

Venus and Mars - "Good" vs. "Evil"?

Post by "Joshua" of June 22, 2025 at 8:50 PM

George Santayana discusses this question in his essay on Lucretius from [Three Philosophical Poets](#);

Quote

To a fortunate conjunction of atoms, a child owes his first being. To a propitious season and atmosphere, a poet owes his inspiration and his success. Conscious that his undertaking hangs upon these chance conjunctions, Lucretius begins by invoking the powers he is about to describe, that they may give him breath and genius enough to describe them. And at once these powers send him a happy inspiration, perhaps a happy reminiscence of Empedocles. There are two great perspectives which the moralist may distinguish in the universal drift of atoms,—a creative movement, producing what the moralist values, and a destructive movement, abolishing the same. Lucretius knows very well that this distinction is moral only, or as people now say, subjective. No one else has pointed out so often and so clearly as he that nothing arises in this world not helped to life by the death of some other thing; so that the destructive movement creates and the creative movement destroys. Yet from the point of view of any particular life or interest, the distinction between a creative force and a destructive force is real and all-important. To make it is not to deny the mechanical structure of nature, but only to show how this mechanical structure is fruitful morally, how the outlying parts of it are friendly or hostile to me or to you, its local and living products.

This double colouring of things is supremely interesting to the philosopher; so much so that before his physical science has reached the mechanical stage, he will doubtless regard the double aspect which things present to him as a dual principle in these things themselves. So Empedocles had spoken of Love and Strife as two forces which respectively gathered and disrupted the elements, so as to carry on between them the Penelope's labour of the world, the one perpetually weaving fresh forms of life, and the other perpetually undoing them.

It needed but a slight concession to traditional rhetoric in order to exchange these names, Love and Strife, which designated divine powers in Empedocles, into the names of Venus and Mars, which designated the same influences in Roman mythology. **The Mars and Venus of Lucretius are not moral forces, incompatible with the mechanism of atoms; they are this mechanism itself, in so far as it now produces and now destroys life, or any precious enterprise, like this of Lucretius in composing his saving poem. Mars and Venus, linked in each other's arms, rule the universe together; nothing arises**

save by the death of some other thing. Yet when what arises is happier in itself, or more congenial to us, than what is destroyed, the poet says that Venus prevails, that she woos her captive lover to suspend his unprofitable raging. At such times it is spring on earth; the storms recede (I paraphrase the opening passage),[5] the fields are covered with flowers, the sunshine floods the serene sky, and all the tribes of animals feel the mighty impulse of Venus in their hearts.

The corn ripens in the plains, and even the sea bears in safety the fleets that traverse it.

Not least, however, of these works of Venus is the Roman people. Never was the formative power of nature better illustrated than in the vitality of this race, which conquered so many other races, or than in its assimilative power, which civilized and pacified them. Legend had made Venus the mother of Aeneas, and Aeneas the progenitor of the Romans. Lucretius seizes on this happy accident and identifies the Venus of fable with the true Venus, the propitious power in all nature, of which Rome was indeed a crowning work. But the poet's work, also, if it is to be accomplished worthily, must look to the same propitious movement for its happy issue and for its power to persuade. Venus must be the patron of his art and philosophy. She must keep Memmius from the wars, that he may read, and be weaned from frivolous ambitions; and she must stop the tumult of constant sedition, that Lucretius may lend his undivided mind to the precepts of Epicurus, and his whole heart to a sublime friendship, which prompts him to devote to intense study all the watches of the starry night, plotting the course of each invisible atom, and mounting almost to the seat of the gods.[6]

This impersonation in the figure of Venus of whatever makes for life would not be legitimate—it would really contradict a mechanical view of nature—if it were not balanced by a figure representing the opposite tendency, the no less universal tendency towards death.

The Mars of the opening passage, subdued for a moment by the blandishments of love, is raging in all the rest of the poem in his irrepressible fury. These are the two sides of every transmutation, that in creating, one thing destroys another; and this transmutation being perpetual,—nothing being durable except the void, the atoms, and their motion,—it follows that the tendency towards death is, for any particular thing, the final and victorious tendency. The names of Venus and Mars, not being essential to the poet's thought, are allowed to drop out, and the actual processes they stand for are described nakedly; yet, if the poem had ever been finished, and Lucretius had wished to make the end chime with the beginning, and represent, as it were, one great cycle of the world, it is conceivable that he might have placed at the close a mythical passage to match that at the beginning; and we might have seen Mars aroused from his luxurious lethargy, reasserting his immortal nature, and rushing, firebrand in hand,

from the palace of love to spread destruction throughout the universe, till all things should burn fiercely, and be consumed together. Yet not quite all; for the goddess herself would remain, more divine and desirable than ever in her averted beauty. Instinctively into her bosom the God of War would sink again, when weary and drunk with slaughter; and a new world would arise from the scattered atoms of the old.

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And Stephen Greenblatt in *The Swerve* argues a similar case;

Quote

Human beings, Lucretius thought, must not drink in the poisonous belief that their souls are only part of the world temporarily and that they are heading somewhere else. That belief will only spawn in them a destructive relation to the environment in which they live the only lives that they have. These lives, like all other existing forms in the universe, are contingent and vulnerable; all things, including the earth itself, will eventually disintegrate and return to the constituent atoms from which they were composed and out of which other things will form in the perpetual dance of matter. But while we are alive, we should be filled with the deepest pleasure, for we are a small part of a vast process of world-making that Lucretius celebrated as essentially erotic.

Hence it is that, as a poet, a maker of metaphors, Lucretius could do something very strange, something that appears to violate his conviction that the gods are deaf to human petitions.

* * *

Neither creation nor destruction ever has the upper hand; the sum total of matter remains the same, and the balance between the living and the dead is always restored:

- And so the destructive motions cannot hold sway eternally and bury existence forever; nor again can the motions that cause life and growth preserve created things eternally. Thus, in this war that has been waged from time everlasting, the contest between the elements is an equal one: now here, now there, the vital forces conquer and, in turn, are conquered; with the funeral dirge mingles the wail that babies raise when they reach the shores of light; no night has followed day, and no dawn has followed night, which has not heard mingled with those woeful wails the lamentations that accompany death and the black funeral. ([DRN 2.569–80](#) [Side-by-Side])

The Spanish-born Harvard philosopher George Santayana called this idea —the ceaseless mutation of forms composed of indestructible substances —“the greatest thought that mankind has ever hit upon.”