

LUCRETIUS' PSYCHOANALYTIC INSIGHT: HIS NOTION OF UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVATION

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MANY READERS OF LUCRETIUS have noticed and admired an uncommon psychological acumen. His observations on the personal character of dreams, the rationalizations of lovers, and especially the fear of death are suggestive of an almost psychoanalytic sensitivity. However, this is either noticed only casually or else ascribed to his poetic insight. Until recently, the only aspect of this psychological acumen to attract systematic study was his understanding of anxiety, which appeared to be so intimate that it was viewed as symptomatic of his own emotional illness.

Recently, scholars have become more aware of the philosophical importance of the irrational in Epicurean theory. David Konstan¹ has demonstrated that Lucretius views the fear of death and other irrational emotions as elements of a pervasive general anxiety in the lives of the unenlightened. This prevalence of anxiety and irrationality in the life of the common man certainly explains some of the analogies between Lucretius and psychoanalysis. However, I believe that the explanation can be carried further.

The reason why psychoanalysis can trace so much anxiety to irrational factors is that it assumes unconscious motivation, i.e., that our behaviour and beliefs are partially determined by emotional factors of which we are not aware, and which we do not fully understand. The conception of unconscious motivation is the very foundation of psychoanalysis, and its role as a basic psychological principle is characteristic of Freudian and modern theory. Yet I believe that Lucretius sometimes makes a similar assumption, and that it is largely this technique that makes his psychological insight seem peculiarly modern. Of course, we must understand "unconscious" in a loose sense characterizing any mental process of which a person is not aware, and not in the sense of the "unconscious proper" defined by psychoanalysts as an entire separate region of the psyche not accessible to conscious scrutiny. Yet Lucretius does employ a notion that people do not understand—and can deceive themselves about—their own motivations. In part, he expresses this notion through poetic or descriptive devices. However, he also makes some surprisingly explicit assertions of unconscious motivation.

In the preface to Book 3, Lucretius describes the fear of death (and of punishment in Hades) as a pervasive anxiety in the lives of his contemporaries. To reinforce this picture, he argues that other irrational emotions,

¹*Some Aspects of Epicurean Psychology* (Leiden 1973), especially 10 ff.

particularly greed and ambition, are in fact caused largely by the fear of death. Critics charge that Lucretius is exaggerating the importance of the fear of death in his society, and they are confused by what Bailey aptly describes as "the apparently remote connexion with that fear" (996) of ambition and greed. Cicero (*Tusc. Disp.* 1.21.48) already raised the first of these objections, and some scholars² believe that Lucretius' insistence on ascribing widespread anxiety to such fears merely reflected his own emotional disturbance. W. Y. Sellar³ thought Lucretius' intelligence had failed him when he attempted to reduce ambition and greed to the fear of death. Jacques Perret⁴ noticed the importance of lines 65–67 (discussed below), but he attempted to explain the passage by the social realities of Lucretius' time. Although he admires Lucretius' psychological acumen, he would still have us believe that the poor in Rome were always on the verge of starvation, and the wealthy preoccupied with a desire to avoid the same plight. This approach has been extended recently by R. C. Monti,⁵ who argues that Lucretius is deliberately reflecting the conditions of the civil wars. This is undoubtedly true, and the social background of the civil wars is very relevant for understanding the thrust of the passage; yet, surely, it is still paradoxical to depict precisely the most competitive elements of any society as extensively preoccupied with death. (Ironically, Bailey, attempting to explain another of Lucretius' psychological portraits in the same way,⁶ assures us that "boredom" was common among these same social strata.) The psychology of the argument, as well as its sociology, must be understood.

The present paper cannot resolve the exact role of the fear of death in Lucretius' system. For our purpose, it will be sufficient to accept Konstan's balanced (initial) formulation that "the cause of irrational desires is a complex psychic process in which the fear of death is a component, albeit the most significant one."⁷ What I wish to do is to examine more closely one aspect of that "complex psychic process." For I believe that when Lucretius describes the fear of death as pervasive, he views it as an unspecified component of a general state of anxiety; and when he presents it as the cause of greed and ambition, it is, at least in part, as an unconscious motivation. If this is true, then both the original criticisms, and many of the

²Especially L. Pirelli, *Lucrezio, poeta dell' angoscia* (Florence 1969).

³*The Roman poets of the Republic* (Oxford 1881) 371.

⁴"L'amour de l'argent, l'ambition, et la crainte de la morte" in *Mélanges Ernout* (Paris 1940) 277–284.

