

RATIO, ΑΠΟΝΙΑ, ΑΤΑΡΑΞΙΑ:
ON THE PROEM OF BOOK TWO
OF LUCRETIUS' *DE RERUM NATURA*

Abstract: Lucretius begins his proem by developing vignettes around cornerstone concepts in the Epicurean ethical doctrine, *ἀπονία* and *ἀταραξία*. He thereby makes technical concepts easily understandable to introductory readers.

Keywords: Lucretius, Epicureanism, Epicurean ethics

In a recent article in this journal, I put forth a new interpretation of DRN 2.7–8, arguing that *tenerē ... templā serena* refers to practicing *ἀταραξία*.¹ The purpose of this essay is to consider interpretive ramifications, left unaddressed, deriving from that philological argument. Recognizing that 2.7–8 includes a reference to *ἀταραξία* encourages us to reconsider Lucretius' imagery and argument in the proem. I argue that Lucretius begins his proem by developing vignettes around cornerstone concepts in the Epicurean ethical doctrine, *ἀπονία* and *ἀταραξία*, and that, in doing so, he makes technical concepts easily understandable to introductory readers.

The passage in question is the following:²

<i>Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,</i>	
<i>e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem,</i>	
<i>non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,</i>	
<i>sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est;</i>	
<i>suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri</i>	6
<i>per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli;</i>	5
<i>sed nihil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere</i>	7
<i>edita doctrina sapientum templā serena,</i>	

1) Practicing *ἀταραξία* at Lucretius' *De rerum natura* 2.7–8, RhM 163 (2020) 167–173. That essay should serve as prolegomenon to this one.

2) Text is that of M. Deufert, *Titus Lucretius Carus, De rerum natura Libri VI* (Berlin / Boston 2019). Translations are my own.

*despicere unde queas alios passimque videre
errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae,
certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore
ad summas emergere opes rerumque potiri.* 10

Looking upon the great labor of another person from land when winds are upsetting the calm on the great sea is pleasant, not because there is an enjoyable pleasure in watching another person be harried, but because discerning the ills which you yourself lack is pleasant. Looking upon great contests of war, drawn up throughout the plains, is also pleasant when you yourself share no part in the danger. But, however,³ nothing is sweeter than holding peaceful [sc. mental] sacred realms – raised aloft thanks to the doctrine of the wise – whence you are able to look down upon others and to see them wandering here and there and seeking openly a passageway through life,⁴ fighting over intelligence, disputing elite status, struggling all the time, with constant labor, to rise to lofty riches and to gain power over things.

I suggest that Lucretius develops an argumentative tricolon,⁵ with two vignettes referencing ἀπονία and ἀταραξία (1–2, 5–6) and with one vignette emphasizing ἀταραξία (7–13). ἀπονία (absence of bodily pain) and ἀταραξία (mental unperturbedness) are two fundamental concepts in Epicurean ethics, and Lucretius introduces

3) The third limb of the tricolon does not contradict the two previous limbs, but rather moves it in a new direction. *sed* marks a contrasting, not a contradictory, idea (cf. OLD s. v. 3).

4) C. Bailey (T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex [Oxford 1947], 798) suggests that *viam ... vitae* references a “way of life” such as can only be found in philosophy. It would be better to say that Lucretius uses the philosophically-charged phrase ironically, in order to note that most people are ‘travelling’ a way of life that is not philosophical. For Lucretius, it is the Epicurean *via vitae* that one should travel rather than the unphilosophical *via vitae* of avarice and ambition, travelled by many humans.

5) Nothing is gained by referring to this tricolon as a priamel, although scholars regularly do so (e. g. E. Holtsmark, On Lucretius 2.1–19, TAPA 98 [1967] 193–204, at 194; D. Fowler, Lucretius on Atomic Motion. A Commentary on De Rerum Natura, Book Two, Lines 1–332 [Oxford 2002], 22–66). Lucretius does not cap the first two elements of the tricolon with the climactic element of the tricolon: one does not cap Epicurean doctrine with Epicurean doctrine. Nor do I believe that the third limb of the tricolon explains the first two limbs (pace S. Roy, Homeric Concerns: A Metapoetic Reading of Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, 2.1–19, CQ 63 [2013] 780–784, at 783).

them here while developing his most extended section on ethics in the poem. Of course, scholars have already recognized that Lucretius, in the proem, develops the idea that the Epicurean life offers security (ἀσφάλεια),⁶ but, since we have not recognized, until recently, that the third limb of the tricolon references ἀταραξία, we have not recognized that the proem begins by focusing not on Epicurean security generally but on the security that may be had in ἀπονία and ἀταραξία specifically. The reference to watching the suffering of a sailor on the sea, from the safety of land, and the reference to viewing a scene of infantry, while not endangered by fighting, encourage consideration of the comparative ἀπονία that the Epicurean viewer experiences, while the non-Epicurean viewed are in situations that may cause them bodily harm. Similarly, the example of the viewer being mentally unperturbed while observing the unataraxic lives of non-Epicureans (7–13) encourages consideration of the ἀταραξία that an Epicurean life offers.

