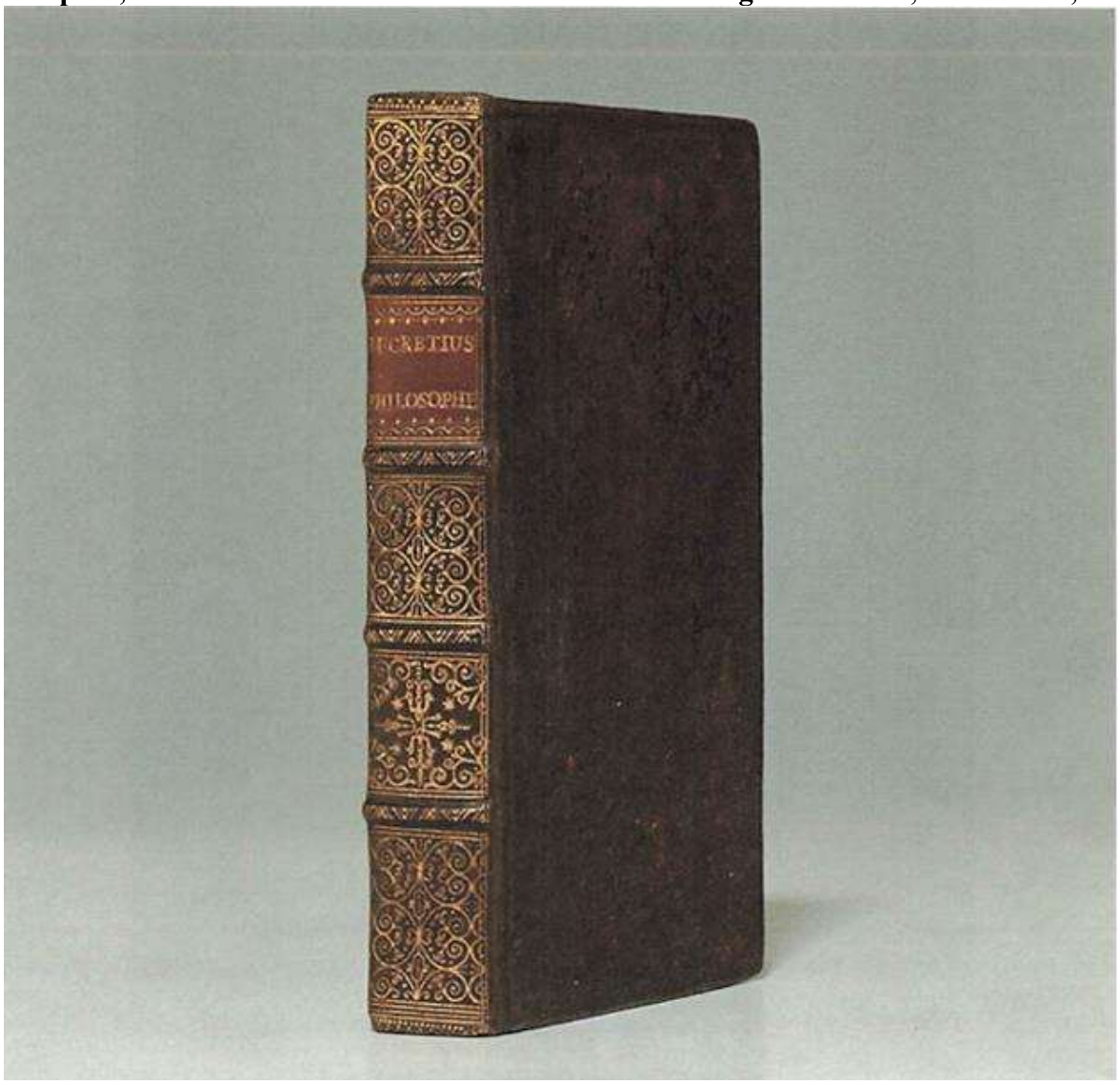
"On the Nature of Things" (1682 first English publication) by Lucretius: A Canonical Book

