

Let's Make a List of 1) Major Causes of the Decline of Epicurean Philosophy after Lucretius and 2) The Obstacles to its Revival Through Today

Post by "Joshua" of August 21, 2023 at 8:40 PM

Quote

I actually think Horace has some lovely descriptions of friendship and wider Epicurean concerns in his works, so I'd argue against him being to blame. Here he is on friendship, from Satire 1.3

Horace is devilishly difficult to pin down, unfortunately. But first, a chronology;

[Assassination of Caesar, 44 BC]

[Battle of Philippi, 42 BC]

[Lepidus Exiled, 36 BC]

Satires 1 (c. 35-34 BC)

[Battle of Actium, 31 BC]

Satires 2 (c. 30 BC)

Epodes (30 BC)

[Reign of Augustus Begins, 27 BC, followed by military adventuring. Returns to Rome 24 BC]

Odes 1-3 (c. 23 BC)

Epistles 1 (c. 21 BC)

Carmen Saeculare (17 BC)

Epistles 2 (c. 11 BC)

Odes 4 (c. 11 BC)

Ars Poetica (c. 10-8 BC)

Now then. Between Philippi and Actium Horace wrote his first book of *Satires*, with distinct Epicurean themes and borrowed Lucretian diction; according to Wikipedia, "Lucretian stock

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phrases such as *nunc ad rem redeo* ("now I return to the matter at hand") give Horace's philosophical "conversations" (*Sermones*) a subtly Lucretian flavor." In the fifth Satire of the first book, he paraphrases the Epicureans on the nature of the gods;

Quote

Hence we came to Rubi, fatigued: because we made a long journey, and it was rendered still more troublesome by the rains. Next day the weather was better, the road worse, even to the very walls of Barium that abounds in fish. In the next place Egnatia, which [seems to have] been built on troubled waters, gave us occasion for jests and laughter; for they wanted to persuade us, that at this sacred portal the incense melted without fire. The Jew Apella may believe this, not I. For I have learned, that the gods dwell in a state of tranquillity; nor, if nature effect any wonder, that the anxious gods send it from the high canopy of the heavens.

In 30 BC come the Epodes, and the ninth in the set has Horace (a former officer in the Republican Army) toasting assiduously the victory of Octavian at Actium, and likewise condemning Cleopatra as an Egyptian seductress when she was, in fact, a Macedonian heiress and a student of several languages who conversed with her Latin conquerors in Greek.

Quote

When, O happy Maecenas, shall I, overjoyed at Caesar's being victorious, drink with you under the stately dome (for so it pleases Jove) the Caecuban reserved for festal entertainments, while the lyre plays a tune, accompanied with flutes, that in the Doric, these in the Phrygian measure? As lately, when the Neptunian admiral, driven from the sea, and his navy burned, fled, after having menaced those chains to Rome, which, like a friend, he had taken off from perfidious slaves. The Roman soldiers (alas! ye, our posterity, will deny the fact), enslaved to a woman, carry palisades and arms, and can be subservient to haggard eunuchs; and among the military standards, oh shame! the sun beholds an [Egyptian] canopy.

Following Augustus' return to Rome in 24 BC as *Imperator*, Horace published his first book of Odes and begins in the same vein;

Quote

[...] If thou, the winged son of gentle Maia, by changing thy figure, personate a youth upon earth, submitting to be called the avenger of Caesar; late mayest thou return to the skies, and long mayest thou joyously be present to the Roman people; nor may an untimely blast transport thee from us, offended at our crimes. Here mayest thou rather delight in magnificent triumphs, and to be called father and prince: nor suffer the Parthians with impunity to make incursions, you, O Caesar, being our general.

And in the 34th Ode in the same book, there is a direct repudiation of Lucretius. In his sixth book, Lucretius strove by several arguments to make the case that lightning did *not* come from the gods. One of the arguments he made was that if lightning came from Jupiter, then Jupiter had no need of cloud to let fly the bolt--so why is it that lightning is not seen on a cloudless day?

