

Jason Nehez

The Moral Philosophy of Lucretius and Aquinas: Competing Ends and Means

Should a firearm be considered *accurate*, if after it had been fired, the marksmen were to draw the bullseye, which had not previously existed, around the place in which the projectile struck? While a sufficient explanation could be provided for why the firearm was able to hit dead center each time it was fired, something would seem to be missing, or artificial, in the results calculated thereafter. The true desire or measure for accuracy of a firearm is that it reaches the desired end at which it is aimed. Therefore, it is the end or projected final result that defines the start of the consideration of the firearm and its measure of its good or bad operation.

Analogously, the human person and the actions of the person must be for some end for which a measure can be made whether the operation has been done accurately. Misunderstand the end, and you will end up with artificial results. Deny the end and you will deny the thing itself! This presentation aims to consider contradictory and competing ends. The first, that of Lucretius, an atomist of the first century BC, finds where the projectile has struck in common human experience and draws his bullseye of atomism around the experience. St. Thomas on the other hand, following the philosophy of Aristotle, aims to perfect understanding by wisdom and the ordering of ideas to make an accurate

Jason Nehez — Holy Apostles College and Seminary, Cromwell, Conn., USA
e-mail: jnehez@holyapostles.edu • ORCID: 0000-0002-6252-127X

portrayal of the science of moral philosophy that hits its target by proper aim to proper ends.

In the following presentation we will first explain wisdom and its importance to moral philosophy. We will follow with a consideration of the nature of things and the soul as told by Lucretius (for a discussion of natures is needed to understand Lucretius' ethics and moral philosophy). We will then present a brief summary on St. Thomas understanding of soul and how his faculty psychology is a superior explanation of moral philosophy. We'll conclude by showing how Lucretius' ethical system fails and to attain true happiness we must take up a faculty psychology aimed at virtue and the perfection of the soul, the principle form of the human person.

Crucial is at the start of any good endeavor to set a framework and intent of the topic of consideration. In this way we will follow the lead of St. Thomas as he considers Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and use this understanding in a comparison of his ethics to that of Lucretius and the atomists. St. Thomas' method is that of wisdom and order. As St. Thomas writes,

[I]t is the business of the wise man to order. The reason for this is that wisdom is the most powerful perfection of reason whose characteristic is to know order. Even if the sensitive powers know some things absolutely, nevertheless to know the order of one thing to another is exclusively the work of intellect or reason.¹

St. Thomas wisely identifies that our senses may know some things absolutely or immediately as they are. It is the power of the intellect and reason to know and order one thing to another. He goes on to say that there are two ways to order: parts to a whole and things to an end. Ordering things to an end is the greater because ultimately all parts to a

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Henry Regnery Company 1964), Bk. 1, Lec. 1.

whole are inclined to the ends of that whole. This will be especially critical as we consider the differences between Lucretius and St. Thomas on nature and ethics.

St. Thomas then offers four ways reason is related to order. One way considers not what reason establishes but merely beholds the nature of things. This way we would call natural philosophy and metaphysics. The second way is reason in establishing its own acts of consideration. We might describe the second way as the arrangement of concepts, ideas, and signs as we do in rational philosophy or logic. The third, and primary consideration of this presentation, is deliberation in the operation of the will. The third way is the order of voluntary acts which is moral philosophy. To complete the list, the fourth way reason relates to order is in establishing external things. The fourth way might be called the mechanical arts or those things related to building and making.

Moral philosophy does not consider just any human acts ordered to an end, but only those subject to will and reason. Those acts that happen ‘automatically’ or naturally such as generation, growth, or breathing are natural actions ordered to an end and not considered under moral philosophy. All men desire the good which is a proper end. Some might say that there are not a few men who desire evil. St. Thomas writes, “There is no problem from the fact that some men desire evil. For they desire evil only under the aspect of good, that is, insofar as they think it good. Hence their intention primarily aims at the good and only incidentally touches on the evil.”²

St. Thomas demonstrates that even those who desire evil really desire an apparent good. They desire some action they think will procure some good for them. In reality, the action is evil not only because of the desire but because of the disconnect with the reality of the nature

² *Ibid.*, Bk. 1, Lec. 10.

of the thing. In other words, the action is evil because it misunderstands some order to the reality of the thing. The desire is inclined to some good, whether real or apparent, for the one who acts rightly and the one who acts according to evil. The evil is differentiated because it acts toward an evil end. The one who acts evil acts toward an ‘apparent’ good. The one who acts evil acts according to something that only subjectively appears good to their inclination but in reality is not good. Therefore, we can begin to infer that good will have to consider some end for its achievement.

Having considered order and wisdom and how it pertains to moral considerations, I’d like to spend some time presenting Lucretius’ view on the nature of things. The order of things as they pertain to the whole is the way that we arrive at wisdom. If we have different understandings of the whole we may arrive at different conclusions of what constitutes the parts of that whole, what constitutes an appropriate end, and how we arrive at that end. Lucretius, as he represents the atomism of Democritus and his subsequent ethical theories, will demonstrate a considerable contrast to the metaphysics and ethics of Aristotle and St. Thomas. To understand how the two ethical theories diverge we first must understand the underlying foundation from which they begin.

