how close the poet inadvertently came to the discovery that man's finis in life is beatitude, the state after death when intellect and will, capable of knowing and loving perfect Goodness, will be completely satisfied. In one of Lucretius' most stirring passages, he upraids the dissatisfied man in the voice of nature.

nam si grata fuit tibi vita antea acta priorque et non omnia pertusum congesta quasi in vas commoda perfluxere atque ingrata interiere: cur non ut plenus vitae conviva recedis aequo animoque capis securam, stulte, quietem?24

Again, in a later passage of the same book, Lucretius marvels at the lust for life that characterizes all men, and reveals itself in their longing for ever new pleasures.

praeterea versamur ibidem atque insumus usque nec nova vivendo procuditur uilla voluptas; sed dum abest quod avemus, id exsuperare videtur cetera; post aliut, cum contigit illud, avemus et sitis aequa tenet vitai semper hiantis.25

24 D. R. N., III, 935ff.
25 Ibid., III, 1080ff.
From these two passages we see that the poet was well aware that no temporal pleasure can really satisfy man. Others who have discovered this natural thirst in man for perfect beatitude have found in it the basis of a psychological argument for an afterlife. Lucretius did not take this further step, but turned back and chose to berate man for his multiple desires and constant dissatisfaction, failing to see that by doing so he was opposing the very call of nature itself. It is as though he felt that the only way to satisfy man’s longing for beatitude was to crush the longing itself in as many outlets as possible. By limiting desires, man could limit the pain of dissatisfaction. This was the weird and surprising conclusion of a system that made temporal pleasure the end and norm of life. How much truer to man’s nature is the doctrine of an absolutely perfect beatitude in another life, where man’s capacity for joy will be completely filled.

Certainly Epicureanism did not give "new courage to meet death". Men longed for heaven as much as they feared hell. It was not death so much as dying that they dreaded - the loss of their hold on life and being. This is man’s instinctive sense of self-preservation. To try to console him with the thought that life ends at the grave was, as Sikes points out, very weak psychology.

26 Hadzits, Lucretius and His Influence, 135.
27 Sikes, 132.
Our second criticism of the Lucretian idea of sanction is to note how inadequate his proposals were to motivate men, especially his own countrymen, to lead good lives. We have seen that Epicurus, and Lucretius after him, proposed a fairly high standard of conduct to their followers. 'Pleasure' was not to be interpreted as the intemperate indulgence of lower appetites. Yet, we know that the Epicureans were charged with this very abuse from the Founder's time on. Horace could speak of himself humorously but significantly, as having been a "pig from the sty of Epicurus", and one of the outstanding proponents of Epicureanism in the same period was noted for his dissolute life. There must have been a reason for this contrast between the system's theory of life and its actual effectiveness as seen in the lives of so many of its followers.

Masson confirms our suspicions and puts his finger on the sore spot.

Epicurus did not sufficiently allow for the fact that pleasure for himself was one thing, and for the average man an entirely different thing. The consequence is what we might expect. So long as Epicurus survived, going in and out among his disciples, his own noble life and practice ensured that his doctrines should not be gravely misconstrued; so soon as he was dead, and his doctrines stood alone, they were only too certain to be perverted and made to justify self-indulgence and effeminacy.29

29 Masson, 362.
The simple fact is that the sumnum bonum of pleasure was open to easy abuse, particularly in Lucretius' surroundings. The old ideal of stern Roman virtue had broken down before luxury, excess and despotism. Perhaps the young poets, Catullus and the elegists especially, are not perfectly representative of their period, but they certainly must reflect an alarming increase in loose living. Extreme license, intrigue and temporary liaisons seem to have become the main preoccupation of the leisurely class. This was certainly no time to introduce such an individualistic philosophy of life as Lucretius had to offer. What the Romans needed was something to brace them, a tonic rather than a sedative that could only drug the moral sensibilities already sadly deteriorating.

The Lucretian remedy failed completely because it drew no clear line between right and wrong, but depended on subjective prudence to determine the difference.

After all, then, Lucretius is reduced to ordinary moral suasion, and finds no new power or sanction that could keep erring human nature in the right path. And we must sadly allow that no real moral end is enunciated by him; his ideal seems to be quietism in this life, and annihilation afterwards.30

Nowhere is this deficiency so marked as in the Epicurean attitude toward the social virtue of justice. This virtue was not the natural effect of man's ability and desire to live in company

30 Fowler, Social Life at Rome, 330.
with his fellow men, as it had been in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. In Epicureanism the individual could aim only at the maximum of personal pleasure, without consideration of his neighbor. The only reason he respected the 'rights' of others was because he feared violation of his own. "The laws exist for the sake of the wise, not that they may not do wrong, but that they may not suffer it". Justice has no intrinsic value, but is merely an insurance measure.

The ideal from the individual's point of view is really injustice; if only he could commit injustice consistently without ever being discovered, that would be best, but unfortunately not only is there the danger of detection, but what is still worse, because it is a permanent disturbance of mental peace, there is always the dread of detection.32

Epicurus was at least honest enough to answer his own question: "will the wise man do things that the laws forbid if he knows that he will not be detected?", with the unsatisfactory remark: "a simple answer is not easy to find". It is easy to see how such a pliant and uncertain moral standard could be used as a handle for unscrupulous living, according to individual tastes and inclinations. A person of strong passions would not be likely to philosophize about the ill-effects his excesses might have on the

31 Epicurus, "Fragments", in Bailey's Epicurus, LXXXI.  
32 Bailey, Greek Atomists and Epicurus, 512.  
33 Epicurus, "Fragments", in Bailey's Epicurus, II.
tranquil harmony of the whole man. And certainly many a sinner would be willing to run the risk of having his secret transgressions revealed if that were the only sanction he need fear. We must really marvel at the amazing ignorance of human nature manifested by both Epicurus and Lucretius. We have no reason to doubt their own sincere conviction of the value of the system. How they failed to see what form it would take in minds less philosophically inclined is a mystery. Their idealistic world had little in common with the practical world of every-day life.

