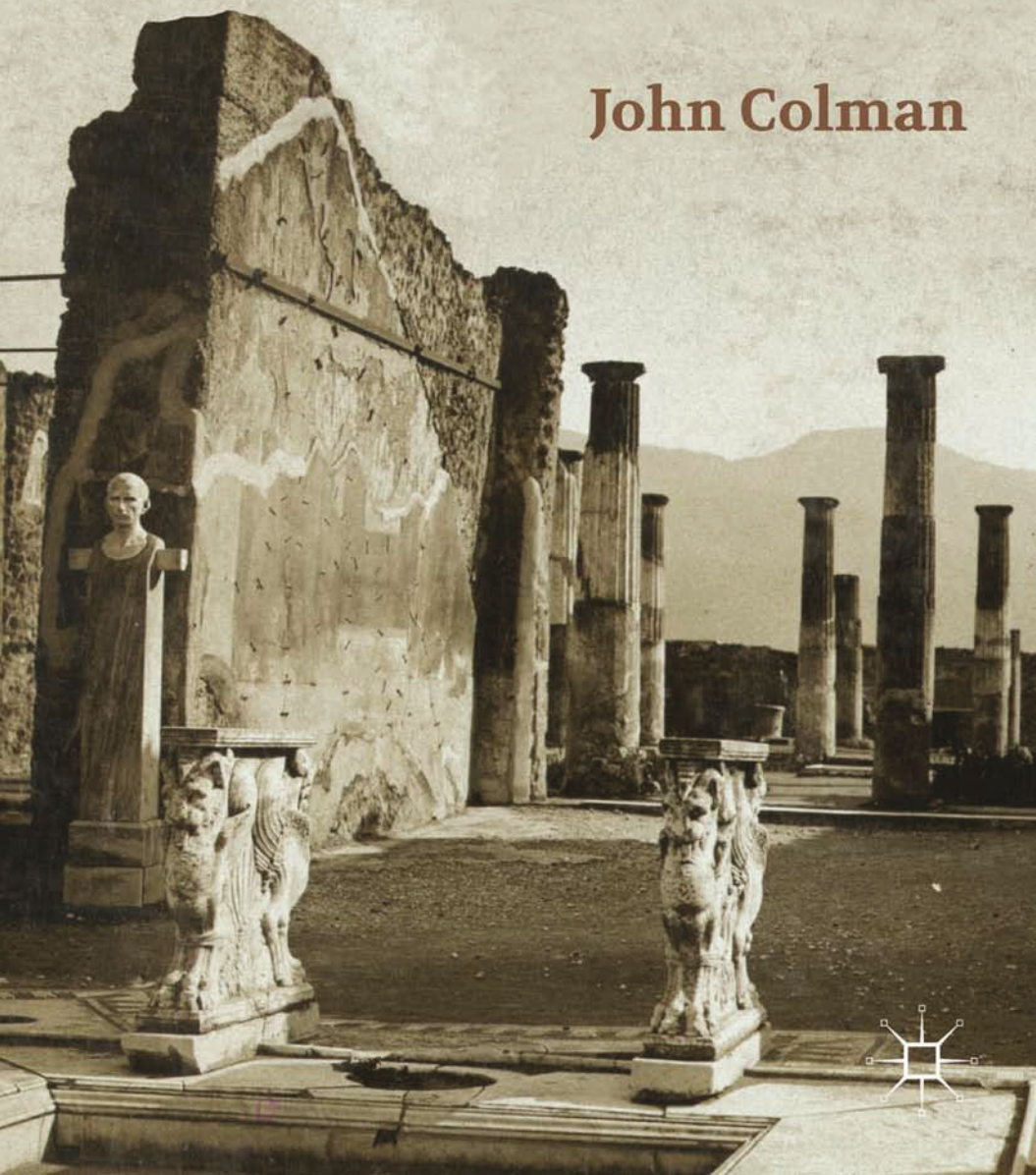




RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Lucretius as Theorist of Political Life