In Lucretius’ main work, *De Rerum Natura*, or *On the Nature of Things*, we discover his views on the principles of all things including ethics. Very early on Lucretius writes,

And now, since I have taught that things cannot
Be born from nothing, nor the same, when born,
To nothing be recalled, doubt not my words,
Because our eyes no primal germs perceive;
For mark those bodies which, though known to be
In this our world, are yet invisible.³

³ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. William Ellery Leonard (Kindle Book), Loc. 103. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

Lucretius' principle ontology and primary first principle is that nothing is created from nothing neither is anything that is destroyed reverted back into nothing. All that is made up of matter has always been and will never pass away.

But we may respond that clearly some things have been that are no more, are they not? The saber toothed tiger, the city of Troy, and the poet Shakespeare can all be considered things that in some way are no longer. So what did Lucretius mean when he says that nothing can be created nor destroyed?

Lucretius hints at the tail end of the quote above that there are invisible things which have impact on our world. Not everything that moves is as a result of something visible to our eyes. He further describes those things in the following passage,

Then too we know the varied smells of things
Yet never to our nostrils see them come;
With eyes we view not burning heats, nor cold,
Nor are we wont men's voices to behold.
Yet these must be corporeal at the base,
Since thus they smite the senses: naught there is
Save body, having property of touch.⁴

Here Lucretius describes that there are varied things in the world that are not visible to the eyes yet have their impact on us. Examples are sight, sound, hearing, and some forms of touch. By observation and analogy he hopes we will conclude from these everyday common experiences that are nonetheless invisible to sight to equally trust in his theory concerning invisible principles to all material things. Lucretius is assured we will agree with him because we would in no way doubt these examples.

Lucretius notices that were all things completely solid there could be no movement. We would have one large heap of material incapable

⁴ *Ibid.*, Loc. 115.

of locomotion. He is able to overcome this challenge to his theory by identifying another physical principle, an antithesis to body: the void.

There's place intangible, a void and room.
 For were it not, things could in nowise move;
 Since body's property to block and check
 Would work on all and at times the same.
 Thus naught could evermore push forth and go,
 Since naught elsewhere would yield a starting place.⁵

According to Lucretius, this void is the space found around things which is what allows a physical thing to move. The void is also found within composite things. In other words, no composite thing is entirely made up of a solid, or a space, but a combination of body and void.

The only place one does not find void are in non composite things. In Lucretius' theory these are the primal germs or seeds. These seeds are what we might today call atoms. These are the eternal void-less initial building blocks of all things. Lucretius theory of all things and ultimately his theory of ethics will rest on this physical metaphysics of the world. Therefore, it has been and will be worthwhile to spend some effort in understanding his theory of nature.

Lucretius will unite all three of his principles: (1) nothing comes from nothing and its inverse something cannot return to nothing, (2) primal germs or body are solid, (3) and void to conclude that these initial building blocks must be eternal.

Thus if first bodies be, as I have taught,
 Solid, without a void, they must be then
 Eternal; and, if matter ne'er had been
 Eternal, long ere now had all things gone
 Back into nothing utterly, and all
 We see around from nothing had been born—
 But since I taught above that naught can be
 From naught created, nor the once begotten
 To naught be summoned back, these primal germs

⁵ *Ibid.*, Loc. 126.

Must have an immortality of frame.
And into these must each thing be resolved,
When comes its supreme hour, that thus there be
At hand the stuff for plenishing the world.⁶

Lucretius solidifies his understanding of the cosmos in this passage. The primal germs are eternal. These seeds have always been, flowing in the void, coming together into composite things by inclination to attachment to other seeds and breaking back apart into the initial building blocks and returning to the flow of the void.

The following passage provides an even more detailed look into Lucretius' understanding of the primal seeds' influence on the world,

And beaten backwards to return again,
Hither and thither in all directions round.
Lo, all their shifting movement is of old,
From the primeval atoms; for the same
Primordial seeds of things first move of self,
And then those bodies built of unions small
And nearest, as it were, unto the powers
Of the primeval atoms, are stirred up
By impulse of those atoms' unseen blows,
And these thereafter goad the next in size;
Thus motion ascends from the primevals on.⁷

The evershifting, movement of primeval atoms build to our visible composites, like a snowball collecting snowflakes while rolling down a hill. Crucial it will be later to consider how this fundamental understanding of the cosmos influences Lucretius' ethical considerations.