The first two lines provide Lucretius' first vignette:

*Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem,*

Looking upon the great labor of another person from land when winds
are upsetting the calm on the great sea is pleasant

The proem begins with *suave*, and *suave* is a calque on ἡδονή.⁷ Given that ἡδονή is a programmatic Epicurean concept, Lucretius thereby sets the frame within which the proem is to be interpreted. The term *laborem* (2) is also programmatic, for, as M. Gale has shown, Lucretius uses *labor* and *laborare* to reference “the futile struggles of the non-Epicurean”.⁸ Accordingly, readers, as they be-

6) Cf. D. Konstan, *A Life Worthy of the Gods: The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* (Las Vegas 2008), 32, with further references.

7) Cf. G. B. Conte, “Υψος e diatribe nello stile di Lucrezio (De rer. nat. II 1–61), *Maia* n. s. 18 (1966) 338–368, at 339–340; J. Godwin, *Lucretius, Selections from the De Rerum Natura* (London 2000), 42; Fowler (n. 5) 35.

8) M. Gale, *Piety, Labour, and Justice in Lucretius and Hesiod*, in: D. Lehoux / A. Morrison / A. Sharrock (eds.), *Lucretius: Poetry, Philosophy, Science* (Oxford 2013), 25–50, at 33. On *labor* as a programmatic term for Lucretius, see too M. Gale, *Virgil on the Nature of Things: The Georgics, Lucretius and the Didactic Tradition* (Cambridge 2000), 147–154.

come familiar both with Epicurean doctrine and with Lucretius' language, infer that the man is at sea for commercial reasons, pursuing the affluence that may result therefrom.⁹ The reader is to infer both that the sailor would not have put himself in this precarious position had he been an Epicurean and that the imagined Epicurean viewer recognizes this. Lucretius' image references the physical harm that the sailor may cause himself, being that the sailor may drown, but we should note that the sailor would also be subject to anxiety that the storm would elicit; accordingly, the reader is also to assume that the non-Epicurean sailor would lack ἀταραξία.¹⁰ Thus, the introductory vignette encourages consideration of the corporeal and mental wellbeing of the viewer and of the corporeal and mental disadvantage of the sailor, but it seems to put more emphasis on ἀπονία, since the reference to viewing 'from land' (*e terra*, 2) encourages reflection on the bodily wellbeing of the spectator.

At lines 3 and 4, Lucretius makes a doctrinal statement regarding pleasure. *iucunda* and *voluptas*, inscribed within the Epicurean hedonic system, both serve as technical Epicurean terms, and their use here is programmatic.¹¹ By inserting two terms (*iucunda* and

9) Cf. H. Diller, *Kleine Schriften zur antiken Literatur* (Munich 1971), 505–527, at 513 (first published in *Studi. ital. di filol. class.* 25 [1951] 5–30); Konstan (n. 6) 34–35. In relation to classical culture more broadly, R. Blondell observes, “in Greek texts sailing often connotes the reckless pursuit of excess wealth prompted by greed,” *Sophocles. Antigone* (Indianapolis 1998), 84.

10) Lucretius' use of *aequora*, in the first line, encourages reflection on the mental realm. Upon first reading, *mari magno* and *aequora* seem to be pleonastic, both referencing the sea. If we consider *aequora* to be doing double duty, however, not only denoting the sea but also connoting a peaceful mind, an especially artful opening appears. For the winds need not only denote literal winds but may also connote things that upset a 'peaceful mind' (cf. the phrase *aequus animus*). The reader comes to realize that the sailor has placed himself in this precarious position because his mind (evoked, again, given the connotative resonances of *aequora*) has been jostled by various socio-cultural 'winds' (e. g. avarice and ambition, cf. Konstan [n. 6] 35). On the passage's mental connotations, see too Fowler (n. 5) 29, 36; Holtsmark (n. 5) 195.