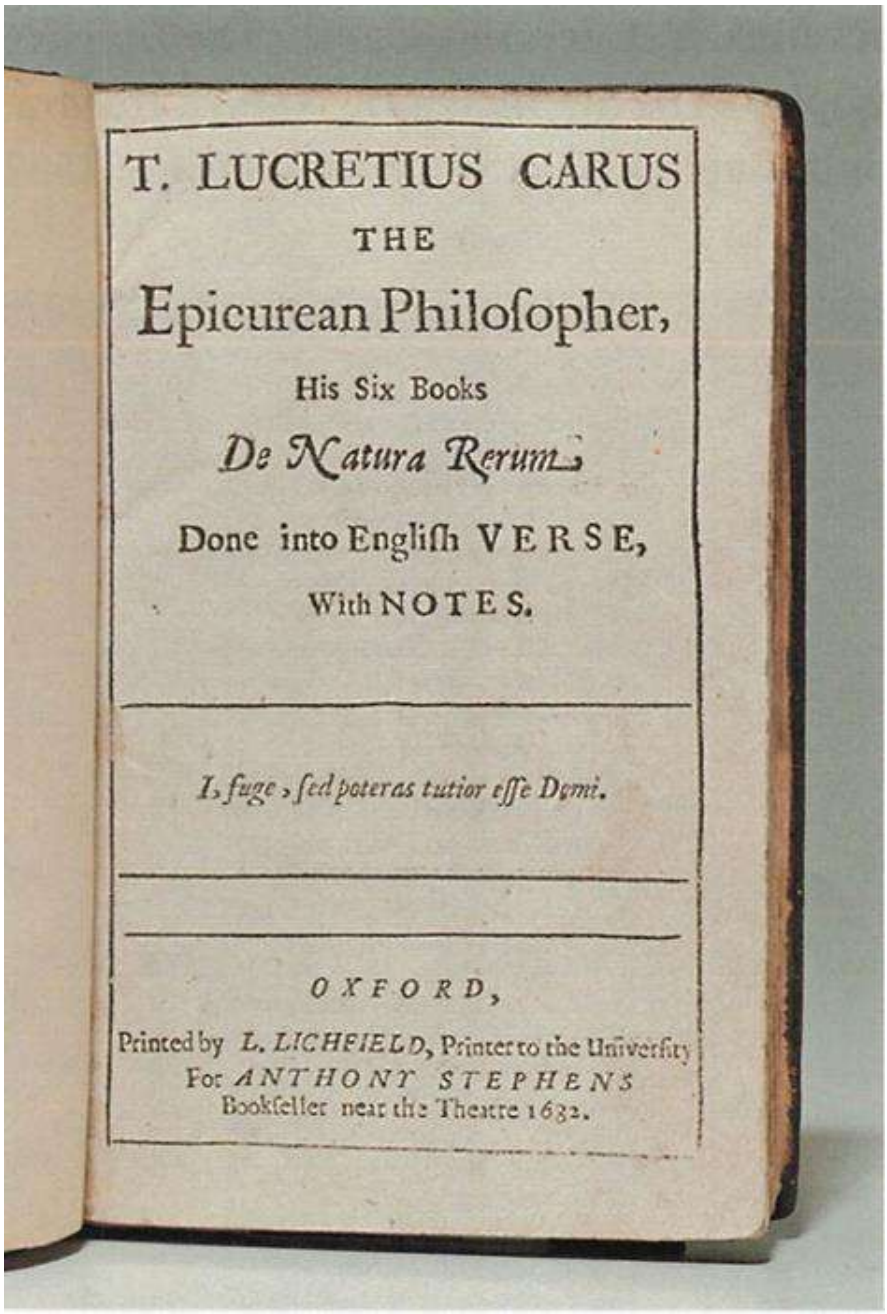
Curated by Stephen A Batman

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Lucretius, T. Lucretius Carus. The Epicurean Philosopher, His Six Books De Natura Rerum Done into English VERSE, With Notes, 1682





