

Was De Rerum Natura intended as satire? A lecture by THM Gellar-Goad.

Post by “Julia” of October 24, 2024 at 4:03 PM

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sp_TrovyT8c

I cannot say much about the subject myself, because my thoughts on it don't seem to want to coalesce into anything sensible - what about y'all? I'd appreciate your opinions! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2024 at 6:16 PM

Thanks for posting that - we have heard of and discussed Professor Gellat-Goad before, but I am not aware of this video. Will review and comment further later!

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2024 at 6:46 PM

To the extent he is arguing that Lucretius employs satire in his argument I have no problem with what I am hearing. To the extent he is arguing that Lucretius is not a devoted Epicurean and considers Epicurean philosophy cynically and as a laughing matter, I just respectfully think he is flat wrong.

But I am only 20 minutes in 😊

Post by “Cassius” of October 24, 2024 at 6:47 PM

Always keeping in mind here that his article on Epicurean views of the size of the sun is excellent. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of October 24, 2024 at 8:15 PM

Ok I've watched the full video. Here's my commentary:

The main thrust of the video with which I can completely agree seems to be that "satire" is used in Lucretius. Clearly Lucretius does "make fun" of opposing schools in a number of passages in the book.

However the title of the book "Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matters" and several comments in the video indicate that THM is making an argument that the entire poem should be taken less than seriously, and that it's more of a literary "satire" in the mode of Horace or similar, where it's maybe a side point to "make the world a better place" but the main point is more something like that of displaying the writer's literary talents.

Obviously I don't agree with that last point, but I can't tell how deeply the book goes into specifically arguing that Lucretius was in fact not a devoted Epicurean attempting to teach Epicurean philosophy, and that instead he was merely a poet following his muse to create a work of art.

If you're the kind of person who finds that kind of literary argument interesting, then you'll probably find the video interesting. If you're not, then you won't. 😊

I do want to state that I was pleased to see that THM did include reference to his article on the size of the sun, and what he said was I thought "spot on" with his article: To say, as Epicurus' opponents did, that Epicurus thought the actual size of the sun was no greater than a "foot" or a basketball is absurd. Epicurus is quoted as saying that the sun is "the size that it appears to be" and this can easily be argued to be consistent with Epicurus always calling attention to the senses, and that the senses have to be used and processed properly, much as we have to process what a tower looks like up close to understand why it looks different at a distance.

I'll find a link to that article and link it here, with my recommendations that it's well worth reading.

Thread

["Lucretius on the Size of the Sun", by T.H.M. Gellar-Goad](#)

[epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2792/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2792/)

[epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2793/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2793/)

[epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2794/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2794/)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4106-was-de-rerum-natura-intended-as-satire-a-lecture-by-thm-gellar-goad/>

I've just received this collection of essays, published in February, with an excellent paper concerning the size of the sun by one T.H.M. Gellar-Goad.

I may attempt an outline; in the meantime, here's a good bit toward the end;

[...]

aporia; doubt, or a difficulty in resolving the available data into established truth.

The author is thoroughly familiar with Epicurean...



Joshua

June 9, 2022 at 6:04 PM

Thanks Julia for pointing out this video, as I had not seen it.

Post by “Julia” of October 24, 2024 at 8:32 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The main thrust of the video with which I can completely agree seems to be that "satire" is used in Lucretius. Clearly Lucretius does "make fun" of opposing schools in a number of passages in the book.

I agree 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Obviously I don't agree with that last point, but I can't tell how deeply the book goes into specifically arguing that Lucretius was in fact not a devoted Epicurean attempting to teach Epicurean philosophy, and that instead he was merely a poet following his muse to create a work of art.

What gives you your certainty that this was not the case? I suspect that if Gellar-Goad hadn't written that Size Of The Sun article, which I too like and respect him for, I wouldn't care much and dismiss it as an absurd claim – and anyone can be right one time and wrong another time.



Post by “Kalosyni” of October 25, 2024 at 8:19 AM

He seems to be saying that all other poets of that time were writing satire, therefore Lucretius also wrote satire. First of all is that premise correct? (Were all other poets before Lucretius writing satire?) And second of all, his conclusion is a "bandwagon" fallacy. Lucretius could be demonstrating a witty way of speaking of things rather than critical satire.

Post by “Cassius” of October 25, 2024 at 8:24 AM

[Quote from Julia](#)

What gives you your certainty that this was not the case?

I may misunderstand your question (as to what "this" refers to), but my point of view is that while gosh knows a consensus of scholars over hundreds if not thousands of years can be wrong about major things, in this case there are few if any others who have held that Lucretius was anything but sincere in his admiration for Epicurus and his intent to convey Epicurus' philosophy faithfully. I am not aware of any significant writer who has ever taken any other position.

Further, in this case it's not just a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with what Lucretius is saying. Most scholars don't agree with Lucretius, but here the issue is not agreeing or disagreeing with doctrine, but interpreting Lucretius' "tone." Yes Lucretius uses a satirical tone in criticizing the opponents of Epicurus, but he's never disrespectful of Epicurean views.

It's almost always possible to argue many sides of the same question, so I am preferring a charitable interpretation of THM's argument. Yes Lucretius uses satire, but the purpose of the book is not to conform to a literary genre of satire, but to convey Epicurean philosophy using the poetic form.


Maybe THM ends up that way in his book, but if his book goes in the same direction as certain comments in the video, I doubt I will spend the time to read the book. No doubt it contains some good nuggets of information, but if the ultimate point is that "Lucretius was not sincere in his attempt to teach Epicurean philosophy faithfully" then I think THM picked an insurmountable mountain to try to climb.