John Colman



LUCRETIUS AS THEORIST OF
POLITICAL LIFE

RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

SERIES EDITORS: THOMAS L. PANGLE AND TIMOTHY BURNS

Postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives has provoked a searching reexamination of the works of past political philosophers. The reexamination seeks to recover the ancient or classical grounding for civic reason and to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The series responds to this ferment by making available outstanding new scholarship in the history of political philosophy, scholarship that is inspired by the rediscovery of the diverse rhetorical strategies employed by political philosophers. The series features interpretive studies attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which censorship and didactic concern impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. *Recovering Political Philosophy* emphasizes the close reading of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life. The editors encourage manuscripts from both established and emerging scholars who focus on the careful study of texts, either through analysis of a single work or through thematic study of a problem or question in a number of works.

PUBLISHED BY PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

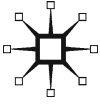
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palgrave
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2012 978-1-137-29231-5

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First published in 2012 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-45086-2

ISBN 978-1-137-29232-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137292322

Chapter 5 originally appeared as "Lucretius on Religion," *Perspectives on Political Science*, Fall 2009, Vol. 38, No. 4, 228–239 and is reprinted here by permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2012

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For Beth

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NOTE FROM THE SERIES EDITORS

Palgrave's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series was founded with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives. This invigorating challenge has provoked a searching reexamination of classic texts, not only of political philosophers, but also of poets, artists, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series publishes studies that endeavor to take up this reexamination and thereby help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as studies that clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The interpretative studies in the series are particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which both censorial persecution and didactic concerns have impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life.

Recent works on *De Rerum Natura* have focused on the significant effect that the recovery of Lucretius's poem had upon modern Enlightenment thinkers. John Colman examines instead the poem in the light of the poet's own intention, in the poet's original context. Colman highlights Lucretius's claim to be the first to write a genuinely philosophic poem and to find thereby a place for philosophy in Rome. Colman thus illuminates the enormous cultural problem that Lucretius confronted and attempted to solve or to mitigate by his poetic presentation of science: Rome and its culture was hostile to philosophy and philosophic science. But why? At the center of Lucretius's presentation of his materialist physics,—Colman shows—is a teaching on the deep psychological reasons

for this hostility, combined with an attempt to diminish the hostility and its sources. Lucretius focuses on the question of what the discovery of nature and natural necessity means for the status and significance of human freedom and of political life in its passionate attachment to freedom. The Lucretian philosophic study of humanity's fear of death, and erotic response to that fear, reveals the character of the gulf that separates the philosophic life from the life moved by political ambition and civic attachments. Lucretius's conception of the philosophic life, in its relation to civic culture, distinguishes his understanding profoundly—Colman concludes—from the much more politically and technologically ambitious or hopeful project of Lucretius's modern appropriators.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Whatever is good in this book is credited to brilliant teachers. To Christopher Kelly, Christopher Bruell, Robert Faulkner, and Waller Newell, I hope the words found here are a small recompense for all your generosity and the learning you tried—hopefully with some success—to impart to me. A great debt of gratitude is owed to the editors of this series, Thomas Pangle and Timothy Burns, for allowing me to be a part of their project. My thinking on Lucretius, and much besides, has benefitted from many a late night symposia with my colleague Marc D. Guerra. To my parents, no words can capture what is owed. Finally, for Beth, without you “the village” would be too small.