11) For example: At line 19, Lucretius uses *iucundo* to reference the ἡδονή that exists with the attainment of ἀταραξία and ἀπονία. At line 31, *iucunde* references the pleasure that arises in living an Epicurean life. *voluptas* is the standard Latin calque for ἡδονή, the Epicurean τέλος. On the interconnectedness of ἡδονή with ἀταραξία and ἀπονία, see Epicurus' *Epistula ad Herodotum*, 128–129 and 131, where ἡδονή is τὸ μῆτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μῆτε ταράττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν; cf. e. g. J. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrate-*

voluptas) with Epicurean ethical denotation, Lucretius argues indirectly that ‘Epicurean pleasure’ includes discerning (*cernere*) ills that the Epicurean lacks.¹² Lucretius’ imagined Epicurean viewer, recognizing that the sailor risks life and limb, feels joy while speculating because the viewer’s Epicureanism has kept him from placing himself in the sailor’s precarious position.¹³ Discernment is a cornerstone of Epicurean philosophy,¹⁴ and the discernment of one’s own wellbeing, thanks to one’s Epicureanism, is a topic to which Lucretius will return later in the poem.

After the interlude on pleasure and discernment in lines 3 and 4, Lucretius provides another vignette:

<i>suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri</i>	6
<i>per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.</i>	5

Looking upon great contests of war, drawn up throughout the plains, is also pleasant when you yourself share no part in the danger.

Lucretius’ imagined Epicurean spectator does not risk life and limb in military endeavors, as do the soldiers viewed, because familiarity with Epicurean doctrine has allowed him to place himself in a position of comparative ἀπovία: *tua sine parte pericli* (6) emphasizes the comparative ἀπovία of the viewer. Commenting on this vignette, Fowler remarks, “war is an activity which is obviously opposed to the calm of the philosopher, so that the second member of [Lucretius’] priamel already anticipates the final point. Its motive is greed, and this in turn is caused by a failure to understand ‘quae sit habendi / finis et omnino quoad crescat vera voluptas’ (5.1432–1433), the nature of true ἀσφάλεια.”¹⁵ In addition to greed,

tes to Plotinus (Princeton 2012), 234; J. Annas, *Epicurus on Pleasure and Happiness*, *Philosophical Topics* 15 (1987) 5–21, at 8.

12) Note Lucretius’ emphasis on the self (*ipse*, 4).

13) Cf. Konstan (n. 6) 35; Fowler (n. 5) 32, 36.

14) See e.g. Cicero, *De finibus* 1.37–38; cf. D. Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge 2013), 178; Konstan (n. 6) 33–34. Cf. T. O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Berkeley / Los Angeles 2010), 120; Cooper (n. 11) 234–239; M. Erler / M. Schofield, *Epicurean Ethics*, in: K. Algra / J. Barnes / J. Mansfeld / M. Schofield (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge 1999), 642–674, at 653. On *ratio* in the poem, see too Holtsmark (n. 5) 203.

15) Fowler (n. 5) 45.

however, we should consider *honorum caeca cupido*¹⁶ to be a cause for war, particularly in relation to the general leading his soldiers. Thus, greed and the desire for status have placed Lucretius' imagined soldiers in a position to suffer in battle.

In the third limb of the tricolon, Lucretius provides another vignette on the wellbeing that the practice of Epicureanism affords. Here Lucretius references ἀταραξία, as I have recently argued, and privileges it in relation to ἀπονία:

*sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,*

But nothing is sweeter than holding well-fortified, serene [sc. mental] realms, raised aloft by the doctrine of the sages.

By claiming that nothing is sweeter (*nil dulcius*) than holding serene mental realms, Lucretius ranks ἀταραξία more highly than ἀπονία (indirectly praised in the first two limbs of the tricolon) and thereby transmits canonical Epicurean doctrine. Diogenes Laertius, in his *Vitae philosophorum*, records (10.137), for example, that Epicurus holds that pains of the mind are worse than pains of the body and that pleasures of the mind are greater than pleasures of the body.¹⁷ The importance of the wellbeing of the mind in relation to the body is perhaps most memorably delineated in Epicurus' letter of farewell to Idomeneus.¹⁸ With the privileging of ἀταραξία in the climactic element of the tricolon, Lucretius expounds canonical Epicurean doctrine.¹⁹

16) See 3.59–64.

17) Whereas bodily pains occur in relation to the present, mental pains occur in relation to the present, past, and future. See too A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (Berkeley, 1986), 67–68. The same argument is put forth at Cicero, *De finibus* 1.55–56.