T. LUCRETIUS CARUS

THE

Epicurean Philoſopher,

His Six Books

De Natura Rerum

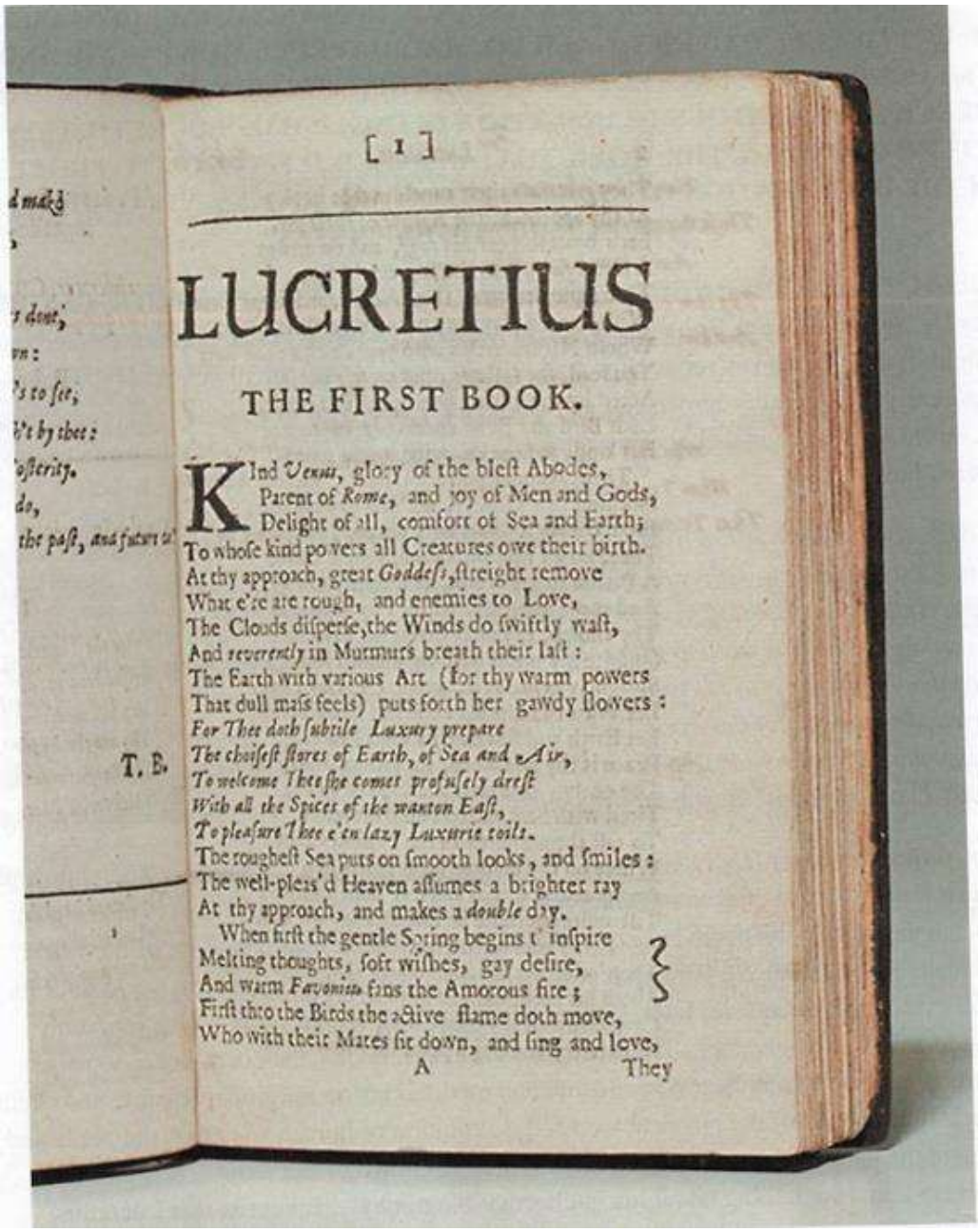
Done into Engliſh VERSE,

With NOTES.

I, fuge, ſed poteras tutior eſſe Domi.

OXFORD,

Printed by L. LICHFIELD, Printer to the Univerſity
For ANTHONY STEPHENS
Bookſeller near the Theatre 1682.



[1]

LUCRETIUS

THE FIRST BOOK.

KInd *Venus*, glory of the bleſt Abodes,
Parent of *Rome*, and joy of Men and Gods,
Delight of all, comfort of Sea and Earth;
To whoſe kind powers all Creatures owe their birth.
At thy approach, great *Goddeſs*, ſtreight remove
What e're are rough, and enemies to Love,
The Clouds diſperſe, the Winds do ſwiftly waſt,
And *reverently* in Murmurs breath their laſt:
The Earth with various Art (for thy warm powers
That dull maſs feels) puts forth her gawdy flowers:
For Thee doth ſubtile Luxury prepare
The choiſeſt flores of Earth, of Sea and Air,
To welcome Thee ſhe comes profuſely dreſt
With all the Spices of the wanton Eaſt,
To pleaſure Thee e'en lazy Luxurie toils.
The rougheſt Sea puts on ſmooth looks, and ſmiles:
The well-pleas'd Heaven aſſumes a brighter ray
At thy approach, and makes a *double* day.
When firſt the gentle Spring begins t' inſpire
Melting thoughts, ſoft wiſhes, gay deſire,
And warm *Favonius* fans the Amorous fire;
Firſt thro the Birds the active flame doth move,
Who with their Mates ſit down, and ſing and love,

