

Returning to Lucretius

My talk is divided up into two parts: the first part tries explain about why I think we should return to Lucretius and where I am coming from in my own approach; the second part poses three heterodox “counter-theses” about Lucretius 1) that he was not an atomist, 2) that he did not believe in a spontaneous swerve in a rain of atoms through the void, 3) and that, for Lucretius, there is no ethical “peace of mind” or ataraxia, as Epicurus called it.

Why Return to Lucretius?

I think a new Lucretius is coming into view today. Every period in Western history since Lucretius has returned to him like bees returning to their flower fields in search of nourishment. Each time, though, our return is different—like the expanding arc of a spiral. We bring new questions, find new answers, and make Lucretius speak to us again as if for the first time. We make Lucretius’ epic poem *De Rerum Natura* into the mellifluous honey of a *liquid* antiquity that always has coursed through the veins of modern history like a spring of fresh meaning and inspiration.ⁱ

We thus return to Lucretius today not as though he were an unchanging figure carved in stone but as if he were a rush of new life at the cutting edge of the 21st century. We stand in front of Lucretius’ breathtaking and revolutionary poem not as passive students of unchanging relics in a museum but as active participants in a history of our present. Today, we are asking Lucretius again to tell us something about *nature*.ⁱⁱ

I recently returned to Lucretius in 2014, when I taught Book II of *De Rerum Natura* for a class on what I called “the philosophy of movement.” I added Lucretius to the syllabus because he was an overlooked figure in the history of philosophy who wrote about motion. I was excited about the text, but I was also skeptical that anyone who believed in “eternal unchanging atoms” could have *motion* as their philosophical starting point. What I encountered, however, absolutely shocked me.

There were no atoms. I scoured the whole Latin text. Lucretius never used the word “atom” or a Latinized version of this word—not even once. Translators *added* the word “atom.” Just as shockingly, I could not find the great isolated swerve in the rain of atoms, for which he is so well-known. In Book II, Lucretius says instead that matter is *always* “in the *habit* of swerving” [*declinare solerent*] (2.221) and *if it were not (nisi)*, “all would fall like raindrops [*caderent*]” (2.222). The solitary swerve and the rain of matter are therefore counterfactual claims. Lucretius never said there was a rain and then one atom swerved. He says that matter is in the “habit” [*solerent*] of swerving, meaning that it happens more than once. This, he says, is the only way to avoid the problem of assuming that something comes from nothing—the swerve of matter in the rain.

This small but significant discrepancy made me wonder what else had been left out of translations and interpretations. Could it be possible that there was a whole hidden Lucretius buried beneath the paving stones of Greek atomism? If there are no atoms and no solitary swerve in Lucretius, can we still make sense of the rest of the book or had a missed something? In 2016 I decided to find out. I dedicated a whole seminar to just Book 1 of *De Rerum Natura* read in Latin. To my delight a whole new view on this foundational text

emerged that year. I published the results of this effort in 2018 as *Lucretius I: An Ontology of Motion*.

Around this time I also began to notice an increasing number of major differences between Lucretius and his teacher Epicurus. One of the reasons I thought I would find atoms and isolated swerves in Lucretius was because of a long history of interpretation that conflated the two thinkers, just as earlier scholars had errantly done with Democritus and Epicurus.ⁱⁱⁱ There is no doubt that Lucretius studied and followed Epicurus, just as Epicurus had followed Democritus.^{iv} However, between the three thinkers there are worlds of difference that have not been sufficiently understood. Not all students *merely* imitate their masters. Sometimes imitation functions as a mask for a student to put forward her or his own ideas—which is what I think Lucretius did.^v I thus began to unravel what I call the “Epicurean myth of Lucretius.”^{vi}

Lucretius did something very strange. He wrote Epicurean philosophy in the style and method of Homeric poetry and in doing so ended up completely changing the meaning of both.^{vii} Just like an ancient satyr play, Lucretius’ poem has numerous invocations of bacchanalian intoxication,^{viii} sexual imagery, and desire,^{ix} deceptive invocations of gods he does not believe in (Venus and Mars), all affirmed joyfully alongside the destructive power of nature itself: death. This is in stark contrast with the contemplative, serious, pessimistic, and aloof style of Epicurus and his followers.