Post by “Julia” of October 25, 2024 at 5:02 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4106-was-de-rerum-natura-intended-as-satire-a-lecture-by-thm-gellar-goad/>


[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

He seems to be saying that all other poets of that time were writing satire, therefore Lucretius also wrote satire. First of all is that premise correct? (Were all other poets before Lucretius writing satire?) And second of all, his conclusion is a "bandwagon" fallacy. Lucretius could be demonstrating a witty way of speaking of things rather than critical satire.

Sincerely, thank you so much for pointing that out! 

[Quote from Cassius](#)


in this case there are few if any others who have held that Lucretius was anything but sincere in his admiration for Epicurus and his intent to convey Epicurus' philosophy faithfully. I am not aware of any significant writer who has ever taken any other position.

That's true 

[Quote from Cassius](#)

but he's never disrespectful of Epicurean views.

Hmm -- that's true. In so many lines of poetry, even implicit, hidden satire would have shone through at one point or another -- yet, it simply doesn't.

Somehow I found the video lecture quite confusion -- What is he even saying? What really are his arguments? -- so thank you both very much for helping me untie the mental knot I was stuck in 

Post by "Titus" of October 28, 2024 at 5:43 PM

Ironically, his exuberant depictions of Epicurean philosophy as a remedy and Epicurus as the Messiah tell us that Lucretius was definitively not only someone who was well informed about Epicureanism but was also able to deliver powerful images to his audiences. This is one of the reasons why the poem has survived through the ages. I would argue that these powerful images could be interpreted in a sartorial manner, but they must have their source in a personality that is devoted to the subject.

Since I have access to the interlibrary loan system of our university, I am looking forward to diving deeper. (Additionally, I've also ordered a review of the book).

Post by “Joshua” of October 28, 2024 at 6:18 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

I would argue that these powerful images could be interpreted in a sartorial manner, but they must have their source in a personality that is devoted to the subject.

I hope the autocorrect kicked in here on 'satirical', because if not I'm going to have to exercise my chivalry once more against Thomas Carlyle and his [Sartor Resartus](#).

The honorific 'soter' or savior has been totally subsumed into the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but in pre-Christian antiquity it was applied freely to gods, heroes, kings, and liberators. There would be nothing unusual about a devoted Epicurean honoring Epicurus in those terms.

Cicero does mock the Epicureans for this, as in the following passage;

Quote

Hereupon Velleius began, in the confident manner (I need not say) that is customary with Epicureans, afraid of nothing so much as lest he should appear to have doubts about anything. One would have supposed he had just come down from the assembly of the gods in the intermundane spaces of Epicurus!

Post by “Titus” of October 29, 2024 at 4:29 AM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

I hope the autocorrect kicked in here on 'satirical', because if not I'm going to have to exercise my chivalry once more against Thomas Carlyle and his Sartor Resartus.

This is the work of the translation software I used to check my writing. Intuitively, I tried to write "satirical" but it always autocorrected me.

[Quote from Joshua](#)

The honorific 'soter' or savior has been totally subsumed into the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but in pre-Christian antiquity it was applied freely to gods, heroes, kings, and liberators. There would be nothing unusual about a devoted Epicurean honoring Epicurus in those terms.

Hopefully, the next time I am autocorrected to "soterial" 😄

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 29, 2024 at 8:48 AM

So if Lucretius criticized Epicurean opponents, the Stoics (and Platonists?) then that is where it is satire (which [Cassius](#) pointed out in post 8 above).

And does Lucretius ridicule those who believe pleasure exists in excess riches and power?

I found this:

Quote

satire, artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to [censure](#) by means of ridicule, [derision](#), [burlesque](#), [irony](#), [parody](#), [caricature](#), or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform.

Satire is a protean term. Together with its derivatives, it is one of the most heavily worked literary [designations](#) and one of the most imprecise. The great English lexicographer [Samuel Johnson](#) defined satire as “a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured,” and more elaborate definitions are rarely more satisfactory. No strict definition can [encompass](#) the complexity of a word that signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature—as when one speaks of the satires of the Roman poet [Horace](#) or calls the American novelist [Nathanael West](#)’s *A Cool Million* a satire—and, on the other, a mocking spirit or tone that [manifests](#) itself in many literary [genres](#) but can also enter into almost any kind of human [communication](#). Wherever [wit](#) is employed to expose something foolish or vicious to [criticism](#), there satire exists, whether it be in song or sermon, in [painting](#) or political debate, on television or in the movies. In this sense satire is everywhere.

Quote

By their practice, the great Roman poets [Horace](#) and [Juvenal](#) set indelibly the lineaments of the [genre](#) known as the formal verse satire and, in so doing, exerted [pervasive](#), if often indirect, influence on all subsequent literary satire. They gave laws to the form they established, but it must be said that the laws were very loose indeed.

And this source has more on understanding the genre: <https://www.britannica.com/art/satire>

Post by “Titus” of November 11, 2024 at 1:29 PM

The closing passage of the introductory text from "Laughing Atoms, Laughing Matter" on page 16 states as follows:

"As I suggest in my conclusion to this book, it is worthwhile to think of *De Rerum Natura* not as a work of Epicurean philosophy or as a satire of it but, rather, as a work of Epicurean satire. The tools and tropes and texts of satire are deployed in the service of the Lucretian speaker's stated Epicurean goals, while the tenets and totems of Epicureanism are deployed in service of the speaker's satiric commentary on his society."

Post by “Julia” of November 11, 2024 at 4:09 PM

Thank you for sharing that quote! 👍