

Sedley - Epicurus and The Transformation of Greek Wisdom

Post by "Cassius" of December 26, 2023 at 5:18 PM

OK now finished and finally after far too long I am in position to place a fix on where this book fits in with a general study of Epicurus. Here's my summary:

David Sedley is probably one of the top five scholars of Epicurus alive today, and he might be at the very top. Everything he writes is full of good information about Epicurus. His speculations are always based on lots of evidence and I'd go with his speculation on something before most anyone else's.

I think I put off reading this book so long because I was unsure what to make of the title. Now after reading it I'd say the title could be "translated" into something more like this:

"The Story of How Lucretius decided to follow the example of Empedocles and write a poem on physics, How Epicurus took much of the order of his "On Nature" by responding to Theophrastus' physics, How these observations allow us to reconstruct the Table of Contents in On Nature, and How, from those starting points, we can decode the way Lucretius reworked the order of Epicurus' arguments in "On Nature" to create a poem with more OOMPH than if he had followed Epicurus' own order of topics."

As such, there's not a lot of ethical insight that most of our readers here won't already be familiar with, but the book provides a good framework for why Lucretius started the poem off with the "hymn to Venus" that seems to some people to be so out of place. Dr Sedley says that aspect arises from Lucretius' apparent decision to mimic the opening of Empedocles' poem, which started in a similar way, but to totally rearrange Empedocles' view of nature to conform to Epicurean philosophy.

Dr. Sedley also does a good job of taking on the question of the ending of the poem, and his conclusion is that Lucretius simply had not finished reworking the final books of the poem before he died. He doesn't go in Emily Austin's direction of noting that Lucretius failed to include what the original plague narrative had said about the citizens of Athens learning the lessons of how short life can be, but rather he argues that Lucretius intended a significant recap of Principle Doctrine 4 to explain how even pain like that of the plague comes under the scope of Epicurus' advice about the manageability of pain.

So there's a tremendous amount of good material here and I wish I had read this long ago. It's not however what I would call the best place to start for a newer reader, but it will really fascinate anyone who wants to dive into an analysis of Lucretius or get a better idea of what was likely included in Epicurus' own "On Nature."