Epicurus had many Greek and Roman followers who wrote and promoted Epicurean doctrine,^x but Lucretius did something no one had ever done before. He espoused a version of Epicurean philosophy in a book of Latin poetry written in Homeric hexameter. He wanted to make something new by mixing the old traditions: a double profanation. Lucretius performed a bewildering hybrid of two completely opposed figures and traditions (Homer and Epicurus) and made something novel: something uniquely Roman.

De Rerum Natura has largely been treated as a Homeric-style poem *about* Epicurean philosophy, but I think that there is also a hidden Epicurean philosophy of Homeric myth. In the end this is where the real brilliance and originality of Lucretius lies: not in Homer or Epicurus but in their perverse and twisted entanglement. There is thus a *becoming* Homer of Epicurus. I think it is a genuine injustice to reduce such a radical enterprise to mere Epicurean “doctrine.”

The method itself of *philosophical poetry* is a satyr’s slap in the face to the whole Greek tradition of philosophy from Thales to Aristotle, *including Epicurus*.^{xi} With few exceptions (Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedocles) Greek philosophers systematically reduced Homeric poetry to irrational and sensuous mythology in order to define their new abstractions and idealisms against the straw man of the oral tradition. This was a founding moment of exclusion that has stayed with the Western tradition up to the present—contributing to a perceived inferiority of pre-classical and indigenous oral knowledge. It is therefore completely unsurprising that today Lucretius is still almost always invoked as a philosopher completely reducible to the *real* Greek master: Epicurus. By doing so, the Western reception of Lucretius has reproduced the same Greco-centric and idealist tradition that vilified Homeric poetry and archaic materialism.

Lucretius was the first from within this tradition to produce a true and radical materialism of sensation and the body. However, like Homer, Lucretius also paid the

ultimate price for his materialist sins and was largely exiled from the discipline of philosophy. Either Lucretius is a skilled poet of the Latin tongue *or* he is a slavish imitator of the great master Epicurus. Never has Lucretius been read as an original *philosophical poet* of a radical materialism that goes far beyond anything Epicurus achieved. This is what I have tried to do in my books.

Even more provocatively, Lucretius refused to use Epicurus' Greek terminology when many other Epicurean and Roman authors, such as Cicero, did so often and easily. The Romans are famous for renaming Greek gods; i.e. the Greek Aphrodite becomes the Roman Venus, Zeus becomes Jove, and so on. However, it is also well-known that there is no strict equivalence between the two deities. The translation was, as translations always are, a transformation that resulted in new stories and a shifting fluidity of roles among the gods. This, I argue, is what happened with Lucretius. *De Rerum Natura* was not written as Epicurean dogma.^{xiii} It was an original work of philosophical poetry that translated Homeric mythology and Epicurean philosophy into the Latin vernacular and thus transformed them into an original philosophy of motion. A few scholars have noted the tension between Lucretius' poetic style and Epicurean doctrine, but none has suggested that it indicated anything philosophically original as a result.^{xiiii}

The unearthing of this "hidden Lucretius" is the subject of my books. In the first volume I worked out a systematic ontology of motion and a new materialism beneath the atomist and Epicurean myth of Lucretius in books one and two. In the second volume, I described a movement-based theory of *ethics* through a close reading of books 3 and 4. Volume three is not yet written but will focus on natural history in books 5 and 6.

Where am I coming from with all of this? (skim and summary of this section)

My project is not an isolated one but is part of longer but under-read lineage of thinkers who have held heterodox interpretations of Lucretius. To give you a sense of where I am coming from I would like to quickly highlight three major works that have led me in this direction.

1) The first is German philosopher Karl Marx's 1841 dissertation on "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature." There Marx gave one of the most radical and heterodox interpretations of Epicurus and Lucretius the world *never* saw. The complete work was not even available in German until 1927 and not in English until 1975 in his expensive collected works. It is no wonder that it remains one of the most neglected of all Marx's books. However, in his dissertation, Marx was the first to argue not only that Epicurus had a distinct philosophy different from Democritus' but that the core concepts of atomism (atom, void, fall, swerve, repulsion) all were actually continuous dimensions of the *same flow of matter*.