INTRODUCTION

DESIGNING AND TURBULENT EPICUREANS

In his *Thoughts on French Affairs*, Edmund Burke draws attention to the “old Epicureans” to highlight the radicalism of French revolutionary thinking. The atheism of the French revolutionaries, Burke remarks, represents a departure from the atheism of old. Unlike the “old Epicureans” who, Burke says, were “an unenterprising race,” Enlightenment atheists—whom Burke implicitly identifies as adopting a new Epicureanism—have “grown active, designing, turbulent, and seditious.”¹ The quest of the French revolutionaries, those “pettifoggers run mad in Paris,” for “abstract and unlimited perfection of power” does not comprehend that a sound constitution is an “elaborate contrivance of a fabric fitted to unite private and public liberty with public force, with order, with peace, with justice, and above all, with institutions formed for bestowing permanence and stability through ages.”² The fanaticism of revolutionary fervor to “go beyond the barrier” of sound constitutional equilibrium of liberty and order is the necessary outgrowth of theoretical abstraction unhinged from the practicalities of political life. Ultimately for Burke, an “untempered spirit of madness, blindness, immorality, and impiety” defines the revolutionary project.³ The radicalism of the new atheists is a consequence of the two predominant principles of the revolutionary ethos: the fundamental equality of all men and the sovereignty of the people. The revolution’s vigor and rapid spread across the continent are due to the fact that this ethos is “flattering to the natural propensities of the unthinking multitude, and to the speculations of all those who think, without thinking very profoundly.” The fury of the new atheists makes them “sworn enemies to Kings, Nobility and Priesthood.” Burke does not explain why the old Epicureans were less enterprising, but his suggestion appears to be that they were not egalitarians, “adventurers in philosophy,” or “furious,” “extravagant Republicans.” The old

Epicureans' lack of boldness and ambition may then be attributed to the fact that, unlike their modern cousins, they had no political or "ideological" project they wished to advance.

Burke's assessment of the lack of ambition and boldness of ancient Epicureanism stands in contrast with recent scholarship that has traced Lucretius's influence upon the French philosophes, more daring elements within renaissance humanism, the English and Scottish enlightenment, German materialists, and much else within the more radical wing of early modern philosophy.⁴ Given Burke's characterization of the ancient Epicureans, one may wonder if the use made of Lucretius by his early modern followers was in keeping with his understanding of his own teaching. One wonders if, far from drawing simply and honestly from Lucretius's account of the nature of things the more enterprising moderns used his poem as a way to give their radical project a patina of classical respectability. Burke's reflections ought then to give one pause and consider whether the appropriators of Lucretius remained true to his original teaching or if they have falsely attached to Lucretius a revolutionary intention alien from his own.

Much of the scholarship chronicling Lucretius's influence on modern political and scientific philosophy has concentrated on how particular aspects of Lucretius's materialism, his account of the mortality of the soul, or how his critique of religion was an inspiration for the modern project. None, however, has sufficiently asked whether Lucretius's poem taken as a whole could be seen as endorsing what his modern appropriators were advocating. Although the radical and revolutionary project of many of his appropriators has been wonderfully demonstrated, this has not led to a reconsideration of Lucretius's own intention. There has been little consideration of what Lucretius himself would have made of the radical project of early modern political philosophy. Burke's reflections on ancient Epicureanism, by contrast, provocatively suggest that Lucretius differs from his modern cousins in important ways.

Despite the influence that Lucretius and Epicureanism more generally may have had on the radical enlightenment, the similarities between them in fact pales in comparison to the great divide that separates classical philosophy—of which Lucretius and Epicureanism were a part—from its more enterprising modern relatives. Burke's reflections suggest that the radical enlightenment thinking is a corruption of classical Epicureanism, or is an Epicureanism transformed. Its leaders appear to have eschewed the life praised by Lucretius, one removed from the machinations of political life that attempts to live quietly behind the "well-walled temples of the wise." One striking difference between ancient and modern Epicureans is that the ancient Epicurean merely desires to cultivate his garden, to

find a quiet place for philosophy to exist within—if not somewhat apart from—the city, while the early modern Epicureans seek not to cultivate a garden but, as Descartes would have it, to become masters and owners of nature.⁵ Such a project demanded that the Epicurean become ambitious or, as Burke remarks, “designing and seditious.”