⁵"Lucretius on Greed, Political Ambition and Society: *De rer. nat.* 59–86," *Latomus* 40 (1981) 48–66.

⁶Page 1170, regarding the compulsive traveller of 3.1049 ff. (see below, 229 f.)

⁷(above, note 1) 14. Konstan (26–27) believes that the fear of death and the irrational desires feed upon each other. This is true, but I find much greater evidence of the fear of death nourishing other emotions than conversely, and I am still inclined to believe that this fear and religious fear have some kind of primacy in the Epicurean system.

counterarguments as well, have missed the mark because they do not understand the psychological sophistication of the passage. Lucretius is not asserting that ambitious men—even ambitious Republican nobles—are constantly preoccupied with Hell and that this is the conscious motive for their other passions, but that this fear contributes to a general state of anxiety and unconsciously engenders other passions.

Konstan has already argued well that Lucretius portrays the fear of death as a generalized, unspecific anxiety. He cites a fragment in which the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenanda differentiates an “explained” or specific fear of death (e.g., when a person is threatened by a fire) from an “unexplained” (*ἀτράνωτος*) fear.⁸ Konstan appropriately cites Lucretius’ analogy of “shadows of the mind” (3.87–90) as a description of the latter:

*nam veluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis
in tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus
interdum, nilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam
quae pueri in tenebris pavitant finguntque futura.*

Yet this general anxiety, as depicted by Lucretius, is none other than the state of *τάραχος* or psychic turbulence in which Epicurus thought all unenlightened men exist, and which it was his purpose to dispel. Thus, Lucretius says that this fear “leaves no pleasure in life unadulterated” (39–40), which is almost a trademark of *τάραχος*. All of the passages in which we shall find Lucretius implying unconscious motivations concern this psychic state. Accordingly, it is the point of the preface to Book 3 that only a thorough understanding of the Epicurean theory of the soul can dispel the fear of death (91–93):

*hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necesses
non radii solis neque lucida tela dei
discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.*

To emphasize this point, Lucretius refers in 41–58 to persons who believe that they can do without this understanding. These people (perhaps politically active Roman nobles) claim that they fear death and Hades less than disgrace (*infamem . . . vitam* 42); yet they still disgrace themselves, and afterwards, they are afraid of punishment in Hades. In a crisis, Lucretius infers, “the mask is torn off, and the truth remains” (*eripitur persona, manet res* 58).

These words are famous as an example of Lucretius’ psychological insight, but what precisely constitutes that insight? The passage is psychologically interesting in other respects, such as the role of guilt, but the important feature is that these men are not consistent with their stated beliefs. This must mean either that they are only hypocrites—i.e., that they

⁸Diogenes, *Fragmenta*, ed. C. W. Chilton (Leipzig 1967) fr. 29.

are deliberately insincere when stating their beliefs—or that they do not know their own fears. If the former meaning is intended, Lucretius' psychology is actually rather shallow.

Now, Lucretius does indulge his characteristic impatience with opponents by charging them with some hypocrisy (46–47), but his main point is that they need an Epicurean understanding to secure their beliefs. This is a standard doctrine which we shall see applied also to others—including Lucretius himself (below, 236)—who are obviously sincere. Moreover, he does not claim, for example, that these boasters are superstitious at the time when they state their beliefs, but only later, after they are shaken by a crisis. The implication is indeed that they are deceptive, but that they have deceived themselves as well. Their initial statements were not completely insincere, but without a sound philosophical basis, they remained insecure.

Having thus established that the fear of death may still lurk in men's hearts even when they do not know it, Lucretius proceeds to explain why they turn to crime even though they fear disgrace. Thus, when he sets out to explain how greed and ambition arise from the fear of death in 59 ff., he has already introduced the theme that those who harbour this fear exhibit general anxiety, and that in their emotional turmoil, they do not always know their own fear.

The critical verses explaining the motivation for ambition and greed are 65 ff. and 75–77. Lines 65 ff. trace ambition and greed to a desire for security:

*turpis enim ferme contemptus et acris egestas
semota ab dulci vita stabilique videtur
et quasi iam leti portas cunctarier ante;
unde homines dum se falso terrore coacti
effugisse volunt longe longeque remosse,
sanguine civili rem conflant divitiasque
conduplicant avidi*

These verses resemble 5.1120–1122, which state the conscious motive for the origin of these passions in the history of civilization:

*at claros homines voluerunt se atque potentis,
ut fundamento stabili fortuna maneret
et placidam possent opulenti degere vitam*

Line 67, however, links this desire for security with the fear of imminent death. Bailey notes that the connection is “remote,” yet because of the parallel passage in Book 5, he would still explain it by comparison with Epicurus' remark (K.Δ. 7) that “some men wish to become famous and conspicuous, thinking that they would thus win for themselves safety from other men” (i.e., from death by killing). Such reasoning could indeed lead men to seek fame deliberately in order to avoid death, and Lucretius certainly

is alluding to this doctrine in Book 5. But in 3.65–67 there is no reference to other men. Instead, the lack of fame is vaguely, but directly, linked to death itself.

