

2014 Article By Jonathan Williams - "Happy Violence - Bentley, Lucretius, and the Prehistory of Freethinking.

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2021 at 4:22 PM

I have not read anything further than the first several paragraphs, and I may not agree with anything else whatsoever in it, but I do agree strongly with the part I've underlined here in red. Is there an institution in the way of our happiness? **Vive la Révolution!**

And a key aspect of that is in the part I did not underline, which is that Lucretius should not be interpreted as preaching the "insignificance" of humans, as some seem to interpret Epicurus/Lucretius as implying. Certainly any individual only occupies a tiny space in the vastness of an infinite universe, but that by no means implies that the individual should see himself or herself as "insignificant" in general.

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Jonathan C. Williams

(Greenblatt 199). Lucretius has another legacy, too. By turning to an eighteenth-century debate between the philosopher Anthony Collins and the philologist Richard Bentley over the merits and dangers of the philosophy of freethinking, a debate in which Lucretius plays a strange but critical role, I suggest that some readers of Lucretius saw him as advocating the complete opposite of a philosophy of "human insignificance." Richard Bentley, I claim, thought of Lucretius as a theorist of human feeling. By developing a theory of human feeling, Lucretius contributed to a historical understanding of happiness. Lucretius's importance to the history of happiness allowed him, in Bentley's mind, to uphold the human as a figure capable of doing violence to any institution or establishment that threatened happiness. In Bentley's mind, Lucretius did not see the human as insignificant in the grand scheme of things; rather, Lucretius afforded the human *too much* significance and left no place for God or organized religion. Lucretius's contribution to the history of happiness aligns disturbingly, Bentley suggests, with the religiously dangerous philosophy of freethinking, which sees the human mind as a more reliable authority on the nature of the universe than the church or the Scriptures. While Lucretius's philosophy is on its face more compatible with atheism than with religious faith, his ideas were particularly attractive to theists. When theists such as Anthony Collins absorbed Lucretius's ideas about human feeling, they were able to view his theories of feeling as complements to religious faith. The combination of Lucretian feeling with religious freethinking leads not to a philosophy of human insignificance, but to a philosophy of human exceptionalism.

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