

Epicurean therapy involves an in-depth transformation of the client's self and life that might inspire the development of existential therapy as a philosophical art of living.

The Nature of Things

Lucretius (2015). London & New York: Penguin

In the first century BC, Epicureanism has a renaissance in the Roman Republic. Roman philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus (99-55 BC) writes a poem in 7414 hexameters with the aim of explaining Epicurus' philosophy to the Roman audience. Lucretius' use of a poetic style provides the Epicurean art of living a beauty and power that may speak to many existentially oriented readers.

The first three books of the poem give a basic interpretation of being and nothingness from the perspective of Epicurus' materialistic philosophy of nature. Lucretius portrays Epicurus as a saviour who has freed human beings from the fear of supernatural deities by demonstrating how human beings should account for the world in terms of natural phenomena. Lucretius does not argue for a technological mastery of nature but for a therapeutic liberation of the human spirit from superstition and ignorance. Thus, Epicurean art of living leads to spiritual salvation from the darkling terror in the mind, caused by religion and unawareness (Lucretius, 2015: p 113-114). However, people can only attain this salvation if they base their lives on a particular explanation of nature and naturalness. In this respect, Epicureanism does not only represent a therapeutic art of living but takes the form of a therapeutic sect or secular cult whose members must shape their whole way of living according to a special ideal of wisdom. Following American philosopher John M. Cooper, Epicureanism involves a vision of the good human life as one authorized by reason, but this is rather about directing one's entire life after a certain truth than about living through completely independent thinking (Cooper, 2012: p 228).

What I find most interesting about the poem as an existential therapist is the third book, giving a thorough argument against the fear of death. According to Lucretius, human beings tend to go through life with a fundamental fear of death, causing many of the worst human sufferings and disturbances:

*Of mind and spirit, and toss that Dread of Death out on its ear,
Since that's what stirs the lives of the mortals into such turmoil
From the very depths, and there is nothing that it does not soil
With the smirch of death, no pleasure, pure and clean, it does not soil*
(Lucretius, 2015: p 114-115)

Most of our attitudes about loss and endings as well as about material possessions and social achievements spring from an egocentric dread of losing our lives and earthly goods, making us thirst for immortal existence. The fear of death turns us to blindly following unnatural desires and cravings, destructive of self or others. Thus, this fear causes most human ills and vices, meaning that the art of living well must involve an art of dying well. Following Lucretius, we must confront ourselves with death and acknowledge that death anxiety is irrational, depriving us of the ability to live a flourishing life and achieve *eudaimonia*. Through naturalistic therapy, we must rather learn to live in and according to nature and the universe with a concern for its whole. These superhuman achievements will make us godlike, living like mortal immortals who understand and accept the ways of the world.

Lucretius does not only show how the fear of death makes people submit to religion, making them more dependent and worried. He also demonstrates how fear causes people to give love and sexual desire the status of a secular salvation. In other words, our fear of life's uncertainty tends to make us idealize love and sexuality and yearn for them to save us. However, this longing is only an escape from the hard realities of life into illusions. According to Lucretius, we may alleviate human suffering and escapism by rationally decreasing human desire to what is naturally necessary. This implies a realistic perception of love and marriage as something that belongs to everyday life and does not save the individual from it.

In these years, we are witnessing a renaissance of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy and culture. Yalom and Deurzen have pointed out the close relationships between existential therapy and classical arts of living. The poem of Lucretius provides a thrilling and captivating insight into an in-depth therapy that might inspire many existential practitioners. The World Confederation for Existential Therapy has recently defined existential therapy as 'a philosophically informed approach to counseling or psychotherapy' (www.existentialpsychotherapy.net). This definition allows a more in-depth exploration of the value of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy.

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