

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2021 at 4:31 PM

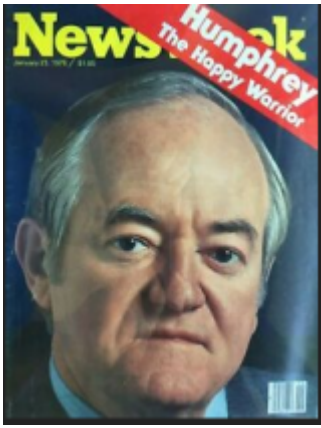
The collision between these two forces, the illness and the cure, produces a state of peace, or of sober courage. In the Lucretian scheme, *fear* is one of the forces comprising the "illness" side of the equation: fear arises from not knowing why certain things happen—not knowing why a sinister storm approaches on the horizon, and not knowing whether that storm will be fatal.<sup>2</sup> Fear is like an illness because it is debilitating and crippling; its cure is knowledge. Lucretius thinks that when we are able to discover why a storm comes and what causes it, fear is transformed into sobriety and freedom. This is Lucretius's theory of human feeling, and it gives a moral weight and purpose to the more strictly scientific aspects of his thinking. After all, he is only interested in explaining the nature of atoms and physics because it is through this thorough explanation that his readers will have their fear transmuted into freedom. Later thinkers like Collins will use Lucretius's emphasis on freedom as a basis for happiness. Lucretius shows Bentley, however, that this kind of happiness is not an easy happiness. It is, instead, a *happy violence*. One only becomes happy by knowing causes, and by knowing causes one also does violence to religion. Lucretius's dialectic of illness and cure is so seductive in its promise of peace that it occludes its own insistence on violence. Happy violence is thus Lucretius's true legacy. Beneath all of Lucretius's swerving atoms is a happy violence that threatens, through its

unflagging devotion to the human capacity for reason, to tear eighteenth-century notions of religion apart at the seams.

My approach in this piece has two parts. First, I aim to trace the influence of Lucretian philosophy on the history of free thought. Lucretius is a key figure in the history of freethinking because his philosophy of free will opens up a possibility for human happiness that, for freethinkers like Anthony Collins, is a means for seeing the human subject as an exceptional figure in the face of epistemological uncertainty. Even if the passages that Bentley cites from Lucretius do not use the term “happiness,” they do, for Bentley, activate the terms of freedom and empowerment that become important to later advocates of happiness. Collins will seize on the ideal of Lucretian freedom and attach it to his ideal of happiness without knowing that this ideal relies on the ethics of Lucretius’s anti-religious thought. Second, I show how Richard Bentley’s appropriation of Lucretius is a medium through which we might rethink the legacy of Lucretian materialism in the eighteenth century. For some scholars, Lucretius is important in the eighteenth century because his theories about matter suggest that human subjectivity is a myth.<sup>3</sup> For thinkers like Bentley, though, Lucretius positioned the human subject as preeminent to nonhuman matter. For Bentley, Lucretian subjectivity is a dangerous and uncontrollable force because it allows humans to act irresponsibly on their feelings.

I don't think "preeminent to nonhuman matter is accurate" - that sounds like the Biblical setting up of Adam and Eve to rule over the animals. But I do think that from the perspective of the individual that Epicurus and Lucretius held that it was correct for us to view - through our feeling - that some things more important to us than others, and that the happiness of ourselves and our friends is at the top of that list.

There are lots of people who have been described over the years as happy warriors. I will date myself by remembering, from when I was growing up, the first person to whom I heard that title applied. He doesn't look so happy in this magazine cover though!



But in general I think "Happy Warrior" is a good title for any aggressive Epicurean philosopher.