

George Santayana's Essay on Lucretius (1910)

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2020 at 1:21 PM

I'll try to reply thoroughly to all of these comments when I get the time, but I'll sketch an outline of my thoughts here as they come to me.

First, of course, I dismiss his portrayal of Epicurus. We have the benefit of DeWitt, and Santayana did not. That doesn't excuse what Don calls sloppy scholarship, but his position was *de rigueur* for the time. But I'm certainly not here to make excuses for him!

It's his insight into Lucretius that is for me worthwhile. Not Lucretius as an Epicurean, perhaps, but Lucretius as a materialist, and, above all, as a poet of nature.

His exploration of the Venus/Mars diad, as a representation of the ongoing atomic cycle of emergence and dissolution, is illustrative of what I mean. I think that we all appreciate the significance of Venus as an enduring metaphor for the fertility of atomic "re-creation", but how much of our time do we give to its corrolary? Santayana makes an interesting proposition; assuming that Lucretius' poem is truly unfinished, did he plan to cap it off with an elegy for creation and a final balancing hymn to Mars? I can't say—and it may be that in ending the poem with the plague in Athens, Lucretius really did end the poem with Mars triumphant, and Venus, for a time, brought low. I know that I, for one, will be enriched by Santayana's explication on these lines when I again read Lucretius.

I do think that Santayana gets something really wrong in all of this—

Quote

Life, however, belongs to form, and not to matter; or in the language of Lucretius, life is an eventum, a redundant ideal product or incidental aspect, involved in the equilibration of matter; as the throw of sixes is an eventum, a redundant ideal product or incidental aspect, occasionally involved in shaking a dice-box. Yet, as this throw makes the acme and best possible issue of a game of dice, so life is the acme and best possible issue of the dance of atoms; and it is from the point of view of this eventum that the whole process is viewed by us, and is judged.

How Santayana can write these words, and also hold that Lucretius despised life, is beyond me. And this is another aspect of Lucretius; it is too easy to miss the forest for the trees. As with Lucretius' love of pleasure, so it is with his love of life: the poem itself—the colossal and imaginative sweep of his art—is the best evidence there is for his zest and zeal. His whole poem, in form and finish, is better evidence even than the arguments it contains. How could anyone who really despised life dedicate his small hours to the crafting of 7,000 lines of verse,

of unsurpassed beauty and grandeur?

But here again Santayana had the poor fortune to write in that long darkness, before DeWitt arose to shed his light; pleasure, DeWitt says in correction, is the telos. The summum bonum is life itself.

And yet there is more still to admire in Santayana's essay. In general, the further he gets from the subject of Epicurus, the more useful his analysis. His examination of Lucretius as a poet of nature is of a high order. His contrast of Lucretius with Shakespeare, Shelley, and Wordsworth is full of insight.

His contrast of Lucretius with Horace on the subject of friendship is noteworthy as well.

Anyway, when I finally get around to editing and publishing the next episode some of this will get a little clearer.