A They

"A DEFINING TEXT FOR RENAISSANCE HUMANISM, INFLUENCING BOTTICELLI, DA VINCI, GALILEO, MACHIAVELLI, MONTAIGNE AND SHAKESPEARE": EXCEEDINGLY RARE FIRST EDITION, FIRST ISSUE OF CREECH'S MOMENTOUS TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH OF LUCRETIUS' ON THE NATURE OF THINGS, THE WORK THAT INSPIRED JEFFERSON TO PROCLAIM, IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, AMERICANS' VITAL RIGHT TO "THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS"

First edition, first issue in English, of Roman poet Lucretius' On the Nature of Things, a seminal work in Western history, with rare first issue of Creech's controversial preface, quickly revised in later printings and omitted from future editions, along with first issue of Creech's "Life" of Lucretius also quickly revised to prevent charges of "impiety.

" Creech's translation is heralded for introducing the West to Lucretius' nearly lost masterpiece that offered "key principles of a modern understanding of the world, " as well as a "crucial guide" to Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed himself "an Epicurean" like Lucretius and gave the Declaration of Independence "a distinctly Lucretian turn" by naming "the pursuit of happiness" to be a pivotal American right.

On the Nature of Things (De rerum natura), the only work by the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, "is that rarest of accomplishments: a great work of philosophy that is also a great poem. ..at the core of the poem lay key principles of a modem understanding of the world" (Greenblatt, Swerve, 200, 5). Written before the birth of Christ but lost to the world until its discovery nearly five centuries later, it offers an extraordinary "vision of atoms randomly moving in an infinite universe...

Divided into six untitled books, the poem yokes together moments of intense lyrical beauty; philosophical meditations on religion, pleasure, and death; and scientific theories of the physical world, the evolution of human societies, the perils and joys of sex, and the nature of disease." Virtually nothing is known of Lucretius. "It is possible, however, to know something about his intellectual biography... Epicurus was Lucretius' philosophical messiah, and his vision may be traced to a single incandescent idea: that everything that has ever existed and everything that will ever exist is put together out of what the Roman poet called 'the seeds of things,' indestructible building blocks, irreducibly small in size, unimaginably vast in number" (Greenblatt in New Yorker).

Noted scholar Stephen Greenblatt "posits Lucretius' On the Nature of Things as a defining text for Renaissance Humanism, influencing Botticelli, da Vinci, Galileo, Machiavelli, Montaigne and Shakespeare" (Owen, Lucretius, and the Radical Imagination). At one point in the work's early history, when "the Church was attempting to suppress the text, a young Florentine was copying out for himself the whole of On the Nature of Things... the handwriting was conclusively identified in 1961: the copy was made by Niccolo Machiavelli.

Thomas More engaged with Epicureanism more openly in his most famous work, Utopia... and] Moliere undertook to produce a verse translation of De rerum natura (which does not, unfortunately, survive). In England, the wealthy diarist John Evelyn translated the first book of Lucretius' poem, and Isaac Newton declared himself an atomist" (New Yorker). By the mid-1600s another translation into English by Puritan Lucy Hutchinson was known but it remained unpublished until the 20th century.

It was only in 1682 that this first edition in English was published "by the young Oxford-educated scholar Thomas Creech. His Lucretius was greeted as an astonishing achievement" (Swerve, 257; emphasis added). The work ultimately proved to be of vital importance to Americans when Thomas Jefferson found Lucretius to be "a crucial guide. . . He owned at least five Latin editions of On the Nature of Things, along with translations of the poem into English, Italian and French. It was one of his favorite books." Jefferson gave the Declaration of Independence "a distinctly Lucretian turn. The turn was toward a govemment whose end was not only to secure the lives and liberties of its citizens but also to serve 'the pursuit of happiness.'" When a correspondent asked Jefferson his philosophy of life, America's third president and Founding Father simply answered: "I •am an Epicurean" (Swerve, 262-63).