A. Desmouliez⁹ praises Lucretius' insight in 67 as "psychoanalytique presque" (321), yet he considers it as an intrusion of Epicurean doctrine, which Lucretius has cleverly "welded" to 65–66 but which does not reflect the motivations of the avaricious men. But why should Lucretius "weld" his doctrine to their motive? Poverty, he says, "*seems as if* to linger at Death's very door" (*videtur . . . quasi iam leti portas cunctarier ante*); if we read these words as an explanation of their motivation—which is how Lucretius offers them—they imply that the men themselves only vaguely understand the connection; to use a modern idiom, they "somehow associate" poverty with a threat to life.

These verses do not express an articulate judgment, but an indistinct imagining. Moreover, as shown by such words as *contemptus*, *iam* (67), *formidine* (64), and *terrore*, this imagination is coupled with a strong emotional reaction. The emotionality is underscored by the repetition of *longe*, which is more unnatural in Latin, and therefore more emphatic, than "far, far away" would be in English. Because of this emotionality, which scholars have not adequately considered in interpreting the passage, the images in these men's minds are vivid, but the logical relations are obscured. P. H. Schrijvers,¹⁰ in discussing these lines, cites evidence that for Epicurus, fear involved largely the faculty of imagination, and the power to recall from memory emotionally charged images. What he does not notice is that when emotion and imagination interact in this way without reflective judgment, the ambitious men are not aware of the implicit logic embodied by their state of mind. Thus, the image *quasi . . . portas cunctarier ante* conveys a horror of imminent death, but no conscious or articulate assertion of how poverty relates to death.

The complaint of the ambitious malcontents in 75–77 also is emotional and imaginative:

*macerat invidia ante oculos illum esse potentem,
illum aspectari, claro qui incedit honore,
ipsi se in tenebris volvi caenoque queruntur.*

They do not mention death. It is signalled to the reader by the imagery of darkness which they evoke—as Lucretius links the image of shadows with the fear of death—and by their despised status (cf. *contemptus* 65), which, according to Schrijvers (289–290), is also associated with the fear of death in Epicurean doctrine. But surely the malcontents, in their emotional state,

⁹"Cupidité, ambition et crainte de la morte chez Lucrèce," *Latomus* 17 (1958) 317–323.

¹⁰*Horror ac divina voluptas: Études sur la poétique et la poésie de Lucrèce* (Amsterdam 1970) 288–290.

are not aware of these relations. Their conscious motive is purely envy (*invidia*). It is as if they moaned "He has all the glory, and I am left in the shadows!" and Lucretius turned to the reader saying "Ah! You see? 'shadows' . . . what is really bothering them is the fear of death." Finally (78 ff.) they are so preoccupied with ambition, or so distraught with general anxiety that they commit suicide. By now, they have no conscious fear of death. It is Lucretius who insists that this is their true motivation.

Again at the end of Book 3, Lucretius describes the state of mind of those who suffer general anxiety arising from the fear of death. The harangue delivered by the voice of Nature against this fear concludes with another vivid picture of general anxiety, which Lucretius compares to the behaviour of a compulsive traveller (1048–52, 1057–70):

. . . *vigilans stertis nec somnia cernere cessas
sollicitamque geris cassa formidine mentem
nec reperire potes tibi quid sit saepe mali, cum* 1050
*ebrius urgeris multis miser undique curis
atque animi incerto fluitans errore vagaris.*

. . . *ut nunc plerumque videmus
quid sibi quisque velit nescire et quaerere semper
commutare locum quasi onus deponere possit.
exit saepe foras magnis ex aedibus ille,* 1060
*esse domi quem pertaesumst, subitoque (revertit),
quippe foris nilo melius qui sentiat esse.
currit agens mannos ad villam praecipitanter,
auxilium tectis quasi ferre ardentibus instans;
oscitat extemplo, tetigit cum limina villae,* 1065
*aut abit in somnum gravis atque oblivia quaerit,
aut etiam properans urbem petit atque revisit.
hoc se quisque modo fugit, at quem scilicet, ut fit,
effugere haud potis est, ingratum haeret et odit
propterea, morbi quia causam non tenet aeger* 1070