"But if Jupiter and other gods shake
bright heavenly spaces with dreadful noise
and hurl down fire to any place at all,
according to what each of them desires,
why do they not see to it that those men
who in their recklessness have committed
abominable acts are struck and stink
of lightning fires from hearts pierced by the bolt,
a bitter precedent for mortal men?

Why instead is the man who is aware
he himself has committed no wrong act
in his innocence entangled and wrapped
in flames, snatched up in fiery hurricanes
suddenly sent down from heaven? Besides,
why do they target isolated places
and work so hard for nothing? Or are they
exercising limbs, toning their muscles?

Why do they allow their father's weapon
to be blunted on the earth? Why does he
let that happen and not save the lightning
for his enemies? Why does Jupiter
never hurl down his lightning bolt on earth
or let his thunder peal when skies are clear

in all directions? Or as soon as clouds
appear, does he himself go down to them,
so that from there he may guide the impact
his weapons make from close at hand? And why
does he send them into the sea? What charges
does he bring against that liquid mass of waves,
those fields of water? And if he wants us
to beware the stroke of his thunderbolt,
why is he reluctant to arrange things
so we can see it as he hurls it down?
But if he wishes to overwhelm us
with his lightning when we are unaware,
why does he thunder from that area,
so we can guard against it? Why does he
first stir up darkness, noises, and rumbling?
And how can you believe he discharges
lightning to many places all at once?
Would you dare to say it never happens
that many strikes occur at the same time?
But that has happened very frequently
and must take place—just as rain and showers
fall in many spots, so numerous thunderbolts
are formed at the same time. And finally,
why does he destroy the sacred temples
of the gods and his own splendid dwellings
with hostile lightning and smash to pieces

well fashioned idols of the gods, robbing
his own images of their dignity
with a violent wound? Why for the most part
does he aim at high places, for we see
most traces of his fire on mountain tops?"

I cannot claim to know why or what it means, but Horace latches on to this argument in order to make the reverse case; lightning has struck on a cloudless day, therefore Lucretius was wrong about the gods. To tell the truth, it's always difficult to know with Horace whether he's being completely serious. But the final quote that I will share here is often repeated, and this Ode seldom taken into consideration;

Quote

A remiss and irregular worshiper of the gods, while I professed the errors of a senseless philosophy, I am now obliged to set sail back again, and to renew the course that I had deserted. For Jupiter, who usually cleaves the clouds with his gleaming lightning, lately drove his thundering horses and rapid chariot through the clear serene; which the sluggish earth, and wandering rivers; at which Styx, and the horrid seat of detested Taenarus, and the utmost boundary of Atlas were shaken. The Deity is able to make exchange between the highest and the lowest, and diminishes the exalted, bringing to light the obscure; rapacious fortune, with a shrill whizzing, has borne off the plume from one head, and delights in having placed it on another.

What's strange is that two years later he publishes his first book of epistles, and with it the most famous Epicurean quote in his whole body of work.

Quote

Albius, thou candid critic of my discourses, what shall I say you are now doing in the country about Pedum? Writing what may excel the works of Cassius Parmensis; or sauntering silently among the healthful groves, concerning yourself about every thing worthy a wise and good man? You were not a body without a mind. The gods have given you a beautiful form, the gods [have given] you wealth, and the faculty of enjoying it.

What greater blessing could a nurse solicit for her beloved child, than that he might be wise, and able to express his sentiments; and that respect, reputation, health might happen to him in abundance, and decent living, with a never-failing purse?

In the midst of hope and care, in the midst of fears and disquietudes, think every day that shines upon you is the last. [Thus] the hour, which shall not be expected, will come upon you an agreeable addition.

When you have a mind to laugh, you shall see me fat and sleek with good keeping, a hog of Epicurus' herd.

It is noteworthy that this reference to Epicurus comes immediately on the heels of a short passage on death. Perhaps that was the connection with Epicureanism that mattered to him most.