LUCRETIUS, EPICUREAN AND POET. COMPLEMENTARY VOLUME. VOLUME 2

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649004591

Lucretius, epicurean and poet. Complementary volume. Volume 2 by John Masson

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

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Trieste

LUCRETIUS

EPICUREAN AND POET

COMPLEMENTARY VOLUME

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LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.
1909

PREFACE

It was impossible either to discuss in the former volume all the Epicurean doctrines referred to by Lucretius, or to give all the evidence for the conclusions I have stated, these being based upon texts some of which are very intricate and difficult. In certain cases a choice had to be made as to points to be left over to the Appendix. Perhaps one or two of these might have been treated more appropriately in the book itself, if space had allowed.[1]

I am deeply conscious of the extreme difficulty of the subject, and have gratefully to acknowledge the value of several criticisms from which I hope the book may one day profit.

The main point as to which critics have differed from

[1] I may mention here the attack (it cannot be called 'criticism') on my book in the *Times* (January 16, 1908). The writer condemns it on the ground of minor omissions, which he magnifies as if they were central points. At the same time, he entirely omits to mention that in the Preface and elsewhere an 'Appendix,' or supplementary volume, is frequently referred to for subjects which there was not space to treat in full. The critic, who is of the extreme academic type, does not attempt to grasp the real 'content' of the book, while in his remarks upon Epicureanism he is satisfied to deal with its merest surface. But, apart from this total difference of standpoint, his criticisms cover only a small portion of the matters dealt with. Notably, he avoids the greater doctrines. While emphasizing details, he does not even name central and capital Epicurean tenets, treated at length in chapters which embody much fresh research. I refer, for example, to atomic Declination and Epicurus's theology, certainly the most difficult and among the most distinctive of his doctrines.

me is with regard to the 'Electron.' Several of these have forgotten that the new knowledge resulting from the discovery of radium has in no way destroyed the Atomic Theory as a working hypothesis. No doubt the 'atom' in the strict sense of the word is now the Electron —that is to say, if only we knew a little more about that particle! In the essential quality of indivisibility, on which Lucretius bases the fact of law in Nature and the persistence of all things in the world, his atom corresponds to the Electron. The unchangeableness of the atom is a dogma at present demonstrably false. But would Lucretius have accepted the Electron as equivalent to his atom? I do not think he would. The Lucretian atom has another quality—that of forming groups, and entering into combination with other atoms, to form substances, in which quality it answers to the modern chemical atom, of which the essential property is that it can combine in fixed proportions with other atoms.[1] But what do we know as to the combining properties of the 'Electron'? The doctrine of atoms which has been evolved during the nineteenth century is a conception which chemistry will never be able to dispense with as a working hypothesis, so far as one can judge, for all time to come.

One able critic complains that I have not given 'an authoritative exposition (*sic*) of the present position of the atomic theory,' including in this the theory of Electrons![2] In face of the extreme disagreement of the chief authorities with each other and with themselves, as quoted in Appendix V., this critic might well appear to be a humorist. It is as yet premature to think of comparing Lucretius's atom with the Electron, so vague is our knowledge about the latter. If the Daltonian atom persists, and will always persist, as a half-way house to the Electron, it must do this in virtue of some close and vital

[1] This is why Lucretius is fond of calling his atoms 'seeds of things'—*semina rerum*.

[2] *The Nation*, February 1, 1908.

relation (not yet grasped by science) to the final indestructible particles. The chemical atom behaves in very important respects as if it were final, and it may be called 'quasi-final.' Will the processes of atomic disintegration into electrons ever be brought so under control that we shall be able to utilize them as we do our ordinary methods of chemical analysis? Some chemists would say that the former process differs from the latter not in degree merely, but in kind.

The *Times* critic imposingly informs us that 'Lucretius was not a chemist. . . . From his point of view the atom was the ultimate particle, and, since this particle is at present the Electron,' I ought to have discussed the modern 'Electron' rather than the Daltonian atom, and to have treated fully the inquiry 'whether (as has been said) matter is not only explained, but explained away.' 'The total neglect of this question,' he adds, 'is surprising'! Here is, indeed, logic with a vengeance—logic which ludicrously defies both the sense of proportion and the historic sense! With so wide a subject, before devoting a chapter to discuss the very conflicting theories of to-day as to matter being 'explained away' or not (see Appendix V.), it was necessary to record, and to record in full, those doctrines of Epicurean science to which the world owes so great and manifold a debt. It was not for nothing that, when modern science was struggling for birth, Gassendi made the world familiar with the ancient theory of atoms, with Epicurus's firm grasp of law in Nature and his reachings after scientific method. These were solid achievements, and to set them forth was the real task which this side of my subject called for. The undertaking, though the critic may ignore it, is no slight one.

The reviewer first quoted considers that the Tyndall-Martineau controversy as to the 'potency of Matter,' of which a full account is given, is 'rather out of date by now,' as is also W. K. Clifford's theory of 'mind-stuff,' which I quoted as a parallel to the doctrine of

Atomic Declination. Instead of the latter, he recommends me to discuss 'the far-reaching speculations of Professor Haeckel.'[1] On both points I must differ with him. As a thinker, Clifford is far more original than Haeckel. Lucretius's saying that 'Nature is seen to do all things herself, and entirely of her own accord without the gods,' has never been more vividly and suggestively illustrated than by the famous discussion between Tyndall and Martineau. That controversy is by no means out of date, and will long outlast all Haeckel's philosophizing. In his gift of luminous exposition Tyndall has something akin to Lucretius.