2) This radical idea was virtually left for dead until the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze miraculously picked it up in 1962 in his book, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. There, Deleuze credited Marx's brilliant discovery but argued instead that the swerve was the result of a vital "force" immanent to matter. Later Deleuze developed this reading into a new "immanent" interpretation of Epicurus and Lucretius that appeared as an appendix to his 1969 *Logic of Sense*.

3) From there, the French philosopher Michel Serres explicitly adopted the idea of a vital and unpredictable force immanent to matter and developed it into the first truly

pathbreaking, book-length treatment of a new, turbulent Lucretius consistent with the early chaos theory of the day in *The Birth of Physics in the Text of Lucretius* (1977). Unfortunately, Serres' book was not translated into English until 2000, after which it quickly went out of print.^{xiv}

Beginning in 2016 an unusual burst of new books was published, tracing their lineage back to this tradition and overturning the old orthodox reception of Lucretius. In 2016 a wonderful collection of essays offering contemporary reassessments and reinterpretations of Lucretius drawing on the "immanent" tradition was edited by Jaques Lezra and Liza Blake and published as *Lucretius and Modernity*. In the next year Ryan Johnson published *The Deleuze-Lucretius Encounter*, and in the fall of 2017 Pierre Vesperini published a devastating critique of the "myth of Lucretius" in his *Lucrèce: Archéologie d'un classique européen*. Among other things, Vesperini argued convincingly against every single major point Stephen Greenblatt made in his error-filled narrative history of the discovery of *De Rerum Natura*, *The Swerve* (2011). Vesperini argued that Lucretius was not a faithful Epicurean; that Lucretius was not an unknown radical of his day; and that Lucretius did not provide a "complete kit for modernity," but was historically appropriated by mechanistic modernists and then retroactively lionized by the Romantics.

The *coup de grâce* of this burst came in January 2018, when Serres' *The Birth of Physics* was retranslated and republished with a blurb on the back by Claire Colebrook explicitly acknowledging the timely importance of reintroducing this book for its contributions to twenty-first century *new materialism*. Two months later saw the publication of my first book, *Lucretius I: An Ontology of Motion*, and Lezra's book *On the Nature of Marx's Things*. There has been an absolutely unprecedented explosion in heterodox readings of Lucretius in just the past three years. I think the time is right now for a full return to Lucretius, materialism, and radical naturalism.^{xv}

What am contributing to this tradition?

My books on Lucretius are part of this tradition but also diverges from it in important ways worth mentioning. It diverges from Marx's reading insofar as Marx treats Epicurus and Lucretius as identical and I do not. The difference between Epicurus and Lucretius is one of the most important contributions of my books.

What I call the "kinetic Lucretius" also diverges from Deleuze's vitalist reading. Deleuze, following Marx, read Lucretius and Epicurus as identical but broke from Marx when Deleuze argued that the swerve is identical with Spinoza and Nietzsche's concept of *contatus*, "vital striving," "force," or "power." What I have tried to show in my books is that this kind of vitalist reading is textually unsupportable. Matter is, above all, in motion, and motion is not just about life. It is just as much about death, decay, and decomposition. It is purely arbitrary to privilege one side of this ontological binary, life versus death, and claim that everything is life, or alive, or vital power. Vitalism in all its forms is just another way of explaining the movement of matter with recourse to something else: life. At its worst, it falls prey to the fear of death that Lucretius locates as the locus of unethical action. The ontologization of life is yet another way to escape death and motion.

My work even diverges from the great Michel Serres' *The Birth of Physics*. Serres who, like Marx and Deleuze, still equated Epicurus and Lucretius. He also still accepted the

existence of Lucretian atoms, despite their textual absence from *De Rerum Natura*. Serres showed how Lucretius prefigured chaos theory's understanding of turbulence, entropy, and far-from-equilibrium states. However, in addition to these insights, my books have tried to argue that Lucretius also prefigured quantum theory's understanding of entanglement and indeterminacy.

