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Lucretius

On the Nature of Things

Read by **Hugh Ross**



1	Book 1	5:57
2	But I fear in these matters...	6:47
3	And why do we see roses coming out in spring...	6:50
4	Come, I have been teaching you...	6:10
5	Besides, although things may be thought as solid...	6:08
6	Moreover, there is nothing you can claim is separate...	6:09
7	Thus, matter which consists of solid bodies...	6:13
8	Thus, primary basic stuff is purely solid...	6:38
9	Thus, those who have thought the material of stuff is fire...	6:07
10	And thus, since these four basic elements...	5:46
11	Here there remains a slender chance to avoid the issue...	6:03
12	All that exists then, has no boundaries...	5:44
13	There would be no way they could act like this...	4:24
14	Since I have shown that space is infinite...	1:32
15	Book 2	6:55
16	This being the case, it is clear...	5:42
17	In my argument, this is now the place...	6:17
18	So do you now see that, though outside forces push...	3:53
19	Come now, learn next about the particles...	5:09
20	And finally, all things agreeable to the senses...	7:52

21	Since I have proved that point, I will go on...	4:06
22	In these matters, it is also good...	6:00
23	What's more, any single living creature...	6:11
24	Besides, if no natural colour has been given...	6:06
25	First you must look for some oily substance...	6:11
26	But if someone, by chance, were to point out...	6:15
27	But now set your mind, I pray...	6:02
28	Since the moment earth was first created...	5:29
29	Book 3	6:56
30	First, I say that mind, which we often call the understanding...	5:52
31	And now, I will move on in this discourse...	5:22
32	Now, though I am keen to give an argument...	6:28
33	As for the rest, if anyone denies...	6:31
34	Then, too, we sense mind comes into being...	7:05
35	And since mind is one part of a man...	5:52
36	And since we do perceive vital sense...	5:18
37	Moreover, are particles of soul left in a body...	5:00
38	Furthermore, a tree cannot live in aether...	5:59
39	Thus, if you see a man concerned about himself...	4:33
40	Furthermore, what if the nature of things suddenly spoke...	6:28

41	But in life there is fear of punishment...	6:14
42	Book 4	7:18
43	Come now and learn how thin the substance is...	6:15
44	Then, too, if tiny particles of things which are dispatched...	3:56
45	In these matters, we should not think it at all wonderful...	5:44
46	Now, from darkness we see things in the light...	4:25
47	It also happens that when young children...	4:50
48	And furthermore, if anyone thinks that nothing is known...	6:10
49	And therefore, when we force up these voices...	6:10
50	And now, so you can understand how this happens...	5:24
51	Come now and find out what substances...	6:56
52	In these matters you must desire...	5:44
53	The ways that sleep floods rest throughout the limbs...	6:33
54	Then, too, human minds...	3:28
55	This pleasure we call Venus.	6:09
56	And these problems are those one finds...	5:12
57	And when, during the mingling of the seed...	5:55
58	Book 5	6:23
59	As for the rest – so we avoid delaying...	7:24
60	Even if I did not already know what primary particles are...	5:38

61	Now I will speak of air...	7:23
62	And furthermore, since the most important portions...	6:10
63	Then there followed the first developments of sun and moon...	6:36
64	And sun's disk and fire...	6:04
65	In the same way, the goddess of the morning...	6:19
66	You must assume for similar reasons...	6:46
67	Back then many races of animals must have died off...	6:24
68	Back then they did now know how to use fire...	5:30
69	Thus, to suppose that in the past...	6:28
70	Therefore, kings were killed...	4:00
71	O unhappy race of men...	5:55
72	Now, Memmius, to find out how the nature of iron...	6:04
73	However, using mouths to imitate the liquid sound of birds...	5:41
74	Book 6	5:56
75	Now, although I have set down many things...	7:35
76	These things, you understand, take place...	5:33
77	So then we must assume the storm clouds stand...	7:06
78	The vault of heaven, set with gleaming stars...	4:55
79	To continue now with this discussion...	5:07
80	Come now, I will show you how moisture gathers...	7:54