Lucretius was not first and foremost a man of science. One main aim of my book is to treat Epicurean ethics. I have written from the standpoint of the Humanist, never forgetting that Epicureanism was not merely a system, but a rule by which men sought to guide their lives, and in some sense even a religion. In this attempt to estimate Epicureanism from a practical standpoint, it would be one-sided indeed to ignore Epicurus's attitude to theistic belief in its bearing on ideals of conduct.

In this volume I have briefly treated the history of the doctrine of Pleasure both before Epicurus and in our own days (see Appendix, §§ xii.-xv.); but I have been more anxious in the case of both Epicurus and Lucretius to show that each of them had heart enough for the making of 'a moralist.'[2] Not all who pretend to discuss ethics deserve that name. To grasp and allow for the strange contradictions in the teaching of Epicurus springing from strange contradictions in his temperament and character is in itself a heavy task.

[1] See *The Nation* for February 1 and 15, 1908.

[2] And Diogenes of Œnoanda, too, the old man who, in his pity 'for all those who have no knowledge,' causes the main doctrines of Epicurus to be engraved on the walls of the most public place in his city! The inscription of this obscure, ungifted man is one of the most significant of Epicurean documents, even apart from the light it throws upon doctrines both of ethics and physics, as admirably set forth by Usener.

In treating of Lucretius as a poet and philosopher, I have tried to avoid as far as possible the use of philosophical terms, which are not necessarily a guarantee of precise thinking, and so often tend to conceal vagueness of knowledge. I have tried to express myself in the concrete terms of literature rather than in the abstract. The latter has the advantage of being by far the easier method. But the danger of abstract treatment is its superficiality.[1] Its realization of facts by the mere reason is too shallow to allow of any genuine induction being drawn. It tends to create an illusory sense of mastery, a false *opinio copiæ*. The mere concept in the mind is placed above, and often is actually substituted for, the realization by heart and imagination of the matters dealt with. As Schopenhauer would say, in scientific or abstract treatment the subject is merely 'thought'; in literature it is

[1] 'Dialecticorum mens Idearum plerumque inimica.' It is because such critics do not even aim at inwardness and grasp that their method 'is at enmity with the Idea.' The entire subjectivity of this point of view reminds us of the old contention of the Spider against the Bee. Extolling his cobweb, the Spider says: 'This large castle (to show my improvement in the mathematics) is all built with my own hands, and *the materials extracted altogether out of my own person*.' 'In this building of yours,' replies the Bee, 'you boast of being obliged to no other creature, *but of drawing and spinning out all from yourself*.' But the final result is only a cobweb, whereas the Bee (representing the world's great classics), visiting all the flowers and blossoms of the field and garden, and with long search and much labour, 'brings home honey and wax . . . furnishing the world with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light' ('The Battle of the Books'). What did Sainte-Beuve mean when he loved to call himself 'the naturalist of souls'? Surely this—that all true knowledge, in whatever field, must, like the bee, with his constant excursions into the wide world in sun and storm, be based upon observation and experience. To the poet the world, whether of nature or of men and women, has a deep significance as a living and ever-unfolding manifestation of the Divine which it cannot bear to the man who lives with mere abstractions. How wholesome to turn from the latter to any average page, for example, of Louis Stevenson—and find there a true bright mirror of real things, every sentence a record of something experienced, something done, or some vivid aspect

'perceived.' From such abstract knowledge on any subject we learn the truth of it only in an indirect way. It substitutes, as it were, a geometrical diagram of the features for the portrait of a face. The result is a figure of one dimension which, if not too distorted, might serve as the vague shadow-picture of any Epicurean of the schools. There is only one Lucretius, and it has taxed all my powers and demands far higher to grasp the qualities which make him what he is—the comrade of all fighters against superstition, the ally of the man of science, the poet who so loved our earth and every changing feature of her face, in whom sadness and high fervour are so strangely blended, who felt for children terror-stricken in the dark, and who set forth exulting in his bright new-found weapons, with his heart all on fire to deliver his fellows from Care and Fear. Nor was it possible to ignore, as the extreme academic type of criticism would have us do, the bearing of his doctrines on life and conduct. In this how unlike Epicurus! 'Philosophy,' he tells us, 'is a continued striving by thought and discussions to bring about a happy life.' 'Vain is the discourse of that philosopher by which no human suffering is healed.'[1] One main aim of the book is to form a severely practical estimate of Epicureanism, as we find it both in Epicurus and in the poet, as a rule of life. Epicurus would have repelled with violence any estimate of his system which left out its practical aim. Can it save men from their slavery to appetite, care, ambition? By its success in this, he would have said, it must stand or fall.

caught for us of the beautiful earth in the background. Literature is no mere inventory of facts: these must be combined and interpreted for us by some fine spirit who fills the whole narrative with a life unmistakably his own, even as we say of a picture, 'Here is a Titian!'; for we know at once that no other hand could have painted it. It is the aim of all art to express the meaning of life. Thus it brings us into touch with the inner reality of things (see Addenda, p. 196).

[1] See 'The Sayings of Epicurus,' vol. i., p. 342.