Mechanistic materialism has been thoroughly criticized across the humanities and sciences, but I think we have been too quick to throw out materialism with the mechanistic bathwater. Lucretius is such a wonderful figure to return to today because he embodies the diffractive relations we need to rediscover between the arts, sciences, and humanities for a new posthumanities and a new materialism. Lucretius was a scientist and philosophical poet. Knowledge today, however, has been so compartmentalized that thinkers like Lucretius are extremely rare. This is a profound loss for most universities.

However, if we are going to address contemporary ethical practice at the global level seriously, we can no longer be merely scientists, philosophers, or poets. It is no longer enough to be merely the scholars of such and such figure or topic; the humanities and sciences need to come back together again. The study of nature unites all theoretical practice. Globalization and climate change demand that we see the big picture—that human activity is completely continuous with natural processes. Humans are geological actors, and the Earth is not a passive stage for our performances. The disconnect between the humanities and natural sciences is part of the same disconnect between humans and nature. We have divided up our knowledges as we have divided up our world, and the consequences have been disastrous. We can no longer study nature as if our acts of inquiry were not already ethical and transformative practices of nature itself.

There will be no resolution to the deepest problems of our times until the Lucretian unity of humans, nature, and art (the humanities, sciences, and arts) are brought back together again in collective ethical practice.

Part II: Three Counter-Theses

1. First Counter-Thesis: “Lucretius was not an Atomist”

The difference between Lucretius and the earlier Greek atomists is precisely that—the *atom*. For Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus atoms are always in motion, but the atom itself remains fundamentally unchanged, indivisible, and thus internally *static*—even as it moves. Instead of positing discrete atoms as ontologically primary as both ancient Greek and later modern theories do, one of Lucretius' greatest novelties was to posit the *movement or flow of matter as primary*.^{xvi} I think Lucretius did not simply “translate Epicurus;” he transformed him.

For example, although Lucretius could have easily Latinized the Greek word *atomos* as *atomus* [smallest particle], as Cicero did, he intentionally *did not*, nor did he use the Latin word *particula* or particle to describe matter. The English translations of “atom,” “particle,” and others have all been added to the text based on a certain historical interpretation of it. The idea that Lucretius subscribed to a world of discrete particles called atoms is therefore both a projection of Epicureanism and a retroaction of modern scientific theories of

mechanism onto *De Rerum Natura*. As such, Lucretius' writings have been crushed by the weight of his past and future at the same time.

In my books I argue that Lucretius *rejected entirely* the notion that things emerged from discrete particles. The existence of discrete bodies is deeply at odds with the enormous poetic apparatus he summoned to describe the flowing, swirling, folding, and weaving of matter. However, although Lucretius rejected the term *atomus*, he remained absolutely true to one aspect of the original Greek meaning of the word, ἄτομος (*átomos*, meaning “indivisible”). Nature is not cut up into discrete particles, but is composed of continuous flows, folds, and weaves. Not flows of a single substance but nature as an ongoing process. Discrete “things” [*rerum*] are composed of corporeal flows [*corpora*] that move together [*conflux*] and fold over themselves [*nexus*] in a woven knotwork [*contextum*]. For Lucretius, things, only emerge and have their being within and immanent to the flow and flux of matter in motion. Relative discreteness is a product of folded flux, not the other way around.

[Draw Image of flow, fold, field]

Lucretius' description of matter alternates interchangeably between several words, none of which necessarily refer to discrete unchanging eternal particles: *māteriēs* (matters), *primordia* (first-threads), *corpora* (body), *semine* (seeds, sprouts, or shoots). This is an interesting methodology for any materialist to define matter so heterogeneously. Lucretius thus follows the Homeric and poetic tradition of not adhering to a single fixed ideal concept and instead describes material processes with a variety of contextual words precisely because matter is a process of transformation. In Homer there is rarely a “single word” used in every case to describe similar processes.

Rerum Versus Corpora

The difference between *rerum* and *primordia rerum* is one of the most crucial terminological distinctions in the whole text, and we should take care never to conflate them or translate them equally as ‘things’, and above all not as ‘atoms’. For example, when Lucretius uses the word *rerum* alone without any conditional modifiers such as *semina*, *corpora*, or *primordia rerum*, he is describing *rerum* as they *appear* as seemingly discrete ‘things’. However, when he directly modifies the word *rerum* as with *semina rerum* (1.58), *corpora rebus* (1.196), or *rerum primordia* (1.55), as we will see, he is describing the active material conditions for the ordering and production of seemingly discrete things.