This vignette is another popular example of Lucretius' psychological insight. The description of anxiety as a burden of the mind and the entire atmosphere of the passage are reminiscent of psychoanalysis. Once again, the core of this resemblance is the attribution of unconscious motivation. In this case, there is no question of a conscious fear of death. The fear is *cassa* (1049), i.e., non-specific and unnecessary. The drunkenness metaphor, the plurality of specific cares (*multis . . . undique curis*), and the metaphor of the "wandering mind" (1052) characterize general anxiety. Whereas the preface pictured the imaginings behind irrational behaviour, this passage stresses the irrationality of the behaviour itself; but in both cases, the subject cannot control his own feelings and is at the mercy of confused emotions.

The unconscious character of the root of the anxiety is asserted in statements which are as explicit as we can reasonably expect: *nec reperire potes tibi quid sit saepe mali* (1050 "you can't discover what's wrong with you") and *quid sibi quisque velit nescire* (1058 "nobody knows what he wants"). Indeed, says Lucretius, if men knew the cause of their anxiety, they would not exhibit such behaviour (1053 ff.).

The statements in 1050 and 1058—and others, such as *hoc se quisque modo fugit* (1068)¹¹—so closely resemble certain popular post-Freudian clichés that although they attract our attention, we do not realize how paradoxical they must have been for ancient readers. We need only ask ourselves, suspending our post-Freudian awareness, exactly what it means to say that a person does not know what he wants—i.e., that he is unaware of his own mental processes.

Note that these statements do not express the thoughts of the traveller (or of the victim of Nature's harangue, who simply wanted one thing after another and could never be satisfied: 957). The traveller does not say to himself, "I do not know what I want . . . I'll go to the country." Instead, he may feel other motives (*pertaesumst*), or even no apparent motive (*oscitat extemplo*). It is Lucretius who says that he does not know what he wants—because, of course, Lucretius does know his true motivation. It is—unbeknownst to the traveller—the fear of death, and other irrational emotions.

Beliefs, as well as behaviour, can be unconsciously motivated. Thus, Lucretius derides the man who frets over what will happen to his corpse (3.870–887)

<i>Proinde ubi se videas hominem indignarier ipsum,</i>	870
<i>post mortem fore ut aut putescat corpore posto</i>	
<i>aut flammis interfiat malisve ferarum,</i>	
<i>scire licet non sincerum sonere atque subesse</i>	
<i>caecum aliquem cordi stimulum, quamvis neget ipse</i>	
<i>credere se quemquam sibi sensum in morte futurum.</i>	875
<i>non, ut opinor, enim dat quod promittit et unde,</i>	
<i>nec radicitus e vita se tollit et eicit,</i>	
<i>sed facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse.</i>	
<i>virus enim sibi cum proponit quisque futurum,</i>	
<i>corpus uti volucres lacerent in morte feraeque,</i>	880
<i>ipse sui miseret; neque enim se dividit illum</i>	
<i>nec removit satis a proiecto corpore et illum</i>	
<i>se fingit sensuque suo contaminat adstans.</i>	
<i>hinc indignatur se mortalem esse creatum</i>	

¹¹This idea too was probably as striking to ancient readers as it is familiar to us; like the constructions with *se* and *ipse* in 3.870 ff. (see below, 231), it helps convey Lucretius' notion that the individual is unknowingly responsible for his own anxiety.

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*nec videt in vera nullum fore morte alium se
qui possit vivus sibi se lugere peremptum
stansque iacentem (se) lacerari urive dolere.*

This man's stated belief (and it is obviously sincere) is that corpses do not have sensation (874–875). However, like the exiles in the preface of the book, he acts inconsistently with his belief, by imagining an element of survival: *facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse* (878). This bears a striking resemblance to what might be designated today as “projection.” He unconsciously (*inscius*) imagines “another self” (cf. *alium se* 885). Lucretius suggests an underlying motivation, which he describes as a “hidden goad” (*caecum aliquem cordi stimulum* 874). He does not identify the goad (it is presumably the insecurity arising from ignorance of the true nature of the soul) but *stimulum* implies a powerful emotion, and *caecum* emphasizes the unconscious status of the goad.