18) Diogenes Laertius 10.22.

19) This has previously gone unnoted. See E. Kenney, *Lucretius* (Oxford 1977), 18; G. Bonelli, *Aporie etiche in Epicuro* (Brussels 1979), 89; cf. A. Dalzell, 'Lucretius', in: *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 2: *Latin Literature* (Cambridge 1982), 207–229, at 217. After his tricolon, Lucretius continues to focus attention on the wellbeing of the body (*corpoream ad naturam*, 20) and of the mind (*animo quoque*, 39); cf. Fowler (n. 5) 17–18. On the privileging of ἀταραξία in relation to ἀπονία, cf. O'Keefe (n. 14) 120; V. Tsouna, *The Ethics of Philodemus* (Oxford 2007), 24–25; A. Long / D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge 1987), 123; J. Gosling / C. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford 1982), 353.

Recognition that *tenerē . . . templā serena* references the practice of ἀταραξία does much to explain why Lucretius moves from *suave* to *dulce* in the third element of the tricolon. As commentators remark, *dulce* is more closely aligned with sensuous pleasure than is *suave*.²⁰ Accordingly, I suggest that, by asserting that ‘nothing is sweeter’ (*nil dulcius*) than practicing ἀταραξία with minds fortified by Epicurean doctrine, Lucretius indirectly argues that no sensuous pleasure (e. g. a ‘Cyrenaic’ pleasure of the flesh) is sweeter than the kinetic pleasure taken in awareness of one’s experience of ἀταραξία.²¹ As Wolfsdorf notes, “in the case of kinetic mental pleasure, the mode of awareness is not [sense-perceptual]. For lack of a better term, we may refer to it as ‘mental awareness’”.²² That the Epicureans believed that there was kinetic pleasure, ‘joy’ (χαρά),²³ taken in cognizance of one’s experience of the katastematic well-being inherent in ἀταραξία clarifies why Lucretius switches from *suave* to *dulce* in the third limb of the tricolon. Lucretius himself articulates the relationship between ἀπονία, ἀταραξία, and pleasure shortly hereafter.²⁴

20) Fowler (n. 5) 33; W. Merrill, *Lucretius. De Rerum Natura* (New York 1907), 399.

21) In *Non posse* 1098d, Plutarch cites from Epicurus’ *De fin.*, ‘For the stable condition of the flesh and the reliable expectation concerning this contain the highest and most secure joy for those who are able to reason it out (tr. Wolfsdorf).’ There-with see Wolfsdorf (n. 14) 172. Cf. Erler / Schofield (n. 14) 653.

22) Wolfsdorf (n. 14) 152.

23) Cf. Wolfsdorf (n. 14) 149; D. Fowler / P. Fowler, ‘Introduction’ in *Lucretius. On the Nature of the Universe*, tr. R. Melville (Oxford 1997), xxiii; Erler / Schofield (n. 14) 656; J. Purinton, *Epicurus on the Telos, Phronesis* 38 (1993) 281–320, at 286. Lucretius’ position mirrors that of Philodemus (cf. Tsouna [n. 19] 16–17) and of Cicero’s *Torquatus* (*De finibus* 1.29–32, 37–39) and the position is attributed to Epicurus and to Metrodorus also (see Plutarch’s *Non Posse* 1091a–b). In earlier scholarship, it was regularly suggested that the katastematic states were the Epicurean τέλος. See e. g. J. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford 1993), 188; Long / Sedley (n. 19) 122; Gosling / Taylor (n. 19) 350.

24) 2.16–20: *nonne videre / nihil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui / corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mensque fruatur / iucundo sensu cura semota metuque?* Lucretius’ reference to the absence of *dolor* in the body is a calque for ἀπονία. In all three vignettes discussed here, Lucretius’ Epicurean viewer experiences no corporeal *dolor* while viewing the struggles of others. Lucretius elsewhere uses *dolor* to reference physical pain (see e. g. 2.963–972).