Before proceeding into Lucretius ethics we must first understand two more components in his metaphysical considerations. In observation of the world there are not a few peculiar happenings that require an explanation by any theory that aims to consider fundamental natures.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Loc. 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Firstly, what is the life principle that seems to be in certain things and not in others? For example, what makes the tree grow and the rock not? What is this ability of animal and human creatures to act of their own accord with no direct external influence, such as locomotion? And what of the unique human ability of rationality? Secondly, any theory considering nature must also consider the seemingly universal experience of something beyond ourselves. Are we all there is or is there something or someone more or greater beyond? To truly appreciate Lucretius' approach to questions of the good we must also understand what is Lucretius' understanding of the soul and what is Lucretius' understanding of the gods.

Firstly, we will consider Lucretius' understanding of the soul. He writes,

Wherefore no less within the primal seeds
Thou must admit, besides all blows and weight,
Some other cause of motion, whence derives
This power in us inborn, of some free act.—
Since naught from nothing can become, we see.
For weight prevents all things should come to pass
Through blows, as 'twere, by some external force;
But that man's mind itself in all it does
Hath not a fixed necessity within,
Nor is not, like a conquered thing, compelled
To bear and suffer,—this state comes to man
From that slight swerement of the elements
In no fixed line of space, in no fixed time.
Nor ever was the stock of stuff more crammed,
Nor ever, again, Sundered by bigger gaps:
For naught gives increase and naught takes away;
On which account, just as they move to-day,
The elemental bodies moved of old
And shall the same hereafter evermore.⁸

⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc. 566.

Initially, Lucretius acknowledges the problem we mentioned above. Besides those things that act externally on a person there seems to be some internal and innate source of motion in man. This source of motion, commonly referred to as the mind behaves of its own accord without external influence. Lucretius seems to admit at least some free will. In the latter half of the excerpt above Lucretius gives his explanation for the apparent free will of man.

Lucretius indicates that the source of this motion is in the structure or type of primal germs or atoms that makeup the mind or soul of man. These elements have characteristics that permit them to move in ways not fixed. Lucretius also puts special emphasis on their quantity and whether they are great or slight in number. In other words, the soul is material albeit a very unique material that allows for life, movement, and rationality. According to Lucretius, the soul is not some immaterial actualizing principle but an additional set of material atoms that happen to have the characteristics of motion, sense, thought, etc.

Secondly, we will consider Lucretius' understanding of the gods. He writes,

When they feign
That gods have established all things but for man,
They seem in all ways mightily to lapse
From reason's truth: for ev'n if ne'er I knew
What seeds primordial are, yet would I dare
This to affirm, ev'n from deep judgment based
Upon the ways and conduct of the skies—
This to maintain by many a fact besides—
That in no wise the nature of the world
For us was builded by a power divine—
So great the faults it stands encumbered with:
The which, my Memmius, later on, for thee
We will clear up.⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc 519.

Lucretius provides a two pronged assault on the idea that the world is divinely created. His first argument which is unarticulated but implied is that the understanding of the primordial seeds leads us to an understanding that all things are material. Therefore there is no room in this world for immaterial divinities. It is possible that Lucretius leaves a small window open for another separate world of divinities later in his writings.

His second argument, is a kind of argument from evil. There appears to Lucretius so many faults in the world that attribution to the divine for the creation of things seems ridiculous. If the divine is perfect and if this perfection created the world it would assuredly create it perfect. But the world is far from perfect. Therefore the world must not have been created by the divine. While the consideration of the divine is not initially necessary for the discovery of moral philosophy its presence or lack thereof certainly has influence on a theory.

While this is not a presentation of the competing metaphysical and physical theories of the traditions of Aristotle and Aquinas against Democritus and Lucretius it does seem necessary to at least demonstrate in a brief way the counter arguments of Aristotle and Aquinas so that it can be seen their respective ethical theories originate from different principles. Differing initial principles serve as a kind of symptom indicator that perhaps there are different ends guiding the whole of the aim. As argued above Lucretius, and his predecessor Democritus, believed that all things were made up of atoms and void. Therefore, nothing came from nothing and no thing could ever be created that never was previously in act. Aristotle and St. Thomas believe that the atomists misunderstand a crucial part of being and non-being.

In his commentary on Aristotle's physics, St. Thomas writes against the premises of the atomists,

All of these philosophers were deceived because they did not know how to distinguish between potency and act. For being in

potency is, as it were, a mean between pure non-being and being in act. Therefore, those things which come to be naturally do not come to be from nonbeing simply, but from being in potency, and not, indeed, from being in act, as they thought. Hence things which come to be did not necessarily pre-exist in act, as they said, but only in potency.¹⁰

The act-potency distinction is one that becomes crucial when considering these two contrasting theories. St. Thomas is trying to say here that something does not come from nothing *per se* but can *per accidens*. In other words, pure non-being does not have any causal power but being which has a privation of form is being-in-potency to the act of form. The example often used is the statue to bronze. A block of bronze is only raw material but has potential to be a figure. The figure, the form in this scenario, is that which appears after the artist applies the art of his craft to the bronze. The statue then did not come from non-being but rather from the potency of bronze to the form or figure of the art.