B. P. Wallach¹² has shown that this theme was a commonplace among non-Epicurean as well as Epicurean sources, and that Lucretius' version alludes to some of these. But if we compare Lucretius' treatment with the other versions cited, the peculiarity of his psychological analysis emerges all the more sharply. Thus, Wallach follows Bailey in citing certain sources, such as Diogenes of Oenanda (fr. 14 Chilton), as examples of imagining that “there will be a surviving ‘self’ which will identify itself with the corpse” (Bailey 1139). But, in fact, neither this source nor the others cited express the paradox of the “other self” or any implication of unconscious motivation. Diogenes, for example, simply says that he no longer shudders over the decay of the body now that he understands Epicurus' teaching; and Epicurus, in his *Letter to Menoeceus* (125), writes with acute logical precision, but no psychological perception, μάταιος ὁ λέγων δεδιέναι τὸν Θάνατον οὐχ ὅτι λυπήσῃ παρών, ἀλλ' ὅτι λυπεῖ μέλλον. ὁ γὰρ παρὸν οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖ, προσδοκώμενον κενῶς λυπεῖ. Lucretius, in contrast, makes his suggestion of unconscious motivation the point of the entire passage, and seems to delight in multiplying paradoxical constructions with *se* and *ipse* (*se . . . indignarier ipsum* 870, *illum se fingit* 882–883) which serve to drive home his argument that the man does not realize what “he himself” is imagining.

This comparison appears to indicate that the postulation of unconscious motivation was a Lucretian innovation in Epicurean theory. Indeed, the same conclusion is implied as well by our comparison above of Lucretius' analysis of ambition with Epicurus' remarks about safety from other men in K.Δ. 7. The latter text is concerned with rejecting the logical validity of a conscious motive for ambition, rather than tracing it to an unconscious motivation.

¹²*Lucretius and the Diatribe against the Fear of Death* (Leiden 1976) 30 ff.

The extant portions of Epicurus' works and those of other Epicureans are scanty. Lucretius himself certainly did not wish to appear to be unorthodox, and cannot be expected to call our attention to any changes which he may have introduced into Epicurean theory. Therefore it is very difficult to establish whether any particular element of Lucretius' thought represents an innovation. In the present case, however, there is material for comparison, and one finds that what is always missing in these other Epicurean sources is the concept of unconscious motivation. Thus, the paradox of suicide resulting from the fear of death is quoted from Epicurus by Seneca (*Ep.* 24.22); but whereas Seneca's version finds anguish in a way of life based upon the fear of death, it is only Lucretius' description that stresses a person's unawareness of the fear which is still active in his mind.

There is in Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* what seems to be a very interesting precedent for Lucretius' analysis. In a discussion of religious anxiety, Epicurus mentions the possibility that men may suffer from superstitious fears without actually assenting to them intellectually, "by some irrational impulse" (ἀλόγῳ γέ τιτι παραστάσει 81.8). Lucretius' *aliquem cordi stimulum* (3.874) is reminiscent of this irrational impulse. Conceivably it represents a translation of this phrase or a reference to it. Yet although Epicurus' impulse does work inconsistently with a person's belief, there is no clear indication that it is unconscious (*caecum*).

As I have mentioned earlier, Konstan has found the idea of an "unexplained" fear of death in other Epicurean sources as well as Lucretius. Moreover, the general anxiety portrayed by Lucretius was certainly an Epicurean theme (τάραχος), and Lucretius' concept of unconscious motivation is related intimately with this anxiety. The "irrational impulse" described by Epicurus hints that Lucretius' supposition of unconscious motivation may have been a mere extension of Epicurean theory. Nevertheless, the evidence available for comparison consistently suggests that Lucretius was adding a decisive nuance.

Lucretius does not offer any explanation of a philosophical basis for postulating unconscious motivation. We might easily assume that he had none. But even if this nuance was derived exclusively from his personal experience and poetic intuition—as it surely was to a considerable extent—it would be interesting and admirable. However, as I have already pointed out, we cannot expect Lucretius to call our attention to philosophical innovations. Therefore we must consider whether there is any possible basis for unconscious motivation in his psychology. Here we need not look for an unconscious region of the mind, but simply for a way in which emotions can affect thought and behaviour without a person knowing it.