This technical distinction between *rerum* and *corporea rerum* is crucial to understanding Lucretius' philosophical method. If the condition of discrete things (*primordia rerum*) is just other discrete things (*rerum*), we have explained nothing and precisely failed to give an account of the *nature* or *conditions* by which discrete things themselves are produced. We have only presupposed precisely what we set out to explain: things. The conditions cannot resemble that which they condition. This is the fundamental thesis of Lucretian materialism. If they did then our explanations would be circular, mechanistic, and would uncover nothing about the *nature* of things.

[image: flow (copora) / fold (rerum)]

Alternate Vocabulary: Weaving and Folding

Instead of talking about discrete particles, Lucretius talks endlessly about flows and folds. These are the core tenets of what I call Lucretius' "kinetic materialism." If matter does not flow it cannot fold; if it folds it must also flow. However, if we interpret Lucretius' concept of *copora* as 'discrete particles' or 'atoms' instead of flows, his whole conceptual edifice of folding [*plex*] (*simplex*, *duplex*, *complex*, *amplex*) completely unravels. Atoms simply cannot fold. If Lucretius is an atomist, then we are left with a truly confounding problem of explaining this crucial aspect of his poetic thought. Discrete particles or things [*res*] cannot, *by definition*, fold themselves because the two sides of a thing cannot touch without reunifying the thing with itself. This is because discreteness implies that the thing [*res*] is already bound and limited, with a single and absolute interior and exterior. There is nothing here to fold.

Among all the images of weaving, I will give just two quick examples: the weaving of forms and of the soul.

Weaving of Forms and Figures

Forms are woven together [*exordia*] by threads [*filo*]. Lucretius importantly does not say that there are simply different pre-existing forms but rather that there is a long or far distance or difference between woven the forms.^{xvii} The invocation of weaving here is directly related to the Homeric, poetic, and feminine tradition of craft knowledge [*metis*] and not to Epicurean rationalism. Lucretius says,

Now let us see the motion from which all things are first woven and how far different they are in form, how varied they are in their many kinds of figures.

Other weaving words throughout are [*textum*, *contextum*, *nexum*].

Weaving the Soul

Lucretius also describes the *soul* as a process of "weaving" [*nexam*] (3.217). Lucretius' description of the soul as something *woven* is no coincidence. Poetry from Minoan Crete to Homer is frequently described as an act of weaving.^{xviii}

Since the soul and body come into being with their matters "woven" [*inplexis*] (3.331) together and "roots" [*radicibus*] (3.325) growing together, they are also "unwoven" or "untied" [*dissolu-antur*] (3.330) together as well. Since the soul and body are in constant motion, then it follows that the soul is always weaving. However, it also follows that if all movement is also death, then the soul's movement is also an unweaving as well: death. Weaving, then, just like the movement of the "first-threads" [*primordia*], is both creative and destructive *at the same time*. There is no binary opposition here, not even an alternation. Living is dying, and dying is living. The two are united in the same kinetic process.

The soul is woven together [*nexam*, *inplexis*] (3.217, 3.331) into a textured fabric [*textum*] (3.208-210), which in turn is woven by Lucretius' words in the poetic *textum*, which is in turn woven [*exordia*] of the first-threads [*primordia*] or flows of matter [*materies*]. In other

words, nature performs itself poetically through humans—poetry is not a representation of nature; it is a performance.

2. Second Counter-Thesis: “Lucretius did not believe in a spontaneous swerve in a rain of atoms through the void.”

Contrary to Epicurean and modern interpretations, I think Lucretius is clear that the swerve or change of motion, *mutatum*, *depellere*, or *declinare*, does not happen *ex nihilo*. Such a spontaneous change would contradict the first thesis of materialism: nothing comes from nothing. So it could not be the case that first there is a rain of parallel atoms falling through the void, and then out of nowhere one of the atoms swerves. Rather, Lucretius says matter has always been in the habit of swerving. (2.221–4).

