



LUCRETIUS AND HIS *DE RERUM NATURA*  
SIX CENTURIES AFTER  
A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID SEDLEY

by  
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**ABSTRACT:** In this interview David Sedley reflects on some important points of his seminal interpretation of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* six centuries after its discovery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini (Terranuova, now Terranuova Bracciolini, 1380 – Florence, 1459).

**KEYWORDS:** Lucretius' *De rerum natura*; Epicurus; Empedocles; Herculaneum Papyri; Ancient Philosophy, Hellenistic Philosophy

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**QUESTION:** What is distinctive about this text among other famous works of ancient philosophers which by good luck have been preserved?

**ANSWER:** What is most remarkable about the *De rerum natura* is that to all appearances it was written, and achieved fame, as a contribution to the Roman literary canon, and was not treated as a specifically philosophical text and source until a much later date; yet for us it is by far the fullest and most informative available source on Epicurean physics, and among our best sources on Epicurean ethics as well.

**QUESTION:** Please could you summarize the outcome of your research on the close relationship between Lucretius' poem, Empedocles, and the Herculaneum Papyri, which you studied in your seminal book *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* published in Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) in 1998? By the way, what exactly does the title of this volume mean?

ANSWER: In my book I argue for the following closely connected claims.

(a) Lucretius makes a firm distinction between his literary and his philosophical debts, and, correspondingly, between his poem's form and its content. The content is, as he concedes, the difficult and demanding subject of the world's true nature, which he compares to bitter medicine that will nevertheless, if we persist with it, ultimately transform our lives for the better. The form, which he compares to the honey on the rim of a cup that enables children to take their medicine, is the seductive poetic medium.

(b) This latter, formal aspect is unmistakably derived from the Greek master of his genre, the 5<sup>th</sup> century poet of nature Empedocles.

(c) For the content, analogously, Lucretius draws directly on his philosophical master, Epicurus himself, and not on lesser, intermediate sources. Specifically, his material on Epicurean physics comes from Epicurus' major treatise *On Nature*, and mainly from the first fifteen of that work's thirty-seven books. The Herculaneum library has provided us not only with evidence for the availability of this treatise in first-century BCE Italy, where Lucretius worked, but also with valuable information regarding the specific content of many of its individual books. Hence my hypothesis about Lucretius' source can be tested, and is systematically tested in my book, by reference to a substantial body of data.

(d) As that same hypothesis predicts, Lucretius' arguments and polemics constantly reflect the philosophical context in which Epicurus was writing, and do not show signs of any updating in the light of developments that occurred in the two centuries separating Lucretius from Epicurus, including the various debates that had taken place between Epicureans and Stoics. On this ground I call Lucretius an Epicurean 'fundamentalist': like other fundamentalists, he is content to rely on his school's foundational scriptures, and does not expect that consultation of any writings postdating them would add anything significant.

(e) Nevertheless, because Epicureanism promises salvation from suffering to all mankind, and not just to Greeks, Lucretius recognizes the need to make Epicurus' philosophy fully at home in his native Latin culture. In aid of that ambition, he develops a native Roman mode of exposition, exploiting the resources of the Latin language to the full in order to save Epicureanism from the appearance of an alien import.

(f) It is primarily to this cultural transformation that my book's title refers. But it also, if secondarily, refers to Lucretius' philosophical transformation

of his great Greek poetic forerunner and model, in adapting Empedocles' didactic genre so as to voice the one true philosophy, Epicureanism.

**QUESTION:** Despite some studies which consider Lucretius as 'son of his time', in dialogue with other philosophical schools and informed about the doctrinal developments of the Epicurean school (e.g. J. Schmidt, *Lukrez, der Kepos und Die Stoiker: Untersuchungen zur Schule Epikurs und zu den Quellen von De rerum natura*, Frankfurt/M.-Bern-New York-Paris, Peter Lang, 1990; and the more recent volumes by F. Montarese, *Lucretius and his Sources: A Study of Lucretius, De rerum natura I 635-920*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2012, and F. A. Bakker, *Epicurean Meteorology: Sources, Method, Scope and Organization*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2016), do you continue to consider Lucretius an 'Epicurean fundamentalist' (as you argue in your book, Ch. 3), and, therefore, to believe that the sources of the poem are exclusively attributable to the works of Epicurus (primarily, his *On Nature*)?

**ANSWER:** Yes, I do. Some of the work you mention has provided a valuable counterweight to my case, but not of sufficient quantity or cogency to make me reconsider my original contention. I had already remarked in my book (p. 91) that even if one or two instances were to be identified in which Lucretius did appear to have taken into account some philosophical development that postdated Epicurus, it would not alter the overall case, based as this is on the poem's overwhelming concentration on the issues and debates that belong to Epicurus' own time, in stark contrast to the updated presentations of Epicureanism that we meet in Lucretius' contemporaries Cicero and Philodemus. Bakker has made the most skilful case so far for the presence of at any rate one anti-Stoic polemic (at *DRN* 1.1052-93), but concedes that, even if well founded, it need not be enough to damage my overall contention.

**QUESTION:** Do you believe the hypothesis (recently once again questioned by M. Capasso, "Il preteso Lucrezio ercolanese", *Atene e Roma*, n.s. 8/3-4, 2014, p. 145-171) of the Norwegian classical scholar Knut Kleve (starting from his pioneering article "Lucretius in Herculaneum", *Cronache Ercolanesi*, 19, 1989, p. 5-27) that a copy of the *De rerum natura* was preserved in the so-called 'Villa dei Papiri'? What are the consequences of the presence or absence of this text in the Epicurean circle of Philodemus of Gadara? More in general, what is the relationship between the *De rerum natura* and the works of Philodemus preserved by the Herculaneum Papyri?

**ANSWER:** I have great admiration for Kleve, but I was never convinced by his claims to have found Lucretian fragments among the Herculaneum papyri. Small and damaged fragments apparently attributable to two great Latin poets, Ennius and Lucretius, were identified only because Kleve was

actively looking for them. This is a high-risk methodology, and unsurprisingly the attributions have, one by one, had to be modified or altogether withdrawn. The negative case has been well and succinctly made by David Butterfield, *The Early Textual History of Lucretius' De rerum natura* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 5-6.

Even if fragments of *De rerum natura* were one day to turn up among the remains of Philodemus' book collection, that would not significantly strengthen the case for direct contact between Lucretius and the circle of Philodemus. The owner of this Epicurean library could, like anyone else, readily buy books on the open market.

There are, however, reasons why I do not expect such a discovery ever to occur. Philodemus, if his surviving works are at all representative, worked extensively on ethics, aesthetics and philosophical history, but had very little interest in physics. Nor was he likely to read philosophical works in Latin, any more than other Greek philosophers in the ancient world did. There was therefore very little apparent motivation for him ever to acquire a copy of the *De rerum natura*.

**QUESTION:** What role does a revolutionary text such as the *De rerum natura* play in contemporary scientific and philosophical debates?

**ANSWER:** The rediscovery of Lucretius' poem in the Renaissance helped in due course to inspire early modern atomism, and we must always be grateful for that. Although Lucretius is no longer a direct contributor to any scientific debate, he would be able to boast that, among all the philosophical systems of antiquity, his was the only one whose fundamental contentions about man's place in the universe have been strengthened, rather than overturned, by modern science.

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