A clue is provided in his answer to an objection to the Epicurean analysis of thought at 4.770–817. Thought was explained on the model of

sensation. The Epicureans maintained that all objects give off a constant stream of images consisting of the superficial layer of their atoms. The senses receive such images, while the mind perceives similar images composed of finer atoms. We must bear in mind that the Epicureans, as thorough materialists, applied this theory to every kind of thinking. For example, Lucretius states that even acts of volition must begin with the mind perceiving an image of the action to be performed (4.881). The objection raised concerns how it is that we can think of whatever we wish, or even dream of a moving object. Lucretius' answer is that actually innumerable mental images surround us at any given moment, passing in succession too rapidly to be perceived individually; therefore we are aware only of those to which our attention is directed. Thus we can imagine a moving object by attending to many separate images in rapid succession, i.e., cinematographically (4.804–808):

. . . proinde omnia quae sunt
 praeterea pereunt, nisi si ad quae se ipse (sc. animus) paravit.
 ipse parat sese porro speratque futurum
 ut videat quod consequitur rem quamque; fit ergo.

Now, the importance of these remarks is not limited to the specific example of cinematographic dreaming. Actually, Lucretius' answer has revealed another aspect of the theory; for if sufficient images are always present to explain any thought, then the problem is not how we can think of what we wish, but how we can exclude the other images to think specifically of what we wish. Lucretius proceeds to explain this by selective attention, drawing an analogy with vision. Just as we do not see objects which are in our field of vision unless the eye focusses upon them, so the mind is aware only of those mental images to which it attends (807–815):

nonne vides oculos etiam, cum tenuia quae sunt
 cernere coeperunt, contendere se atque parare,
 nec sine eo fieri posse ut cernamus acute?
 et tamen in rebus quoque apertis noscere possis,
 si non advertas animum, proinde esse quasi omni
 tempore semotum fuerit longeque remotum.
 cur igitur mirumst, animus si cetera perdit
 praeterquam quibus est in rebus deditus ipse?

Thus, normally the course of thought is governed by the mind's attention and its expectations. But Lucretius quickly adds that by the same token, this selective attention can lead us astray (816 f.):

deinde adopinamur de signis maxima parvis
 ac nos in fraudem induimus frustraminis ipsi.

This postscript has occasioned some confusion, since it is not clear how

selective attention can lead to error. Part of the solution is suggested by *adopinamur*, which is equivalent to Epicurus' προσδοξάσειν. The point of that concept is that since the images are true, error must arise because we think beyond what is supported by the evidence—something similar to what is termed in English “jumping to conclusions.” But why should our concentration lead us to jump to conclusions?

The answer lies in understanding exactly what kind of error Lucretius has in mind. The purport of these verses has been misconstrued because of a tendency to forget that Lucretius in this context is concerned with thought in general, and mentions visual attention only as an illustrative analogy. It is worthwhile to quote in full Robin's commentary; for his interpretation grasps the meaning rather well—except that he too has confused the visual and mental terms of the analogy.

L. veut parler de constructions imaginaires sur la base de quelques données réelles, auxquelles nous avons donné une attention excessive, de telle sorte que ces faibles données deviennent pour nous les indices d'une réalité plus considérable: *mon ombre me frappe tout à coup, je m'imagine qu'il y a quelqu'un contre moi; une étoffe blanche qui flotte au vent de la nuit devient un fantôme*. Nous avons laissé se perdre tous les simulacres qui auraient pu servir à corriger notre erreur, et de celle-ci nous sommes nous-mêmes les artisans par l'activité propre de notre imagination.

Robin's examples (which I have italicized) concern mental interpretation of visual data. However, the analogy is between *rebus apertis* (811) and *animus* (814). Lucretius is explaining mental thought by visual analogy, so that we should expect mental data. Moreover, Lucretius' warning seems to be excessively grave for such matters as Robin suggests. The theme of serious delusions based on trivial evidence (*maxima de parvis*) represents a characteristically Epicurean assessment, not of the fear of a physical shadow, but of the “shadows of the mind” (*animi tenebras*) which Lucretius compares with children's fears in the dark (3.87–93). Diogenes too (fr. 38 column 1 Chilton) says that anxieties, as well as physical afflictions, are much greater than their cause, like fire from a spark. Therefore, in all likelihood, Lucretius is alluding here precisely to the kind of delusion with which we are concerned, and his remark may give an indication of how he thought such persons went astray.

What happens, then, to the attention and expectations of such persons? As we have seen, they are ignorant of the true meaning of life and death, and subject to irrational fears and desires. In their case, it is not logical thinking, but emotion that directs the mind's attention and dictates its expectations. It is conceivable that Lucretius chose the word *deditus* (815) deliberately, because this word fits the concept of emotional obsession as well as concentration. At any rate, their irrational fears and desires, not their intellect, determine their thoughts and lead them to jump to dangerous conclusions, oblivious of the facts.