Included with Jefferson's numerous Latin, Italian and French editions was a 1714 edition of Creech's translation: "entered by Jefferson in his undated manuscript catalogue" (Sowerby 4460). First edition, first issue with Creech's preface that was "dropped in all subsequent editions" due to implication of godlessness (Hopkins, "Thomas Creech's Preface," Studies in Philolou, 702).

This copy is especially rare in featuring the first issue of Creech's preface, as well as the first issue of his Life of Lucretius that makes a "hostile reference to John Calvin" by describing him as "pettish" (br, bottom line) and implying Calvin lacked the authority to criticize Lucretius. In a letter to Creech, written while this was at the printers, his friend Edward Bernard insisted the text be changed due to the Calvin reference that implicated Creech "in an act of impiety" (Hopkins, 706n). In the same letter Bemard offers a correction to the preface: changing "perpolitis" (this copy) to "perpoliti" ((B)r, li2). "Revised copies of the first edition implement verbatim the changes" to both the preface and Life. Bernard's letter makes it clear the changes were to be made "this night" at the printers (Hopkins, 707; emphasis in original).

This first edition was issued without frontispiece, half title. ESTC R8877. Wing L3447. Gordon 331. Early owner inscription dated June 1771 with the surname, "Kilmer," along with 1806 inscription of Frances Kilmer, and 1832 inscription of Marian Kilmer. Below these, on the same initial blank leaf, are the inscriptions of Fanny Emery, dated 1881, and Cecil Emery, dated 1909. The latter signatures appear to belong to family members living in Somerset, England.

(CREECH, Thomas) LUCRETIUS. T. Lucretius Carus. The Epicurean Philosopher, His Six Books De Natura Rerum Done into English VERSE, With NOTES. Oxford: Printed by L. Lichfield, Printer to the University for Anthony Stephens, 1682. Small octavo (4-1/2 by 6-3/4 inches), early 18th-century brown calf sympathetically rebacked in calf-gilt, red Morocco spine

label, raised bands, original endpapers retained; pp. (xvi), 222, (ii), 46, (2). Housed in a custom clamshell box.

Text professionally cleaned expert restoration to early boards. An extremely good and desirable copy of a rarely found work.

Introduction

"On the Nature of Things" (De rerum natura) is a first-century BC didactic poem written by the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (c. 99 BC – c. 55 BC). Though composed nearly two millennia ago, its first complete English translation wasn't published until 1682. This monumental work, comprising approximately 7,400 dactylic hexameters divided into six untitled books, was written with the explicit goal of explaining Epicurean philosophy to a Roman audience1. Lucretius sought to liberate his contemporaries from the shackles of religious superstition and fear by presenting a comprehensive materialist worldview based on atomism.

The cultural climate surrounding the poem's original composition was one of tremendous political upheaval. Lucretius lived during a period of nearly non-stop violence in the Roman Republic—a time marked by civil wars, political assassinations, massacres, revolts, and social and economic chaos7. From the rise of Sulla to the fall of Catiline, Rome experienced seemingly endless bloodshed and civil unrest. Against this backdrop of turmoil, the Epicurean philosophy—with its emphasis on tranquility of mind, intellectual pleasure, and withdrawal from political life—offered Lucretius a philosophical refuge7.

The 1682 English publication emerged during a period of significant intellectual transformation in Europe. The Renaissance had revitalized interest in classical texts, and the Scientific Revolution was well underway. The publication came at a time when traditional religious authorities were being challenged by new scientific discoveries and philosophical inquiries. The poem's materialist worldview, which had been suppressed as heretical for centuries, found new resonance in an era increasingly receptive to naturalistic explanations of the universe4.

The Author

Remarkably little is known about Lucretius himself. Beyond the fact that he was a Roman poet who lived during the first century BC, was devoted to the teachings of Epicurus, and died before completing his magnum opus, almost everything else about his life remains a matter of conjecture7. This biographical void has led to various speculations and legends, including a lurid account by St. Jerome claiming that Lucretius was driven mad by a love potion and committed suicide at age 44—a claim for which there is no credible evidence7.