In none of the three vignettes does the Epicurean sage take pleasure in the pain of others (the narrator, of course, expresses empathy for the pain of others),²⁵ but in all three cases the Epicurean sage uses the pain, actual or potential, of others to reflect on his own wellbeing: the Epicurean sage watches the sailor in danger of drowning; the Epicurean sage watches the soldiers in danger of being killed; the Epicurean sage watches the wayward, ignorant masses going to and fro (9–13); and the Epicurean sage watches all of this from the privileged position of having a body that is not in danger of injury (ἀπονία) and of having a mind that is not in danger of injury (ἀταραξία). Lucretius is adamant that pleasure is to be taken from the detached viewing of the pains of others and he thereby places his imagined viewer within a Democritean tradition of contemplating one's good through consideration of others' ills.²⁶ It is my impression that scholars' regular lack of recognition of the programmatic importance of *labor* (2) within the first vignette and our regular lack of recognition of Lucretius' 'doctrinal statement' in lines 3 and 4 (demarcated by the programmatically important *incunda voluptas*) has regularly led to the idea that Lucretius espouses Schadenfreude, to a greater or lesser degree, within the proem.²⁷ Recognition that Lucretius is making a doctrinal statement and is not expressing a personal opinion, however, does much to explicate Lucretius' reference to *incunda voluptas*.

Lucretius introduces several technical concepts related to Epicurean ethics in the proem, both through vignettes and through declarative statements. As noted above, Lucretius uses the vignette in lines 1 and 2 to encourage reflection on ἀπονία and ἀταραξία. In

25) Cf. 2.14: *o miseris hominum mentes, o pectora caeca!* See too Holtsmark (n. 5) 204.

26) Cf. Fowler (n. 5) 39–40; Konstan (n. 6) 37–39. The passage runs: διόπερ τὰ μὲν μὴ δίζεσθαι χρεῶν, ἐπὶ δὲ τοῖς εὐθυμέεσθαι χρεῶν, παραβάλλοντα τὸν ἑαυτοῦ βίον πρὸς τὸν τῶν φαυλότερον πρησσόντων καὶ μακαρίζειν ἑαυτὸν ἐνθυμώμενον ἢ πάσχουσιν, ὁκόσῳ αὐτέων βέλτιον πρήσσει τε καὶ διάγει. (Democritus, fr. 191 Diels / Kranz, 'Deshalb also soll man dem einen nicht nachjagen und mit dem andern soll man es sich wohlgenut sein lassen, indem man sein eigenes Leben mit dem Leben derjenigen vergleicht, denen es schlechter geht, und in Beherzigung ihrer Leiden sich selbst selig preisen, daß man es soviel besser hat und treibt'.)

27) On Schadenfreude-readings of the proem, see e. g. Holtsmark (n. 5) 193–194; Fowler (n. 5) 37–40.

lines 3 and 4 he makes a declarative statement concerning pleasure and provides enough context so that the reader can recognize that he is making a doctrinal statement. In lines 5 and 6, Lucretius offers another vignette, largely on ἀπονία, and, in lines 7 and 8, he offers a vignette on ἀταραξία. In lines 9 through 15, the narrator expresses exasperation at the errors of humans and, at lines 16 through 18, paraphrases the technical concepts of ἀπονία and ἀταραξία and discusses their doctrinal relationship to ἡδονή: mental pleasure is taken in the recognition of experiencing corporeal and psychological wellbeing.²⁸ Thereafter, Lucretius returns to using the vignette to explicate canonical doctrine, as scholars have already noted: at lines 19–21 Lucretius makes a doctrinal statement regarding human needs and thereafter develops vignettes related to Epicurus' triple division of desires.²⁹ Thus, throughout the proem of book 2, from line 1 through 39, Lucretius goes back and forth between using vignettes and making declarative statements that explicate the vignettes that he develops, in order to propagate Epicurean doctrine.

In conclusion, I note that Lucretius introduces his proem with three memorable vignettes that encourage the reader to reflect on *ratio*, ἀπονία, and ἀταραξία, as they relate to the Epicurean 'sweet life,' and that, while doing this, he does much the same as scholars have already recognized that he does later in the proem. As *praeceptor doctrinae*, Lucretius, through the use of nontechnical vignettes, makes the technical teachings of ἀπονία and ἀταραξία understandable to beginning readers, such as Memmius (as constructed within the text), who are not well familiar with Epicurean doctrine, and he places these teachings within the broader frame of Epicurean ethical theory.³⁰

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28) Cf. W. Schmid, Lucretius Ethicus, in: O. Gigon (ed.), *Lucrèce* (Geneva 1978), 123–165, at 129.

29) Cf. B. Wallach, Lucretius and the Diatribe: De rerum natura II.1–61, in: *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Literatur: Rezeption und Originalität im Wachsen einer Europäischen Literatur und Geistigkeit. Beiträge Luitpold Wallach gewidmet* (Stuttgart 1975), 49–77, at 60; Bailey (n. 4) 800; A. Ernout / L. Robin, *Lucrèce. Commentaire exégétique et critique* (Paris 1962), 209–210.

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