But how can they fail to understand the very emotions which hold their attention? Hitherto, I have been referring to their thoughts as "imaginings." But in a theory which explains thought as the perception of mental images, the difference between reasoning and imaginings cannot be defined by the pictorial character of the latter. For Lucretius, the crucial difference must have been precisely that the mind's attention is distracted by excessive emotions. Since selective attention is exclusive (we miss all other images), but reason and emotion follow different rules of inference (connecting different images), one cannot engage in both of these processes simultaneously. Therefore, as the role of the emotions in selecting the images becomes unduly augmented, clear thinking is displaced by inarticulate "imaginings." Not only do we jump to false conclusions; our thinking becomes incoherent. Finally, we must remember that the anxiety envisioned by Lucretius involves "many cares" simultaneously—all of the irrational fears and desires which Epicureanism was intended to dispel. This multiplies the incoherence; small wonder if we miss the role of our different emotions as well as the logic of our thoughts.

This view fits well the vaguely reasoned fears of the ambitious men and the wandering mind of the traveller, as well as his apparent passivity and lack of control over the direction of his own thoughts. It provides for their eclipsed awareness of their own motivations. Finally—and this is a touchstone for reliable reconstruction of Epicurean theories—it is attractive atomistically, since the emotional distractions can be seen as disturbances of the orderly movements of the atoms of the mind.

A succinct example of how the mind is led astray by fear occurs in Lucretius' discussion of religion. At the same time, this example shows the role of ignorance, which is the ultimate root of anxiety. Lucretius writes (5.1204–11)

*nam cum suspicimus magni caelestia mundi
templa super stellisque micantibus aethera fixum,
et venit in mentem solis lunaeque viarum,
tunc aliis oppressa malis in pectora cura
illa quoque expergefactum caput erigere infit,
nequae forte deum nobis immensa potestas
sit, vario motu quae candida sidera verset.
temptat enim dubiam mentem rationis egestas . . .*

I cannot dwell upon the difficulties which have been raised about this passage.¹³ However, the chief problem is how it can be construed (with *nam* 1204) as explaining the assertion which precedes it, viz., that true piety is the ability to look at everything unperturbed (1203). This problem

¹³There is an excellent discussion of the passage by David J. Furley in his essay on "Lucretius the Epicurean" in *Lucrèce* (Entretiens . . . Hardt 24. Vandoeuvres-Geneva 1978) 19–21 (cf. the discussion with Gerhard Müller, 36–37 and 224–225).

will be resolved when we have understood the experience which Lucretius is describing.

The context of the passage concerns the origin of religion in the experiences of persons ignorant of Epicureanism. Hence, the subject of *suspiciamus* (1204) seems to be indefinite, although it is first-person. However, this same experience is described also in 5.82 ff. (= 6.58 ff.), where it is ascribed to persons who have learned that the gods are free from care (6.58), but who have not mastered Epicurean natural philosophy and are still subject to anxiety (cf. 6.67 *quo magis errantes caeca ratione feruntur*)—i.e., probably, aspiring Epicureans. Like the boasters in the preface of Book 3 and the man pitying his corpse, they are liable to suffer imaginings inconsistent with their stated belief (cf. 6.68–69). In other words, this is the same kind of religious anxiety which Epicurus ascribed to an “irrational impulse.”¹⁴

It should be noted that, at least as regards the Epicurean aspirants, the experience presented here does not represent a fully fledged instance of unconscious motivation. Lucretius could hardly point to unconscious motivation in thoughts narrated in the first person. Moreover, the aspirants are only tempted to espouse superstition by their insecurity; they do not succumb to the temptation. Nevertheless, this text does show how fear misleads the mind.

Let us compare the experience described here with the normal train of thought, in which the mind “expects to see what follows each step” and “therefore it does follow” (4.807–808). When ignorant men regard the awesome spectacle of the heavens, they do not know what to expect to follow (sc. by way of an explanation). The Epicurean aspirants know that they should not expect an explanation burdening the gods, but they are not secure in this knowledge. Moreover, both are distraught with anxiety (1207),¹⁵ so that when ignorance or insecurity arrests their train of thought, the underlying fear in their memory (where its presence is implied by *expergefactum*) may respond to the awesome sight and turn their minds to superstition. In their subjective experience (the text is in the first person) the superstitious fear seems simply to rise up into their consciousness (it “starts to rear its head:” *caput erigere infit*); for it is not selected by their train of thought so much as triggered in their insecure and troubled hearts by the awesome sight.