81	To begin with, men find it strange...	5:06
82	Now I will show how that inferno is suddenly roused...	4:17
83	Pay attention now, and I will show you...	7:19
84	And furthermore, in wells water gets colder...	5:26
85	With matters of this sort, you must clearly establish...	5:36
86	And so once these points have all been fully settled...	7:00
87	Now, I will explain the nature of disease...	3:19
88	Such a cause of disease, such a poisonous atmosphere...	5:34
89	But in those days hardly any birds at all...	5:16

Total time: 8:43:01

Lucretius

(c. 99 – c. 55 BC)

On the Nature of Things

We know little about Titus Lucretius Carus (c. 99 to c. 55 BC) except that he was a Roman poet and author of *De Rerum Natura* ('On the Nature of Things'), a work which he appears to have completed but failed to revise or fully prepare for the reader. We assume from the words of the poem itself that Lucretius was a friend of Memmius, a prominent Roman political figure to whom the work is addressed. Other than that we know virtually nothing about him, other than a scurrilous story circulated hundreds of years after his death that he was driven mad by a love potion, created his poem in lucid intervals, and then killed himself.

On the Nature of Things is a long celebration of the philosophy of Epicurus, a view of life which claims that all natural phenomena are to be understood in terms of the movements and combinations of material atoms. From this it flows that

gods play no role in natural events or human affairs and have nothing to do with creating or sustaining the world, that the immortality of the soul is a myth fabricated by traditional religions for their own absurd and cruel purposes, and that the highest goal of life is the avoidance of unnecessary pain and the pursuit of appropriate pleasure, especially through contemplation. The poem is thus a long, impassioned plea for what we would now call classical humanism.

Most of *On the Nature of Things* is taken up with a wide-ranging materialist explanation for natural phenomena based on atomic theory, aimed at helping us understand how the world works without reference to divine planning or intervention. We can then accept how, like all other things, human beings, including our minds and souls, are made up of elements which combined when we were

born and which will dissolve back into particles when we die – as will the earth and our cosmos eventually. The notions of the immortality of the soul and of an afterlife of rewards and punishments are therefore specious. The gods do exist, and we can learn to contemplate them, but they are supremely uninterested in human beings and do not interfere at all in earthly matters.

Lucretius offers us a vision of the world rather different from the one our scientific traditions present. His world is in constant motion, driven by the mechanical forces of production and dissolution, and intensely vital. At the heart of it lies the random swerve (*clinamen*) of basic particles (atoms), so that there is nothing deterministic about why things occur the way they do. Nature has its regular phenomena, of course, but at the heart of it lie unpredictable motions. These can make our existence precarious and short-lived. But nature is also intensely beautiful, awe-inspiring, and worthy of contemplation. Lucretius argues that we should have the courage to accept this condition and reorientate

our lives so that we are not misled by false ambitions, unnecessary fears, and superstitions.

Interesting as Lucretius' vision of nature is, in many respects it offers few specific contributions to modern scientific knowledge and, for that reason, is generally ignored in histories of science. He is at his best when he is refuting some of the theories of other materialists and when he is arguing for the existence of atoms and their properties. These account for the ways in which a limited number of atomic shapes can produce the variety in materials we see all around us and also explain their variations in colour, smell, and other sensations. From the point of view of modern science, one of the most telling deficiencies in Lucretius is his lack of interest in universally binding theoretical explanations for natural phenomena. Having focused on a particular perception, he will then offer a list of alternative, often very ingenious theories. All those which might conceivably happen in a materialistic universe are acceptable, provided they are not contradicted by our senses; and there is no use, according to

Lucretius, trying to sort out one possible theory from another.

However grave the weaknesses in Lucretius' scientific theories, what really matters here is the eloquence of his plea for a materialistic understanding of the world and of human life. The poem is, first and foremost, driven by an urgent ethical concern that human beings accept a materialistic understanding of themselves, so that they can live better lives, free from the fears of traditional religion and the false values of political ambitions. And the enormous influence of the work stems from the emotional quality of that plea. Hence, while Lucretius may not rank among those who have contributed important theories to science, he ranks in the forefront of those who have encouraged later thinkers to adopt a materialistic vision of the world and to base their lives on the values of classical humanism.

