

The Vessel Analogy At The Opening of Lucretius Book Six

Post by “Don” of September 13, 2023 at 11:52 PM

Okay, so I'm going to use the Leonard translation from Perseus because it's easy to copy/paste, not because I'm a fan of Leonard:

[Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, BOOK VI, line 1](#)

From my perspective, it's fairly straight forward to understand the vessel metaphor:

The verses start out with Epicurus's observation that everything was going pretty well from a material existence perspective for humankind. Almost everything which a person "most urgently required was ready at hand" (the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to achieve, *Letter to Menoikeus* and elsewhere). And humans had safety, men were lords in "riches, honour, praise" (See VS81)

Quote from VS81 (Saint-Andre trans.)

One will not banish emotional disturbance or arrive at significant joy through great wealth, fame, celebrity, or anything else which is a result of vague and indefinite causes.

But humans still weren't happy with all that! Their minds were troubled:

they yet, O yet, within the home,

Still had the anxious heart which vexed life

Unpausingly with torments of the mind,

Epicurus is looking for why this should still be if their material needs were being met, and they had "riches, honour, praise." Aren't those things supposed to make one happy? Aren't they supposed to bring well-being? Epicurus observes they obviously do not!

Epicurus observes that the mind itself - the vessel - is the problem! The mind - the vessel - remains polluted and cracked with erroneous ideas, fears, anxieties, and the like!

Epicurus then teaches how to purge the vessel (the mind) and to repair the cracks so that we can fully experience pleasure! We need to repair the vessel before we can fill it up with pleasures!

The master, then by his truth-speaking words,

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Purged the breasts of men, and set the bounds

Of lust and terror, and exhibited

The supreme good whither we all endeavour,

And so Epicurus teaches how to purge all those defects in the mind ("the breasts of men" since the mind is said to dwell in the chest) and to set bounds/limits to fears and desires (Leonard: "of lust and terror") and shows the way to experience pleasure, i.e., the "supreme good" (bonum summum). Stallings translates this as:

And thus with this truth-telling words he washed the heart all clear,

And set a limit to desire and an end to fear,

And showed what was the highest good, towards which we all strain,

And pointed out the route...The strait and narrow path...

Epicurus taught that we carry around too much worry, fear, anxiety, to be able to enjoy life! Riches, fame, and such aren't enough! We need to banish fear, anxiety, and other such things that are clogging up and cracking our minds - the vessel that wants to experience pleasure!

mostly vainly doth the human race

Roll in its bosom the grim waves of care.

So, I like this line because it goes with my new quickly-become-favorite metaphor. Epicurus calls us not to "roll in..the grim waves of care" but rather to "float on the ocean, and surf the waves." Stallings translates those lines:

...mankind in vain, for the most part,

Set the gloomy sea of troubles churning in the heart.

This terror that is experienced by a mind full of fear and anxiety can only be fixed by "nature's aspect and her law."

This terror then, this darkness of the mind,

Not sunrise with its flaring spokes of light,

Nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse,

But only nature's aspect and her law.

Stallings simply translates those last lines as:

The fear and shadows of the mind must be scattered away,

... by the look of Nature and her law.

So it all comes back around to our recent thread on ataraxia and the work of removing fear, anxiety, the darkness and torments of the mind, and instead freeing our minds from the "gloomy sea of troubles" so we can float on the calm ocean of ataraxia and surf the waves of delightful kinetic pleasures!