I am therefore taking Lucretius’ description to imply that if men are

¹⁴Interestingly, too, Diogenes’ example of the “unexplained” fear of death (above, note 8) is something very similar to the experience described here by Lucretius. These parallels suggest the orthodox core of Lucretius’ theory.

¹⁵As Furley (above, note 13) points out, *oppressa* in 1207 must be construed with *pectora*, and not with *cura*, since in Epicurean doctrine irrational emotions never “repress” one another, but rather nourish one another.

ignorant of the true causes of heavenly phenomena and subject to anxiety, then their superstitious fears awaken in direct response to the awesome vision of the sky. If I am right, we now have a much better understanding of why Lucretius insists that ignorance begets so deep an insecurity that we may abandon our convictions; we can also grasp the confusion and loss of direction inherent in the thought processes of anxious men; and finally, we know how this passage explains the assertion that true piety is being able to look at anything in peace. Perhaps I am taking the striking poetic metaphor *caput erigere infit* rather literally; but the excellence of poetry in such a context is to communicate vividly the experience felt. If we bear in mind the mechanics of Epicurean psychology, that is exactly what this metaphor does. Since mental images do not arise inside the mind, but enter from outside, memory is not so much a capacity to call up stored images as the easing and opening up, by previous use, of pathways in the mind predisposed for the reception of the corresponding images—as Lucretius describes for dreams (4.975–977). Therefore, if we are at a loss to interpret an image which bears emotional associations—just as when the intellect has vacated the helm of our thoughts in sleep—the image will flow naturally along those paths.¹⁶

I have argued that it is the notion of unconscious motivation that renders Lucretius' psychological insight most peculiarly modern. If my reconstruction of the philosophical basis for this notion is correct, we are now in a better position to evaluate the extent to which it can be compared to psychoanalytic theory. A separate region of the mind harbouring repressed, deep-seated instincts, like Freud's unconscious system, is not to be found in Lucretius' philosophical psychology. However, the combination of unlimited ambient images with a mechanism of image selection that operates below the conscious level and is subject to emotional interference does resemble the psychoanalytic "preconscious," i.e., the memories, emotions, and imaginings lurking on the edge of consciousness and ready at times to emerge.

Philosophically, it was the thorough materialism of Epicurean theory that made it possible for Lucretius to assume unconscious motivation. For while spiritualist theories can simply postulate an immaterial subject that is defined as capable of undergoing mental processes as we experience them, materialists must reduce consciousness to mechanisms of which we are not aware. These, in turn, can then be used to explain unconscious motivation. If Lucretius' subjects were aware of their selection and reception of mental images, they could not have missed the difference between logic and emotion and lost track of their own motivations. Similarly, Freud had to postulate

¹⁶Lucretius actually does compare the imaginings of unenlightened men with daydreaming in 3.1047–1048.

mental "regions" and "connections" which, although presumed to be located in the brain, had not been isolated physiologically any more than Lucretius' mental images.

Since Lucretius' irrational motivations were neither permanently barred from conscious reflection (i.e., he did not have any notion of "repression") nor innate, unlike Freud's, they could be uprooted. Psychoanalysis views man more as a rationalizing than as a rational animal. It seeks the solutions, as well as the causes, of anxiety in the unconscious mind, and it views even healthy individuals as largely guided by unconscious motivations. Epicureanism, like the other Hellenistic schools, appealed to reason. Anxiety was blamed on ignorance about the world and how to live, and the cure was sought through reasoning and understanding. Lucretius would not ascribe unconscious motivations to perfected Epicureans.

Nevertheless, his theory, with his psychological sensitivity, was sufficient to enable him to strike an understanding of the "dark" side of the mind that was surprising for his time, and may have brought Epicurean psychology to the threshold of a much more sophisticated stage. With his power of poetic expression, he attempted to convey that understanding in descriptions which fascinate us today. Despite these vivid illustrations, contemporaries such as Cicero apparently could not comprehend his message; nor do scholars who dismiss such passages as merely symptoms of his own illness—although it may be profoundly true, as held by J. J. M. Zonneveld,¹⁷ that Lucretius understood anxiety better than the placid Epicurus precisely because he himself had suffered. Regardless of that possibility, perhaps from our post-Freudian perspective we can better appreciate the depth of his psychology.¹⁸

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¹⁷*Angore metuque, Woordstudie over de Angst in De Rerum Natura van Lucretius* (Nijmegen 1959).

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