

Sedley - Epicurus and The Transformation of Greek Wisdom

Post by "Godfrey" of May 1, 2021 at 5:54 PM

Here's my two cents:

Sedley at his finest: he discusses how the proem to book 1 is a direct response to Empedocles' poem On Nature and a transition from Empedocles philosophy to that of Epicurus. Then he constructs the contents of Epicurus' On Nature and has a couple of charts showing how this correlates to Lucretius DRN. Later he posits that the final book or two of DRN correlates to the Peripatetic Theophrastus via Epicurus.

He further posits that Lucretius was in the process of a rewrite at the time of his death, and that he had only completed books 1-3. His theory is that Lucretius first put Epicurus On Nature into verse, then was reworking the structure of his poem to fit his goal of persuasion as opposed to Epicurus' goal of exposition. He describes Epicurus' books as the contents of a series of lectures, btw.

As to the plague of Athens, Sedley's theory is that it was Lucretius' initial pass, to be reworked. He presents the overall DRN as a cycle of books beginning with pleasure and ending with pain, and posits that the plague of Athens portion would probably have been reworked to show how an Epicurean deals with pain, similar to Epicurus on his deathbed.

He's kind enough to translate 99% of the Greek and Latin; overall it reads quite well for a layman such as me.

Makes me want to read DRN yet again!

Post by "Cassius" of December 26, 2023 at 10:27 AM

Over the holidays I am going to remedy my slackness and read this book in full. I have started the first two chapters and I can echo what Godfrey wrote as to Empedocles with this additional comment:

I don't think the observation really changes a whole lot as to how to interpret what Lucretius is saying in the opening "hymn to Venus," but it probably does help explain why he was

motivated to start with imagery of Venus and then her interaction with Mars. Sedley is saying that Empedocles' poem on physics is lost, but that there is good reason to believe that it started with a similar poetic analogy to Venus / Aphrodite. Sedley's theory is that Empedocles' poem on nature inspired Lucretius to open his poem with analogous imagery, but that Lucretius almost immediately started deviating from Empedocles to restate what Empedocles had presented in (dramatically different) Epicurean terms.

[btn='Empedocles in Wikipedia','wikipedia-w']<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empedocles>[/btn]

Post by “Joshua” of December 26, 2023 at 10:38 AM

I think the main point to take away from the Empedoclean comparison is that his two universal principles of Love and Strife can be loosely analogized to the Epicurean position that the accretion and dissolution of atomic compounds is an endless process, and that dissolution never gets the upper hand; Venus, representing the generative power of nature, is constantly innovating.

So while our world will eventually be destroyed (as alluded to by Ovid), elsewhere in the cosmos other worlds are continually being formed by the linking of atoms. There will be no 'end times' no ultimately ruinous catastrophe that destroys everything.

"The verses of sublime Lucretius will perish only on that day which consigns the world to destruction."

Post by “Don” of December 26, 2023 at 11:04 AM

https://youtu.be/HR2C_7G_yRQ?feature=shared

This video explains the fate of the universe depends on "the stuff in the universe" (atoms? 😊) and "empty space" (void? 😊)

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."

Post by "Don" of December 26, 2023 at 6:04 PM

It's also a great reference work for questions about the content of *On Nature*.