What emerges vividly from his poem, however, is a sense of his character and personality. Lucretius appears to have been a sensitive intellectual profoundly affected by the violence and political turmoil of his era. The stress and tumult of his times stands in the background of his work and partly explains his personal attraction to Epicureanism, with its elevation of intellectual

pleasure and tranquility of mind and its dim view of the world of social strife and political violence7.

Lucretius was the first writer known to introduce Roman readers to Epicurean philosophy6. His commitment to this philosophical system was absolute, and he dedicated his considerable poetic talents to making these ideas accessible and compelling to his audience. Through rich metaphors and vivid imagery, he sought to convey complex philosophical concepts in a way that would resonate with Roman sensibilities.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"On the Nature of Things" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, the poem's influence on the Founding Fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson, cannot be overstated. Jefferson owned at least eight editions of "On the Nature of Things," and the Epicurean concept of "the pursuit of happiness" found its way into the Declaration of Independence8. This fundamental American principle—that government should enable citizens (not subjects) to pursue happiness—represents a radical departure from earlier political philosophies and can be traced directly to Lucretius's Epicurean ideas8.

The poem's materialist worldview, with its emphasis on natural causes rather than divine intervention, helped lay the groundwork for the scientific revolution that shaped modern America. Lucretius's atomic theory anticipated many aspects of modern science, including evolution, and influenced thinkers like Isaac Newton, whose ideas would later become foundational to American scientific and technological development5. The poem's insistence on explaining the world through natural causes rather than supernatural ones resonates with America's pragmatic approach to problem-solving and its separation of church and state.

Furthermore, Lucretius's critique of superstition and religious fear aligns with America's constitutional commitment to religious freedom and secular governance. His advocacy for rational inquiry and evidence-based understanding of the world mirrors the Enlightenment values that informed America's founding documents and institutions5. The poem's emphasis on individual tranquility and freedom from fear parallels American ideals of individual liberty and the pursuit of personal fulfillment.

"On the Nature of Things" also presents a vision of human progress through the development of technology and social organization that resonates with America's narrative of advancement and innovation. Lucretius traces human development from primitive beginnings through the discovery of fire, metallurgy, agriculture, and complex social structures—a narrative of progress through human ingenuity that aligns with America's self-conception as a forward-looking, innovative society6.

Finally, the poem's rediscovery during the Renaissance, as chronicled in Stephen Greenblatt's "The Swerve," represents a pivotal moment in the transition to modernity—a transition that would eventually lead to the Enlightenment values upon which America was founded8. The

poem's journey from obscurity to influence mirrors America's own journey from colonial outpost to global power, guided by transformative ideas.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Nothing from nothing ever yet was born."[3]

This fundamental principle of Lucretius's materialist philosophy emphasizes that everything must have a source or foundation. In our current times, this quote resonates with our understanding of causality and the scientific method. It reminds us that effects have causes, that complex systems emerge from simpler components, and that understanding these relationships is key to solving problems. In an era of "fake news" and information overload, this quote encourages critical thinking about the origins of claims and ideas. It also speaks to innovation and creativity—reminding us that new ideas build upon existing knowledge rather than emerging from a vacuum. For civic society, it underscores the importance of education and historical awareness, recognizing that our present circumstances are the product of past actions and decisions.

2. "Thus Nature ever by unseen bodies works."[3]

This insight about invisible forces that powerfully affect the visible world has profound relevance today. In our modern context, it speaks to the unseen digital infrastructure that shapes our daily lives, the invisible market forces that drive our economy, and the microscopic biological processes that determine our health. It reminds us to look beyond surface appearances to understand complex systems. For policymakers, it suggests the importance of considering hidden factors and unintended consequences. For citizens, it encourages awareness of the often-invisible structures of power and influence in society. In an age of increasing complexity, this quote reminds us that understanding often requires looking beyond what is immediately apparent.

3. "All nature, then, as self-sustained, consists of twain of things: of bodies and of void in which they're set, and where they're moved around."[3]

This elegant formulation of Lucretius's atomic theory has surprising relevance to contemporary thought. Beyond its scientific significance, it speaks to the philosophical tension between substance and emptiness, between material concerns and abstract principles. In our digital age, it resonates with the interplay between physical infrastructure and the virtual spaces where much of modern life unfolds. For society, it suggests the importance of balancing tangible resources with intangible values—recognizing that both are essential components of a functioning whole. It also reminds us that movement and change are intrinsic to existence, encouraging adaptability in the face of evolving circumstances.