Analogously, material beings stand in potency in prime matter to act or actual existence. Therefore, not every primal seed need be in motion or moving to produce something. Neither need there be any being in act to produce a new being in act. Rather, those things only need exist potentially. St. Thomas says it more clearly later,

And this is clear for two reasons. First, matter is non-being accidentally, whereas privation is non-being *per se*. For ‘unshaped’ signifies non-being, but ‘bronze’ does not signify non-being except insofar as ‘unshaped’ happens to be in it. Secondly, matter is ‘near to the thing’ and exists in some respect, because it is in potency to the thing and is in some respect the substance of the thing, since it enters into the constitution of the substance. But this cannot be said of privation.¹¹

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath & W. Edmund Thirlkel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), Bk. 1, # 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Bk. 1, # 126.

In this passage we see a clearer picture of St. Thomas' explanation. Our *per se* non-being is the unshaped, the lack of form. But the material is non-being only accidentally. The bronze exists in potency to a form that only need be applied. Analogously, the man exists in potency to prime matter, the actualizing form need only be applied.

In addition to act and potency we must consider substance in relation to things. St. Thomas says that every thing must be some whole that can be maintained through motion. Motion here signifying any change and not strictly locomotion. There must be a subject unifying the contrary opposite things as it moves toward something. As the caterpillar goes through metamorphosis into the butterfly, there must be one subject that maintains the unity from that form of the species to the next. That unifying thing is the substance. The substance or the subject is first what is and in what the accidents inhere.

Now we can know that any living subject must be a composite. Some material or body is composed with an activating principle, something that causes motion and the material that makes up the thing in motion. As the shape to the bronze, the activating principle is to the composite. In his commentary on *De Anima*, St. Thomas writes,

Since, then, there are three sorts of substance: the compound; matter; and form; and since the soul is neither the compound—the living body itself; nor its matter—the body as the subject that receives life; we have no choice but to say that the soul is a substance in the manner of a form that determines or characterises a particular sort of body, i.e. a physical body potentially alive.¹²

The soul then is the substantial form which gives “shape” to the body. It is the active principle that brings into being the potency in the material body.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster, O.P., and Sylvester Humphries, O.P. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), # 221.

The implication in St. Thomas' writings is both that the soul cannot be material and also that it cannot be separate from the whole that is the living thing. Firstly, it cannot be material, for if it were it would be present in the material already. But something separate must inform the material to unify in such and such a whole. Lucretius would have us believe that the atoms just behave that way because they have from all eternity and we really should not question that fact or first principle. But it is crucial to ask what is the one unifying substance to the thing? How can that unifying substance, if material, know itself? Sight cannot see itself seeing, nor hearing hear itself hearing. There is an ability of soul toward a self reflection that lies unexplained by a strictly material make-up.

Secondly, just as the form of the statue is not separate from the bronze but is a part of the composite substance of the statue so the form of the living thing, the soul, cannot be separate from the whole organism. It is an all or nothing composite in actuality. Soul and body together make the man. Remove the soul and you have a corpse. Remove the body and you have a disembodied spirit.

At this point ready are we to consider what impact this understanding of the soul has on the study of the good, or ethics. To direct our course, let's refer to Peter A. Redpath's work, *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, in which the author writes,

St. Thomas understands moral principles to grow out of a facultative moral psychology (faculties of the human soul naturally seeking facultative perfection and the perfection of the human soul and the entire person). More: Even a correct understanding of St. Thomas's teaching about the nature of philosophy and science essentially presupposes, and grows out of, his teaching about the faculty psychology of the human person.¹³

¹³ Peter A. Redpath, *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas: An Introduction to Ragamuffin Ethics* (St. Louis: En Route Books & Media, 2019, Kindle edition), 72, Loc. 1194.

Redpath shows us that the understanding of St. Thomas is that moral principles are the result of the formal principle of the human person seeking perfection in its facultative abilities. So any theory that purports to get right moral considerations must first get right the understanding of the soul.

In initially understanding the soul we must understand how it integrates or stands in relation to the body. We experience certain acts which seem integral to material experience and the effects of the body but whose results impact the soul. These acts are those between organizations and objects through relation.

For example, the act of hearing, walking, or conversing is the effect of a coincidence of opposites: of being able to unite two opposites into an organizational whole. For instance, the act of hearing is the effect caused in the power to hear by an external stimulus (which St. Thomas calls a “formal object”) that we call “sound.” Hence, St. Thomas says that powers (faculties) are distinguished by their acts and acts by their formal objects. By this he means that acts are effects generated within organizations through a relation that unites an ability and an external stimulus.¹⁴

The abilities of our soul are inclined by external objects. The acts that occur from these inclinations are those that can have moral consequences as we consider their relations to ourselves and to others.

This stands in contrast to Lucretius who claims that it is the internal structure of the primal seeds that provokes a thing to motion and consideration. And so it will benefit for us once more to take up the thought of the atomists to consider how their metaphysical and physical theories grow into their ethical theories and whether there is any wisdom in the theory. The first text I’d like to consider that begins our inquiry into the ethical considerations is the following from Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82, Loc. 1340.