The Latin text of Lucretius was first published as a printed book around 1473, and the first English translation appeared in the mid-17th century. Since the first appearance of the Latin text in print, the

list of those who have acknowledged Lucretius as an important influence reads like a 'Who's Who' of Western culture. It includes, as one might expect, those who welcome the poet's attacks on organised religion and his endorsement of reason and sense experience in pursuit of a life of moderate pleasure. But it also includes some pious Catholics, who seem to have experienced little difficulty with the anti-religious sentiments in the poem; leading Romantic poets; and a slew of 19th-century figures. Thomas Jefferson, it seems, owned eight copies of *On the Nature of Things*, declared himself a firm disciple of Epicurus, and may have derived that phrase 'pursuit of happiness', at least in part, from his reading of Lucretius. The poem's influence can be linked to a range of 20th-century poets and philosophers. So pervasive has its presence been in the intellectual climate that for one critic at least (Stuart Gillespie), Charles Darwin's claim that he had not read Lucretius is rather like Milton's claiming that he had not read Genesis.

Notes by Ian Johnston



Hugh Ross trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and has worked extensively in theatre, film and television. His theatre credits include *The Woman in Black*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and *Bent*. His film credits include *Charlotte Grey* and *Trainspotting*. His television credits include *Sea of Souls*, *Lovejoy* and *Absolutely Fabulous*. Hugh is also active as a director, with credits including *After Liverpool* with the Royal Shakespeare Company. He has also read *Aristotle: An Introduction* and featured in *From Shakespeare – with love* for Naxos AudioBooks.

Credits

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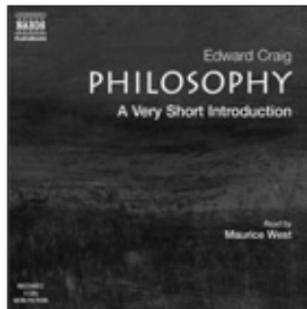
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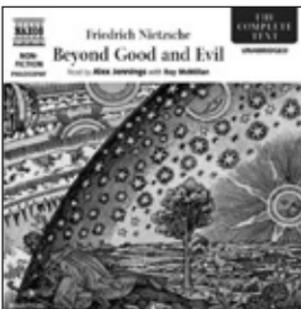
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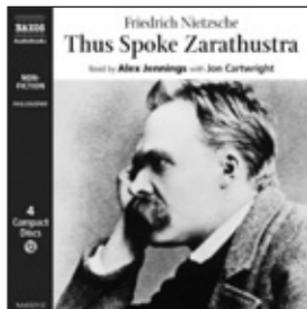
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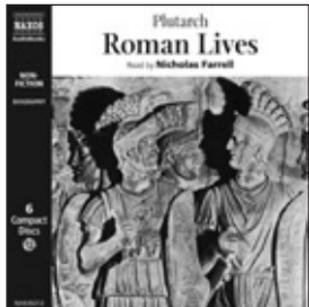
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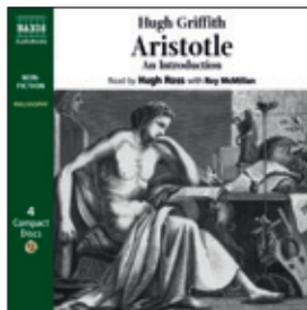
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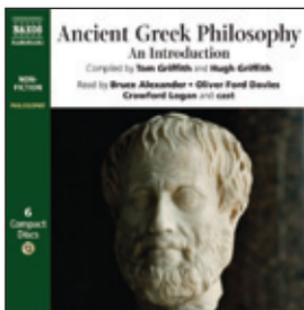
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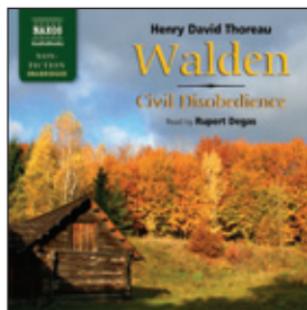
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Lucretius

On the Nature of Things

Read by **Hugh Ross**

Lucretius was born in 99 BC, and *On the Nature of Things* is his only surviving work. His aim was to free the Roman world from its two great terrors – the gods and death. Lucretius argues that the gods are not actively involved in life, so need not be appeased; and that death is the end of everything human – body and soul – and therefore should not be feared.

But *On the Nature of Things* is also a poem of striking imagery, intimate natural observation and touching pathos. It is one of the most influential writings in Western thought.

NEW VERSE TRANSLATION BY IAN JOHNSTON



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