4. "For change in anything from out its bounds means instant death of that which was before."[3]

This profound observation about transformation and identity speaks directly to our era of rapid technological and social change. It acknowledges the discomfort and sense of loss that often accompany progress, as familiar structures and practices give way to new ones. For individuals, it offers perspective on personal growth and reinvention, suggesting that becoming something new necessarily involves letting go of what came before. For institutions and communities, it provides insight into resistance to change and the importance of managing transitions thoughtfully. In a time of accelerating change, this quote reminds us that adaptation often requires a form of creative destruction—a lesson with implications for everything from career development to climate policy.

5. "Thus the sum forever is replenished, and we live as mortals by eternal give and take."[3]

This recognition of the cyclical nature of existence and the interconnectedness of all things has powerful contemporary relevance. It speaks to environmental concerns about sustainability and recycling, reminding us that in nature, nothing is truly wasted but rather transformed. It offers perspective on mortality and legacy, suggesting that our contributions continue to influence the world even after we're gone. For society, it underscores the importance of reciprocity and balance in human relationships and institutions. In an increasingly interdependent global community, this quote highlights the fundamental give-and-take that sustains all systems, from ecosystems to economies to democracies.

Five Major Ideas

1. **Atomic Materialism**:

At the core of Lucretius's philosophy is the revolutionary idea that the universe consists entirely of atoms and void—indivisible particles of matter moving through empty space[1]. This materialist worldview rejects supernatural explanations and divine intervention, insisting instead that natural phenomena can be explained through the interactions of these fundamental particles. Lucretius argues that atoms are infinite in number, eternal, and constantly in motion, combining and recombining to form all visible objects[3]. This atomic theory anticipated modern scientific understanding by nearly two millennia and provided a framework for explaining complex phenomena through simple principles. By grounding reality in material causes rather than divine will, Lucretius laid the groundwork for scientific inquiry and rational investigation of the natural world.

2. **The Nature of Mind and Soul**:

Lucretius presents a radical conception of the mind and soul as material entities composed of extremely fine atoms[1]. He argues that the mind (animus) and spirit (anima) are bodily entities that are interwoven with the physical body and cease to exist when the body dies[1]. This materialist psychology rejects the notion of an immortal soul and afterlife, directly challenging religious doctrines of his time and ours. By explaining consciousness, sensation, and thought in purely physical terms, Lucretius offers an early version of what we might now call a naturalistic theory of mind. This perspective has profound implications for understanding human nature, mortality, and the value of the present life.

3. **Freedom from Fear**:

A central aim of Lucretius's poem is to liberate humanity from the twin fears of divine punishment and death[7]. By demonstrating that the gods (if they exist at all) are removed from human affairs and that death is simply the end of sensation, Lucretius seeks to free his readers from debilitating anxieties. He famously argues that "death is nothing to us" since we cannot experience it—when death is present, we are not, and when we are present, death is not[4]. This therapeutic philosophy aims to promote tranquility (ataraxia) by removing unnecessary fears. In our anxiety-ridden modern world, this emphasis on psychological freedom through rational understanding remains powerfully relevant.

4. **Natural Development and Evolution**:

Lucretius presents a remarkably advanced understanding of natural and cultural evolution[6]. He traces the development of human society from primitive beginnings through the discovery of fire, metallurgy, agriculture, language, and complex social structures. He describes how humans first used hands, nails, and teeth as weapons, then stones and branches, followed by the discovery of copper and eventually iron[6]. This account anticipates modern anthropological and archaeological understandings of human technological development. Even more remarkably, Lucretius presents a theory of natural selection, arguing that many species have died out because they lacked necessary survival traits—an idea that prefigures Darwinian evolution by nearly two millennia[5].

5. **The Swerve and Free Will**:

To account for free will in an otherwise deterministic universe of atoms moving according to natural laws, Lucretius introduces the concept of the "clinamen" or "swerve"—the idea that atoms occasionally deviate unpredictably from their straight paths[3]. This slight indeterminacy in the motion of atoms creates the possibility for freedom and agency in a material world. Without this swerve, Lucretius argues, everything would be predetermined by the mechanical collision of atoms. This sophisticated attempt to reconcile determinism with free will anticipates modern philosophical debates about compatibilism and the implications of physical determinism for human choice and responsibility.