For summits of power and mastery of the world.
O wretched minds of men! O blinded hearts!
In how great perils, in what darks of life
Are spent the human years, however brief!
O not to see that Nature for herself
Barks after nothing, save that pain keep off,
Disjoined from the body, and that mind enjoy
Delightful feeling, far from care and fear!
Therefore we see that our corporeal life
Needs little, altogether, and only such
As takes the pain away, and can besides
Strew underneath some number of delights.¹⁵

Firstly, Lucretius laments the plight of man. He beckons us to consider a common human experience. Namely, that every member of the human species has one life to live and that life seems far too short. Immediately following Lucretius makes an ethical statement. He says that we (our corporeal life) need only that much that takes pain away and gives delight. He believes this because “Nature . . . barks after nothing.” It is thus possible to understand him to be saying that the primal germs, in their constant flow, amalgamated to produce *you*, and at some point they will return to their former un-combined state. Therefore, in their combination there is no combining whole that desires some further perfection but instead just the freedom from pain (disintegration) or the reception of pleasure (increase in combination). This begs the question of how a material set of atoms, no matter the makeup, would understand it to be a whole and to experience pain or pleasure? There is no explanation from Lucretius other than the mere observation that there are wholes juxtaposed to a commitment to atomism. He draws the target around where experience has struck to justify his theory.

In response to the consideration of evil, Lucretius writes,

¹⁵ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Loc. 443.

Nor may we suppose
 Evil can e'er be rooted up so far
 That one man's not more given to fits of wrath,
 Another's not more quickly touched by fear,
 A third not more long-suffering than he should.
 And needs must differ in many things besides
 The varied natures and resulting habits
 Of humankind—of which not now can I
 Expound the hidden causes, nor find names
 Enough for all the divers shapes of those
 Primordials whence this variation springs.¹⁶

To his credit, Lucretius seems to have an accurate observation of the human condition and how it is inclined to pain, pleasure, good, and evil. But as has been argued throughout this presentation, Lucretius attributes these differences to the varied shapes of the primordial elements. As we have shown and will demonstrate further later, the divergence of the opinions of the two authors, Lucretius and St. Thomas, is in a kind of meta-ethical consideration (to use more modern terminology). Their differing initial conditions will lead them to differing conclusions, as with any scientific consideration the end guides the initial course.

We have demonstrated thus far that Lucretius considers the motion of sense not to be within an immaterial soul whose faculties seek perfection but rather in the motion of sense caused by those motions of the primordial seeds.

Their elements primordial are confined
 By all the body, and own no power free
 To bound around through interspaces big,
 Thus, shut within these confines, they take on
 Motions of sense, which, after death, thrown out
 Beyond the body to the winds of air.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1038.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1132.

At the loss of life is the loss of the soul. For the soul is a corporeal part. Just as corporeal as a hand or foot or eye. Not only is the soul corporeal but the I, the self aware person, that participated in the awareness generated by this material soul, will cease to exist and be no more.

Lucretius does not believe in the permanence of self beyond death. His argument is that if the soul is immortal we would remember our soul's life before birth. We cannot remember a time before birth, therefore the soul must not be immortal.

And, even if time collected after death
The matter of our frames and set it all
Again in place as now, and if again
To us the light of life were given, O yet
That process too would not concern us aught,
When once the self-succession of our sense
Has been asunder broken. And now and here,
Little enough we're busied with the selves
We were aforesaid, nor, concerning them,
Suffer a sore distress. For shouldst thou gaze
Backwards across all yesterdays of time
The immeasurable, thinking how manifold
The motions of matter are, then couldst thou well
Credit this too: often these very seeds
(From which we are to-day) of old were set
In the same order as they are to-day-
Yet this we can't to consciousness recall
Through the remembering mind.¹⁸

According to Lucretius, the seeds that make up me were perhaps capable of arrangement identical to ours in some time past. Additionally they are even capable of the same arrangement we would consider to constitute our very being sometime in the future. But when the motion of sense is ceased, the succession of memory ceases. Memory then lies in the motion of the primordials and not in a faculty of the soul to retain images of sense data. And memory, the storing of images as a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1251.

result of sense experience, is how our substance is sustained through time. No answer is provided concerning that this memory is also just the striking of atoms one to another and how these atoms would know they have had such an experience.

To his credit Lucretius follows his theory to a logical conclusion concerning death. He writes,

Nothing for us there is to dread in death,
 No wretchedness for him who is no more,
 The same estate as if ne'er born before,
 When death immortal hath ta'en the mortal life.¹⁹

No hope for the immortal is given to our bodies nor even our intellect. We have been arranged and one day we will be de-arranged by the eternal flow of the primordial seeds and the void.