On such a reckoning the use of Lucretius was undertaken for an explicitly different end and moved by an intention not identical with Lucretius’s own. To see Lucretius independently of his modern appropriators, it is necessary to disentangle him from the project of those whom Burke calls the “new epicureans.” The only way to do so properly is to begin with a clear understanding of Lucretius’s original intent and teaching. Burke’s reflection advises that one should be careful not to confuse ancient and modern Epicureanism or confound Lucretius with those who used his thought to advance a radical and revolutionary project. There may be a need then to rescue Lucretius from the political, scientific, and—in some cases—even theological aspirations of his appropriators. Without attention to Lucretius independent of modern thought, we may close ourselves off from learning from Lucretius a powerful alternative to the modern account of the human condition, man’s place in the nature of things, and how man ought to live. The current book therefore does not have as its aim to explicate the ways in which Lucretius’s poem influenced early modern political and scientific philosophy. I will briefly here in the introduction try to outline the ambitions of the modern project and how it enlisted Lucretius as an ally in its radical project, and will return to the moderns in the concluding chapter to argue how the conscription of Lucretius was in fact a corruption of Lucretius. The overarching purpose of the present book is, however, to unearth Lucretius’s teaching by way of a close reading of his poem with a view to uncovering his intention.

Lucretius’s most obvious intention for writing his poem is his expressed desire to win the friendship of a political ambitious man named Memmius. Lucretius appears to hope that that friendship will begin to draw Memmius away from political life toward the philosophic life. The obstacle to winning Memmius’s friendship is that the affairs of Rome demand Memmius’s undivided attention and his civic duties leave him little or no opportunity to begin the study of the nature of things. Of greater concern to Lucretius himself is that, even should Memmius find the time to begin his studies, he may be led by the threats of the poets and the priests to think that in following Lucretius, he has embarked on a life of “impiety” and “crime” (I, 80–82).⁶ The city, according to these accusations, regards the investigation into the nature of things as unlawfully heterodox and indeed seditious. For these reasons, Lucretius’s intention must go beyond simply winning Memmius’s friendship. Later Lucretius

claims that part of his motivation was to be the first to write a genuinely philosophic poem and to be first to have transcribed the truth about the nature of things into Latin. Lucretius's ultimate claim is nothing less than being the first to bring philosophy to Rome (V, 335–336). It is because of this ambition that Lucretius's poem begins with his account of the political and theological situation in which philosophy finds itself. The hermeneutic of what follows is that the poem as a whole ought to be read with this intention in mind and understood in light of the challenges that politics and religion pose to that intention.

If we briefly turn to Lucretius's modern appropriators, we see that part of the attraction to Lucretius may have been that they saw in him an ally in their own contest against political and religious authority. Lucretius's political and theological situation is in important respects similar, but of course not identical, to that in which his modern admirers found themselves. Burke's "adventurers in philosophy," among whom one might number Pierre Bayle, Paul Henri-Thiry Baron d'Holbach, and Helvétius, were all in some fashion inspired by Lucretius. Helvétius's radically materialist *De L'Esprit* begins with an epigraph from Lucretius. Drawn from the poem of Book I, it reads: "We must see correctly from where comes the nature of the mind and by what reason and power all is done on earth."⁷ Helvétius's epigraph points to how his work will provide an account of the material composition of the soul that aims to advance the cause of free inquiry against the tyranny of ecclesiastical supervision. In the preface to *De L'Esprit*, Helvétius begins with humble reassurances that his intentions are pure and advanced out of love of mankind. Despite Helvétius's materialism, he claims that none of the ideas contained in his work are out of conformity with prevailing religious truths. Helvétius's humanitarian project cannot, however, be easily launched, since many cannot write "without trembling" because of "the discouragement given to men of genius from the imputations frequently filled with calumny." Some "base and cowardly" men appear to wish to keep others from the study of nature and consider it "odious and licentious." Such curbs on scientific inquiry "presage the return of the age of ignorance."⁸ Although some of his ideas may be bumptious and brash, he asks his readers to withhold their condemnation since sometimes it is only by the "boldest attempts that the greatest truths can be discovered." In a time when certain men "forbid knowledge of certain truths," one must fear the prospective age when "it will no longer be permitted to mention any."⁹ It is against such men and such a prospect that Helvétius offers his work.