There remains one last and telling criticism of the Epicurean sanction proposed by Lucretius: it made no provision for the world's unfortunate; for the poor; for the suffering who crowded Rome's tenements; for the slaves who passed their lives so often in utter degradation. What solace could Lucretius offer them in this life when hope for a better state of affairs in the next was taken from them? Perhaps Epicurus could exclaim that the "wise man was happy even on the rack", but what logic is there in that when there is no promise of a prospective reward to alleviate the misery? There was small comfort, indeed, in the thought that death, at least, would end it all - the Master's last resort when faced with suffering that left no other consolation. Lucretius could well fear that his doctrine was a harsh one. For the vast majority of his fellow-men it stripped life of all rhyme and reason.
CONCLUSION

The denial of divine sanction was the last link in the ethico-theological chain forged by Lucretius. It would be well, in summary, to see how the poet's solution met the various threats of superstition as they manifested themselves in the Rome of his day.

As we have seen, religious scruple and a sense of sin were most prevalent during that critical first century before Christ. The result was a widespread reception of oriental religions as the confused and uncertain populace sought a catharsis for their anxious fears. Ecstatic orgies, characterized by brutal rites of expiation, were becoming increasingly and dangerously common. Lucretius destroyed all this with one stroke. In his system there was no need to worry about the wrath of the gods. The crisis through which Rome was passing and which many interpreted as a sign of divine desertion, was not the doing of the gods, but of men. The divine attributes of perfect happiness and rest prevented the gods from interfering, malevolently or otherwise, in the affairs of men. Consequently, it was pure insanity for people to debase themselves with fruitless propitiatory rites which could only increase the worry and sorrow of the participants. Far
better was it for men to compose their minds in tranquility, raising themselves above the political and social upheaval that surrounded them, and adjusting themselves, by inner peace, to the storm without.

Orthodox prayer, for the same reason as rites of expiation, was both useless and harmful. Nothing could be more senseless than to trouble the heedless ears of the gods with frenzied petitions for favors. They were unconcerned with the petty troubles of man, since they stood to gain nothing by helping him. If they could so much as desire to lend aid, they would be subject to pain, and that was out of the question in beings of perfect happiness.

A second threat of superstition, as Lucretius saw it, was the vague and anxious fears of the after-life. His denial of divine sanction destroyed those fears at their roots. This life was all that men could expect; if they were wise they would make the best of it by refusing to allow any childish anxiety to rob them of the peace of mind so essential for real beatitude.

Lastly, the Lucretian denial of divine providence reduced augury and divination to a cheap device of a corrupt priesthood which stood to profit by the enslavement of the people to such superstitious practices. It was silly to try to foretell divine decrees when the gods were known to have no regard or care for men. Why not break the shackles once and for all, and enjoy peace
of soul in the realization that man is the shaper of his own destiny without any fickle interference of divine beings.

The solution which Lucretius proposed introduced a radically new relationship between the gods and men. The best adjective we can choose to describe that relationship is the word "negative". It was characterized by independence; the individual was supreme, and could assert himself boldly without fear of disrespect or foreboding of divine displeasure. In other words, Lucretius eliminated the traditional awe and humble reverence with which man had always looked upon the gods, and substituted a purely intellectual appreciation - one might say a professional esteem - for the divine perfections. The essential difference between God and man was lost, as we find man regarding deity in much the same way as an inferior artist would look upon a superior associate. In general, then, the chasm between human and divine was narrowed; man was sublimated while God, no matter what Lucretius would say to the contrary, was debased. The poet claimed to give the gods a position worthy of their noble nature. In reality he deprived them of all that essentially elevated them above man. Anthropomorphism found its extreme expression in the theology of Lucretius.

Whatever the poet's intention may have been, there can be no doubt that he swept away the foundations of religion. Cicero recognized the fact and stated it concisely. "Horum enim sententiae omnium non modo superstitionem tollunt, in qua inest timor
Lucretius would have objected, of course, and claimed that a singular piety was encouraged in his system. Did he not expressly say that man should purify his mind so that it would be free to contemplate the gods in tranquility? But what Cicero saw and Lucretius did not seem to see, was that, however noble such contemplation might appear in theory, in practice its significance would be lost on the multitude. The ordinary, practical-minded Roman citizen would find the philosophical subtleties, by which esteem for the gods was preserved, too refined to mean much in his busy life. In this sense, Epicureanism was pitched too high for him. In another sense, it was pitched too low. The average man found no real motive for a good life; the doctrine of religious quietism, combined with the supreme end of 'pleasure', was bound to constitute a cloak for self-gratification at the expense of morality. The doctrines offered by Lucretius favored and flattered the sensual tendencies in man, and to this fact the system owed its popularity in decadent Rome. The poet would have deplored this miscarriage of his intentions, but so long as man had the essential note of 'animality', the results could not be otherwise.

Lucretius was inspired by a noble motive when he set out to destroy the bogy that was superstition. Undoubtedly it was making life miserable for many of his countrymen. For this intention and

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1 Cicero, De Natura Deorum, I, xlii, 117.
for his courage in carrying it out, he is worthy of praise. The regrettable feature of his crusade was his unfortunate choice of a solution; his unwarranted swing to the opposite extreme, which could not heal, but only destroy. He reminds us of nothing so much as the zealous doctor who longs to cure, but all unknowingly prescribes a deadly poison. Rome's soul was close to perishing when Lucretius came on the scene. He left it in possession of swift and certain death.
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