To my surprise, Lucretius expects his readers to come to two conclusions: (1) be not afraid of death for it is literally nothing (“Therefore death to us / Is nothing, nor concerns us in the least, / Since nature of mind is mortal evermore.”²⁰), (2) find some comfort in death as it is the rest of your toils and burdens in life. The second conclusion is illustrated in the following passage,

For if thy life aforesaid and behind
 To thee was grateful, and not all thy good
 Was heaped as in sieve to flow away
 And perish unavailingly, why not,
 Even like a banqueter, depart the halls,
 Laden with life? why not with mind content
 Take now, thou fool, thy unafflicted rest?
 But if whatever thou enjoyed hath been
 Lavished and lost, and life is now offence,
 Why seekest more to add—which in its turn
 Will perish foully and fall out in vain?
 O why not rather make an end of life,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1261.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1247.

Of labour? For all I may devise or find
To pleasure thee is nothing: all things are
The same forever. Though not yet thy body
Wrinkles with years, nor yet the frame exhausts
Outworn, still things abide the same, even if
Thou goest on to conquer all of time
With length of days.²¹

Difficult is to see how one can define good and evil if there is nothing to achieve, nothing to seek after the expiration of one's soul. If the end of oneself spells the end of everything, why not seek the end sooner by one's own hand in times of ill fortune? Why not expire those in extreme suffering as a kind of mercy, whatever mercy may mean in a context of complete dissolution? Happiness then seems unachievable since all things are of temporary value.

If happiness is unachievable there does not seem to be any sense in virtue (or vice) for why would someone try to achieve a habit for the perfection of a nature that can have no perfection? You had no control of the arrangement of the primordial seeds that make up your constitution and you will have no control of their future un-arrangement. What matter is it at the moment to try to be better arranged? Therefore, arriving at Lucretius' logical end we are left wanting for a consistent and coherent understanding of morality, ethics, and the human person. In search of the missing elements in Lucretius' thought, then, let's turn now to the considerations of St. Thomas and Aristotle.

As we have shown above, the soul according to St. Thomas is the formal cause of the human person. In contrast to Lucretius who says that we are what we are by the chance combinational behavior of primordial seeds, St. Thomas believes that in fact our sense organs grow out of the soul to aid the soul and not the other way around.

Thomas finds neither explanation viable because the powers do not, by nature, exist to help the organs; the organs exist to service

²¹ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1288.

the faculties. Human beings do not have different sense faculties because we have different sense organs. We have different sense organs because we have different sense faculties. The organs are naturally adapted to assist the faculties perform their proper operations; not vice versa. In the same way, he adds, the natural order of the universe provides different media within which the senses operate, according to the compatibility of the acts to the powers. Moreover, the human intellect (better, the individual person), not the sense organs or sense faculties, know.²²

Here is where Lucretius will be turned on his head and the diverging of theories will occur. As Redpath shows, St. Thomas indicates that our souls have proper operations. Those faculties in seeking to perform their operation inform the body to produce the sense organs for proper facultative operation. Herein lies a possibility for a better and a worse. The better, the good habit leading to perfection and culminating in happiness, will be virtue. The worse, the bad habit leading to disunity, will be vice. Better is still to say that not the faculties but the organizational whole or the human person is the one who knows and performs the operations. There will be a few more faculties than the sense faculties for us to consider before concluding our discussion of St. Thomas.

In addition to the sense faculties of the soul St. Thomas identifies four interior senses as well. The common sense, imagination, estimative or cogitative sense, and sense memory. The first two are for the reception of sensible forms. The common sense brings together all the individual sense data into one unified whole known as a form. The imagination stores these forms for later use. The estimative power in animals and its analogue in humans, the cogitative power, is the faculty of soul that apprehends forms that cannot be conveyed by external sense qualities. These might be something like danger or difficulty. The sense memory then stores these forms for later recall. The imagination is to

²² Redpath, *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 93, Loc. 1522.

the common sense what the sense memory is to the estimative or cogitative sense.

Crucial for us to consider is why the estimative and cogitative sense are different and called by different names in animals and humans. In animals we call this the estimative sense because it senses a good and an evil by a kind of natural instinct. But humans have an intellect, therefore we discover good and evil by the relation of ideas to self preservation.

The intellect then also has an intellectual memory that works “‘sylogistically’, as it were, seeking for a recollection of the past by the application of individual judgments.”²³ This is crucial because St. Thomas identifies that forms incline the intellectual soul toward something. Therefore, the intellectual soul must have an appetitive faculty.

The appetitive faculty is significant in our discussion because in this power of the soul man is inclined to pursue the good and avoid evil. Therefore, it is the soul or the whole person that pursues good and evil or her own free will. This stands in contrast to the movement of tiny material particles that incline the corporeal to avoid pain and to seek pleasure proposed by Lucretius. Instead St. Thomas demonstrates that the actualizing and individuating form, the soul, is inclined to seek what is really and truly good for itself.