Because unless they were accustomed to swerving, all would fall downwards like drops of rain through the deep void,
nor would a collision occur, nor would a blow be produced
by the first beginnings.

If and only if [*nisi*] (2.221) matter was not already in the habit [*solerent*] (2.221) of curving or bending [*declinare*] (2.221) would it fall downwards without collision like rain [*caderent*] (2.222). The *caderent* is therefore a counter-factual and not a speculative point in time which ever existed. The swerve was already before space and time, or at least coexistent with their emergence. There was never a time when there was only the *caderent* without collision [*plaga*] (2.223). Such a time is a total abstraction. If there was such a time, nothing would *be*, which is obviously not the case.

Matter has always been swerving. Lucretius formulates this thesis no less than three times in this section of the poem. In line 2.221 he writes that matter has always been in the *habit* of swerving [*declinare solerent*]. In line 2.293 he writes that all matter has the *clinamen* or swerve within it *from the beginning* [*clinamen principiorum*]. In lines 2.294–307, for those still tempted to think that there was ever the counter-factual state of atoms falling through the void, Lucretius clearly states that the swerving motion of matter has *always been this way and always will be* (2.297–9).

Wherefore with whatever motions the first beginnings
now move, they moved with the same motions in ages past,
and in the future they will always be carried along in a similar way.

Corpora have always moved according to the same motions [*motu principiorum corpora*] (2.297–8). There never was a cataract. There never was a point in time or space when they started swerving, because it is only their swerving motion that produces time and space in the first place.

This is the hardest idea to think. The swerve is neither determined nor random. It is an indeterminate relational process capable of producing emergent forms. This is what he means when he says there is no oblique causal motion. For Lucretius, there is an immanent self-causality or continuous transformation of the whole of nature at each moment. Each

motion comes from another, not in a completely determined or random way. Randomness is merely another version of ex nihilo creation. Lucretius is therefore neither a mechanist or a vitalist.

Wherefore again and again it is necessary that corpora swerve a little, but no more than a minimum, lest we seem to be inventing oblique motions, and the true facts refute it.

3. Third Counter-Thesis: “There is no ethical “peace of mind” or ataraxia in Lucretius.”

Is there such a thing as a “Lucretian ethics?” The almost universal answer to this question historically has been “no,”: there is only an Epicurean ethics that Lucretius parroted. One of the main arguments I tried to make in volume 2 is that there is a distinct Lucretian ethics—different from Epicurus and from other contemporary ethicists as well.

First of all, Lucretius’ ethics is different from hedonism and asceticism—both attributed to Epicurus. Oddly enough the most frequent interpretations of Epicurus’ ethics seem completely opposed to one another. Epicurus sounds like a hedonist because he says pleasure is the highest good, but he is also sounds like an ascetic because he says that the maximum amount of pleasure one can obtain can be achieved only by detaching oneself from pleasure through self-discipline. More precisely, however, Epicurus called this highest ethical ideal *ἀταραξία* (*ataraxía*), meaning “untroubled” or “undisturbed.” The highest good, for Epicurus, is therefore to have no pain and no pleasure. This is achieved through a simple life of individual contemplation.

For Epicurus there are two kinds of pleasures: *katastematic* pleasures and kinetic pleasures. *Katastematic* pleasures are those that occur in the absence of pain [*aponia*] and in an undisturbed mind [*ataraxia*]. Kinetic pleasures, however, are those that occur through movement and action. The aim of Epicurean ethics is to attain the former and try one’s best to steer clear of the latter. For Epicurus, only the gods exist in perfect *ataraxia*.

There are without a doubt similarities between Lucretian and Epicurean ethics, but let’s focus on two important differences. First and most important, for Lucretius, there are only *kinetic sensations* because all of matter is in motion, including the mind. The interconnected, unceasing, and continuous movement of the mind, body, and soul is the main thesis of Book III. Lucretius is explicit in numerous places that there is nothing static in nature.^{xix} The mind cannot escape movement through egoistic contemplation. Thus one will never find Lucretius saying, as Epicurus does, that one should try and avoid all kinetic pleasures.