One can find similar motivations in the radical enlightenment materialism of d'Holbach. D'Holbach characterizes his work as a means to initiate an entirely new way of governance and life. For this offense,

d'Holbach saw his *Système de la Nature* condemned in August of 1770 by the Parlement of Paris whose members accused it of expanding the system of Lucretius. The obstacle to d'Holbach's project is, as in Helvétius, the everpresent entanglement of religion and politics: "To error must be attributed those inveterate hatreds, those barbarous persecutions, those numerous massacres, those dreadful tragedies, of which, under pretext of serving the interests of heaven, the earth has been but too frequently made the theatre. It is error consecrated by religious enthusiasm, which produces that ignorance, that uncertainty in which man ever finds himself with regard to his most evident duties, his clearest rights, the most demonstrable truths. In short, man is almost everywhere a poor degraded captive, devoid of greatness of soul, of reason, or of virtue, whom his inhuman gaolers have never permitted to see the light of day."¹⁰ The reeducation of man advanced through the renewed study of the nature of things would not only free men of their prejudices but also free philosophy from its capture by theology.¹¹ In *Le Bon Sens*, d'Holbach remarks that "theology, from the remotest antiquity to the present time, has had the exclusive privilege of directing philosophy," with the result that "many evasions have been used both in ancient and modern times in order to avoid engagement with the ministers of the gods." Such "ministers" have ever tyrannized over thought, and men of letters have been forced to write ambiguously to avoid persecution. Many, therefore, had a "double-doctrine, one public the other secret." Unfortunately the "key" to separating the two has been frequently lost and with it the philosopher's "true sentiments." D'Holbach therefore calls for greater boldness and an emulation of those ancients such as "Democritus, Epicurus and other Greeks" who "presumed to tear away the veil of prejudice and to deliver philosophy from theological shackles." Still, the doctrines of many moderns who have followed Epicurus, men such as "Hobbes, Spinoza, and Pierre Bayle," have found "few followers in a world still intoxicated with fables."¹² The suspicion that still surrounds the investigation into the nature of things leads d'Holbach at one point to defend his own project by enlisting the example of Lucretius to combat the prevailing idea that atheism is incompatible with virtue. The argument advanced is that whether men are given to virtue or vice is more, and perhaps exclusively, a result of their temperaments rather than of adherence to a philosophic system. It is not "the general opinions of the mind, which determine us to act, but the passions. Atheism is a system which will not make a good man wicked, neither will it make a wicked man good." The same can be said about the religious believer, as no religious system will lead evil men to good deeds. Presuming to echo the sentiments of Lucretius, d'Holbach asserts that in fact religion is often used to provide a cover of zealous

devotion for unscrupulous and heinous deeds. Such a cover is not available to the avowed atheist.¹³ D'Holbach goes further to suggest that in fact atheism gives man over to "reason, philosophy, natural piety . . . and everything that can serve to conduct him to virtue." Philosophers are therefore not "dangerous citizens" as is clear from the fact that "Epicurus never disturbed Greece; the poem of Lucretius caused no civil war in Rome; Bodin was not the author of the league; the writings of Spinoza have not excited the same troubles in Holland . . . Hobbes did not cause blood to flow in England."¹⁴ Those who would argue that religious belief may be erroneous but provides a salutary restraint on the ignorant are propagating the fiction that the truth is dangerous and fail to see that it is men's prejudices that are the most genuine threat to peace. D'Holbach suggests that this truth was first advanced by Lucretius.¹⁵