How then does this faculty of the soul operate? Redpath writes,

In a human being, Thomas maintains, the sense appetite of the intellectual soul needs to be divided in two: 1) an appetite through which the intellectual soul inclines to seek what is suitable, according to the senses and intellect, and to flee from what is hurtful (St. Thomas calls this the “concupiscible” appetite); and 2) another appetite whereby a human being resists attacks that hinder getting what is suitable, humanly good, and harms a human being (St. Thomas calls this the “irascible” appetite). He immediately adds that, because its tendency is to overcome and rise a-

²³ *Ibid.*, 100, Loc. 1634.

bove difficulties that can hurt a human being, the proper object of the irascible appetite is something difficult, dangerous.²⁴

Redpath explains of St. Thomas that all forms have a virtual quantity, or an intensive quantum greatness, to incline the intellectual soul. In one way the soul is inclined to pursue what is good and beneficial and flee what is bad and harmful. This power is called the concupiscible appetite. This can be compared to what Lucretius identified in animal and human life to seek pleasure and avoid pain but it differs greatly in its origin and intent. The concupiscible appetite for St. Thomas inclines the soul to what makes it greater, more perfect, according to its nature. What inclines the soul for Lucretius is what relieves some slight pain in the miserable short existence of an arrangement of material parts.

St. Thomas identifies another species of the appetite which he calls the irascible. This is an essential consideration because it makes sense of things that may at first be difficult but ultimately lead to good. Examples may be long study to achieve a degree for better career advancement, or a long journey to arrive at a desired location, or extreme physical exercise to achieve some physical goal like military service, mountain climbing, or the olympics. This appetite then is a resistance to hindrances for achieving goods. If some hurdle stands in the way, the irascible appetite inclines the person to overcome the obstacle to achieve that which the concupiscible appetite is inclined. "For this reason, he adds, all the emotions of the irascible appetite rise from those of the concupiscible appetite and ultimately terminate in them."²⁵

Right action is the proper use according to reason of these inclinations or appetites that arise from the faculties. Redpath explains its order,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104, Loc. 1697.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 105, Loc. 1710.

Hence, to clarify his point, he makes an analogy. He says that just as in syllogistic matters we draw particular conclusions from universal principles, premises, so in matters relating to the relation between higher and lower faculties and appetites, universal reason directs the sensitive appetite (for example, just like a CEO directs middle management). Because the sense appetite divides into concupiscible and irascible, *in obeying particular reason this whole appetite and its parts obey universal reason.*²⁶

Just as we draw particular syllogistic conclusions from universal principles, we also draw particular moral and appetitive conclusions from universal principles.

Does just any particular conclusion that follows from a universal principle become a moral action? St. Thomas answers in the negative and shows that it is the appetite as it operates toward the good. He writes,

The reason for this is that moral virtue pertains to the appetite that operates according as it is moved by the good apprehended. When the appetite operates often, therefore, it must be often moved by its object. In this the appetite follows a certain tendency in accordance with the mode of nature, as many drops of water falling on a rock hollow it out. Thus it is obvious that the moral virtues are not in us by nature, nor are they in us contrary to nature. We do have a natural aptitude to acquire them inasmuch as the appetitive potency is naturally adapted to obey reason. But we are perfected in these virtues by use, for when we act repeatedly according to reason, a modification is impressed in the appetite by the power of reason. This impression is nothing else but moral virtue.²⁷

St. Thomas impresses on us that we are not naturally perfect nor are we naturally evil. As we are inclined to the good and obey universal and particular reason to achieve the good, a modification takes place in the soul to continue to act according to right principles. This modification he calls moral virtue.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 105–106, Loc. 1723.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, # 249.

If the root of our proverbial tree is the appetite in the soul, the very place where St. Thomas diverges from Lucretius and properly considers moral faculty psychology, then virtue is its fruit that the science is in fact true. For both philosophers start their endeavor to explain and order according to the pursuits of wisdom. What other reason is there for order of man than happiness? As we described Lucretius would have you rest in the fact that one day all your pain will go away because it will be as if you were never born. But St. Thomas gives us a different path to happiness, one that lies through the work of virtue. Here he describes,

If, therefore, man's proper role consists in living a certain kind of life, namely, according to the activity of reason, it follows that it is proper to a good man to act well according to reason, and to the very good man or the happy man to do this in superlative fashion. But this belongs to the nature of virtue that everyone who has virtue should act well according to it, as a horse with good training or "virtue" should run well. If, then, the activity of the very good man or the happy man is to act well, in fact to act to the best of his ability according to reason, it follows that the good of man, which is happiness, is an activity according to virtue. If there is only one virtue for man, his activity according to that virtue will be happiness. If there are a number of such virtues for man, happiness will be the activity according to the best of them. The reason is that happiness is not only the good of man but the best good.²⁸

St. Thomas connects the reality of the soul to the appetitive faculties and to the reality and desire to do those acts according to the good. These actions done well and the results of such actions is in fact the perfection and happiness of man. Without the reality of the soul we could not arrive at the end. Without knowing the appropriate end, at least in a first obscure way, we can not begin our inquiry in the proper way.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, # 128.