On the contrary, Lucretius’ poem is filled with sensuous scenes of moving desire the likes of which Epicurus would never have dreamed to write, such as the erotic love scene between Venus and Mars (1.32–5), the poet’s own intoxication and orgasmic penetration by the “wand” of Bacchus (1.927–34) [describe this scene], the auto-erotics of bodies along the riverbanks (2.29–33), and the absolutely ecstatic “divine rapture” of desire that “seizes” Lucretius when he reads the words of Epicurus (3.29). Lucretius even opens *De Rerum*

Natura with a proem to Venus: the desire and pleasure of gods and men (1.1). There is perhaps no less Epicurean a way to open an Epicurean treatise than an invocation of a Venusian nature overflowing with desire, sex, war, and death, as Lucretius does. However, Lucretius also never says “pleasure is the highest good.” He even explicitly warns against the dangers of romantic idealism (4.1121–1140).

So Lucretius is neither a hedonist nor an ascetic, nor does he think there is any *ataraxia* in nature. This leads to a second difference with Epicurus: If there is no *ataraxia* in nature because matter is ceaselessly moving (2.97–9), then there can be no motionless and unperturbed Epicurean gods, either. Such gods are explicitly impossible for Lucretius, and so he invokes them only as ideas that “sprung from [Epicurus] *mind*” (3.14). In short, *ataraxia* and *katastematic* pleasure are, for Lucretius, transcendent values with no real existence in nature.

Conclusion

So I think its worth returning to Lucretius today because there is new interpretive work to be done and because I dont think we should give up on the possibility of a new (none mechanistic, vitalistic, or discrete) materialism that can unite the humanities, arts, and sciences.

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- ⁱ Brooke Holmes, Dakis Joannou, and Karen Marta, eds. *Liquid Antiquity* (Köln: König Books, 2017).
- ⁱⁱ Pierre Vesperini, *Lucrèce: Archéologie Dun Classique Européen* (Paris: Fayard, 2017), 13.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Karl Marx, translated by Paul M. Schafer, *The First Writings of Karl Marx* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Ig Publishing, 2006).
- ^{iv} David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- ^v See Vesperini, *Lucrèce*. Epicureanism was one of the most popular philosophical schools.
- ^{vi} See Vesperini, *Lucrèce*, chapters 12 and 13.
- ^{vii} See Vesperini, *Lucrèce*.
- ^{viii} See Thomas Nail, *Lucretius I: An Ontology of Motion* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018), chapter 8.
- ^{ix} Nail, *Lucretius I*, 43-50.
- ^x The most famous Roman Epicurean was Philodemus of Gadara (c. 110 – c. 40 or 35 BCE).
- ^{xi} Rare exceptions include the Greek philosophical poets Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedocles.
- ^{xii} For an extremely well argued defense of this point see Vesperini, *Lucrèce*.
- ^{xiii} See Monica Gale, *Oxford Readings in Lucretius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3; Vesperini, *Lucrèce*; Gale, “*Lucretius and previous poetic traditions*,” in Stuart Gillespie, and Philip Hardie, eds. *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 59–75; James Warren, “Lucretius and Greek philosophy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, 19–32.
- ^{xiv} There are numerous and widely differing interpretations of Lucretius through the 19th and 20th centuries, but here I am highlighting the “immanent” interpretation with which my own reading is connected.
- ^{xv} It is time to tear down the whole anthropocentric project of Western metaphysics with its wretched hatred of death, matter, the laboring classes, women, racialized colonies, queer desire, and nature in general.
- ^{xvi} The Epicurean ethos of “katastemic pleasure” [standing still] or “ataraxia” based on stasis is thus transformed in the hands of Lucretius into something quite different.
- ^{xvii} For a full discussion, see Thomas Nail, *Lucretius I: an Ontology of Motion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 208.
- ^{xviii} Giovanni Fanfani, Mary Harlow, and Marie-Louise Nosch, eds. *Spinning Fates and the Song of the Loom: The Use of Textiles, Clothing and Cloth Production As Metaphor, Symbol and Narrative Device in Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Press, 2016).
- ^{xix} See Thomas Nail, *Lucretius I: An Ontology of Motion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).