Baron d'Holbach took inspiration from Pierre Bayle, whose *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was a model for the French encyclopedists. Bayle was renowned for his courage in seeking the liberation of philosophy from its ecclesiastical masters by advocating that religious toleration be extended to heretics and even atheists. In his *Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14:23 "Compel Them to Come In, That My House May Be Full,"* Bayle seeks to defend the philosophic life by arguing that "natural reason" is our only guide in deciding religious controversies. Rather than have reason constrained to bend its discoveries to church dogma, the profession of miracles, or metaphysics, Bayle argues that all religious sects must, to prove the superiority of their beliefs, "come to pay their homage at last at the footstool of the throne of reason, and acknowledge . . . that reason, speaking to us by the axioms of natural light . . . is the supreme tribunal and final judge without appeal of whatever is proposed to the human mind." The ultimate conclusion to this is that no one should ever suggest that "theology is queen and philosophy the handmaid."¹⁶ The words and deeds of "divines themselves," in their "tortures of wit and invention," must try to "demonstrate" the truth of their dogmas and thereby "plainly recognize the supremacy of philosophy and the indispensable obligation they are under in making court to it."¹⁷

Once philosophy is made queen and all dogmas—especially those that relate to morality—are made to stand trial at the bar of reason, one will find that there are no longer grounds to fear that atheism is related to wickedness. In his entry on Lucretius in the *Dictionary*, Bayle suggests that the "good morals" of a man such as Lucretius are proof positive that "atheism is not necessarily joined with bad morals."¹⁸ In his *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, Bayle goes a step further—again using Lucretius—and argues that not only is atheism no indication of

immorality but also that an entire society of atheists could be a moral one.¹⁹ According to Bayle, the preeminent example of men living morally upright lives in the absence of God are the Epicureans. Though Epicurus denied divine providence and the immortality of the soul, the Epicureans nevertheless “performed many laudable and decent actions” and “sacrificed utility and pleasure to virtue.” When confronted with the accusation that without providence and fear of divine retribution there would be no reason for worship of gods, the Epicurean responds that the “excellence of their nature was a great enough reason to venerate them.” To move from the limited theology of the Epicureans as supportive of a decent life to atheism as similarly supportive, Bayle begins by suggesting that the limited nonprovidential theology of the Epicureans may have been more a matter of “policy” than sincerity. Their example is enough to persuade him that “reason without the knowledge of God can sometimes persuade a man that there are decent things which it is fine and laudable to do, not on account of the utility of doing so, but because this is in conformity with reason.”²⁰ Bayle however goes on to contend that by properly channeling men’s desire for worldly glory and praise, laws and mores could restrain men and therefore be a viable substitute for fear of divine retribution. Perhaps to provide evidence that such a claim is not as radical or revolutionary as it may appear, Bayle draws upon Lucretius’s account of the development of political life which—he claims—makes use of such an argument.²¹

Bayle seeks to defend philosophy from its accusers by claiming that one must not too readily discredit a philosophic system based upon the character of its adherents. Although one may indeed find vicious men attached to any given philosophy, it is not the case that the philosophy is itself the cause of such viciousness. Bayle again uses the case of the Epicureans to advance his argument. The Epicureans despite, or perhaps because, they “denied providence and the immortality of the soul, lived in as exemplary a way as any ancient philosophers.” Though some have dishonored the sect with their vices, “they were people debauched through habit and temperament who were glad to cover their filthy passions with so fine a pretext as that of saying they were following the maxims of one of the greatest philosophers in the world...[to] conceal themselves with the cloak of philosophy.” In addition, although it may have become customary to pejoratively label lascivious atheists “Epicureans,” such persons “have not become debauched because they embraced the doctrine of Epicurus; but they embraced the doctrine of Epicurus, misunderstood, because they were debauched.”²² To those who might try to indict Epicurus by the fact that such debauched persons are attracted to his doctrine to begin with, Bayle later points out that Lucretius—aware