St. Thomas even goes so far to say, “It is universally true that virtuous operations are pleasurable to virtuous persons who love virtue.”²⁹ Acting according to right reason because one desires to do such actions is universally pleasurable to those people who have those inclinations. Therefore, sufficient is the consideration up to this point of St. Thomas understanding of the soul and faculty psychology to at minimum demonstrate its superiority to Lucretius’ atomism and subsequent ethical theories. At best we have shown St. Thomas’ teaching is a still very rich and viable understanding of the human person and moral philosophy today.

Before concluding our investigation crucial is to consider Lucretius’ other contention about the world that may have had some impact on his ethical theories. If we recall, Lucretius gave two arguments against any divine origin for the world, any virtue, nor any eternal happiness. St. Thomas comes to a different conclusion but one that better follows his premises to a proper conclusion. Let us consider the following text,

He says first that if the gods (i.e. beings called gods by the ancients) make gifts to men, it is reasonable that happiness be the gift of the supreme God because it is the most excellent of human goods. It is obvious that a thing is led to a higher end by a higher virtue or power, for instance, man is led to a higher end by military art than by bridle-making. Hence it is reasonable that the ultimate end, happiness, should come to man from the highest power of all, the supreme God.³⁰

There is not enough space here to consider Aristotle nor St. Thomas demonstrations for God’s existence. Both authors nonetheless take for granted their demonstrations or the audience acceptability of the divine. They therefore conclude it is not outside of reason that the highest gift come from the highest source. If virtuous activity leads to

²⁹ *Ibid.*, # 155.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, # 167.

man's ultimate happiness it should not be ruled out at the start, as Lucretius did, that it may come from God. On the contrary, it seems more reasonable to think that such a gift would come from God.

Already anticipating a counterargument, St. Thomas writes,

First, the fact that happiness has a human cause does not do away with its chief characteristic, that it is most excellent and divine. He says that if happiness is not a gift sent directly by God but comes to men by virtue as a thing acquired by habit, or by study as a thing to be learned, or by exercise as a thing to be had by training, nevertheless it seems to be something especially divine. The reason is that since happiness is the reward and end of virtue, it follows that it is something most excellent and divine and blessed. A thing is not called divine only because it comes from God but also because it makes us like God in goodness.³¹

St. Thomas anticipating an objection that virtue is not in us naturally and rather that it comes by work, education, and trials still maintains a divine origin. He can still hold to his position because of the consideration of the end. Even if it is not given directly by God in some supernatural encounter the end of virtue is happiness which is the highest end and therefore most apt to be called divine. Therefore, that we end in virtue's perfection in the divine is sufficient to say that it is reasonable to consider a divine origin.

In conclusion, it is the aim of the wise man to order in both speculative and moral matters. We demonstrated that although perhaps internally consistent, Lucretius atomism and the following ethical theories it produced leave much to be wanted. No satisfactory explanation is provided for what constitutes the good, what motivates us to avoid evil, and how to arrive at true happiness. In stark contrast, St. Thomas following Aristotle, with advanced scientific precision takes up all of the above considerations and provides accurate answers to these most pressing questions of natural and ethical considerations. As the pursuit

³¹ *Ibid.*, # 169.

of happiness comes to the attention of all who share the human experience, happiness as acquired through the virtue that is a result of an understanding of faculty psychology as proposed by St. Thomas and Aristotle seems superior to that of the atomism and material psychology of Lucretius. That we have a soul and it inclines to the good and perfection of its nature appears to hit the target for which we are aiming for a proper explanation of moral philosophy.



The Moral Philosophy of Lucretius and Aquinas: Competing Ends and Means

SUMMARY

The author first explains wisdom and its importance to moral philosophy. Secondly, he follows with a consideration of the nature of things and the soul as told by Lucretius. Then he presents a brief summary on St. Thomas understanding of soul and how his faculty psychology is a superior explanation of moral philosophy. The author concludes by showing how Lucretius' ethical system fails and to attain true happiness we must take up a faculty psychology aimed at virtue and the perfection of the soul, the principle form of the human person.

KEYWORDS

Lucretius, Thomas Aquinas, end, means, atomism, Thomism, wisdom, moral philosophy, human nature, soul, faculty psychology, ethics, happiness, virtue, human person.

REFERENCES

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*. Translated by Kenelm Foster, O.P., and Sylvester Humphries, O.P. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*. Translated by Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath & W. Edmund Thirlkel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by C. I. Litzinger, O.P. Henry Regnery Company 1964.
- Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*. Translated by William Ellery Leonard. Kindle Book. Available online at: http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.html. Accessed Mar. 21, 2021.
- Redpath, Peter A. *The Moral Psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas: An Introduction to Ragamuffin Ethics*. St. Louis: En Route Books & Media, 2019, Kindle edition.