Three Major Controversies

1. **Challenge to Religious Authority**:

Perhaps the most significant controversy surrounding "On the Nature of Things" has been its direct challenge to religious orthodoxy. Lucretius's materialist worldview, which explains the universe without reference to divine creation or intervention, has been perceived as a threat to religious authority throughout history[4]. His explicit rejection of the immortal soul, divine judgment, and the afterlife directly contradicts core tenets of Christianity and other major religions. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the poem was frequently condemned as heretical, and attempts were made to suppress it[4]. Even when the poem was rediscovered during the Renaissance, scholars often tried to separate its poetic merits from its "horrible" ideas,

suggesting readers appreciate the former while rejecting the latter8. This tension between materialist explanation and religious interpretation continues to generate controversy in American society, particularly around issues like evolution, science education, and the proper relationship between religion and public policy.

2. **Moral Implications of Materialism**:

Lucretius's materialist philosophy has often been criticized for its perceived moral implications. Critics have argued that by reducing everything to atoms in motion and denying divine judgment, Lucretius removes the foundation for objective morality and undermines social order. The Epicurean emphasis on pleasure (albeit defined as the absence of pain and disturbance) has been misinterpreted as advocating hedonism or self-indulgence. In reality, Lucretius promotes moderation and the cultivation of friendship and community as sources of true happiness4. Nevertheless, the controversy over whether a materialist worldview can provide adequate grounds for ethics and social responsibility continues to resonate in contemporary debates about secularism, moral education, and the role of religion in public life. This controversy reflects deeper tensions in American culture between religious and secular approaches to ethics and social organization.

3. **Political Implications and Withdrawal**:

Lucretius's Epicurean philosophy advocates withdrawal from political life and the pursuit of tranquility through contemplation rather than public engagement7. This stance has generated controversy both in ancient Rome and in modern America, where civic participation is often viewed as a virtue and responsibility. Critics have argued that Epicurean withdrawal represents a form of selfishness or abdication of social duty. Defenders counter that Epicurean communities modeled alternative forms of social organization based on friendship and equality rather than hierarchy and competition. This controversy touches on fundamental questions about the proper relationship between the individual and society, the value of public versus private life, and the nature of citizenship. In the American context, where political engagement is celebrated but often accompanied by partisan rancor, Lucretius's vision of tranquility through withdrawal continues to provoke debate about the proper balance between civic duty and personal well-being.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "On the Nature of Things" because this ancient poem speaks with remarkable clarity to our modern condition. It offers a perspective that stands outside our contemporary debates while addressing perennial human concerns about knowledge, fear, mortality, and happiness. By engaging with Lucretius's ideas, Americans can gain valuable historical perspective on the intellectual foundations of our democratic republic and scientific worldview.

The poem's materialist philosophy challenges readers to examine their own beliefs and assumptions about the natural world, encouraging the kind of critical thinking essential to informed citizenship. Its emphasis on overcoming fear through understanding resonates in our

anxiety-driven media environment, offering a model of rational engagement with life's uncertainties. Lucretius's nuanced discussion of pleasure and pain provides a sophisticated framework for thinking about well-being beyond simplistic consumerism or asceticism.

For Americans concerned with political polarization, Lucretius offers insights into the psychological roots of conflict and the possibility of tranquility through philosophical understanding. His vision of human progress through rational inquiry and technological innovation affirms core American values while placing them in a broader historical context. The poem's exploration of free will within a deterministic framework speaks to ongoing debates about responsibility, choice, and human agency.

Perhaps most importantly, "On the Nature of Things" demonstrates the enduring power of ideas to transcend time and transform society. The remarkable journey of this poem—from ancient Rome to medieval monastery to Renaissance rediscovery to Enlightenment influence to American founding principles—testifies to the resilience of human thought and the unexpected ways in which ideas shape history. By reading Lucretius, civic-minded Americans participate in this ongoing conversation across millennia, connecting with a tradition of rational inquiry and philosophical reflection that continues to inform our understanding of ourselves and our world.

In an era of information overload and shortened attention spans, Lucretius's ambitious synthesis of science, philosophy, and poetry reminds us of the value of comprehensive understanding and the power of eloquent expression. His work challenges us to look beyond immediate concerns to consider fundamental questions about nature, knowledge, and the good life—questions that remain as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. For all these reasons, "On the Nature of Things" deserves a place not just in the historical canon but in the active intellectual engagement of civic-minded Americans today.

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