

ABSTRACT

“Life, a Labor Void and Brief”: Viewing Ebola Through the Lens of Lucretius and Virgil

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The reality of death through disease has influenced the behaviors and actions of humankind since the beginning of history. Although the concept of disease has been present throughout our history, and has evolved with our ever-increasing knowledge of its sources and causes, society is still ravaged by illness-causing microbes and struggles with how to confront the inevitability of death. In looking back to ancient authors and historians, such as Thucydides, Lucretius, and Virgil, and their accounts of plague and disease, I hope to elucidate the inherent reactions of human nature to disease and explore their implications in society. Furthermore, as each of these authors is writing to a specific purpose, illuminating this purpose in the context of the plague will perhaps lend hope - or even a cure - to the fear of death from disease.

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“LIFE, A LABOR VOID AND BRIEF”: VIEWING EBOLA THROUGH THE LENS OF
LUCRETIUS AND VIRGIL

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family – Mom, Dad, Jen, Savannah, and Trey. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to attend the incredible Baylor University, and encouraging me to achieve my greatest goals. I could not have attained all that I have without your support and inspiration!

CHAPTER ONE

Plague

Throughout history, mankind has faced the inevitability of death through the reality of disease. The Ebola plague has recently made this reality all the more evident. Even with scientific and technological advances of the modern age, a single virus can still devastate a community, nation, or continent. In some ways, modern science has given developed parts of the world a sense of security and imperviousness to infectious disease and the belief that modern medicine is infallible in these instances. However, it takes only one instance – such as a nurse contracting Ebola in the heart of Dallas, despite protocol and protection – to obliterate such a fallible sense of security. At this point the true nature of disease exerts its influences on the human race, and the impact of the reality of death becomes apparent.

For as long as mankind has existed, an ever-shifting balance has persisted between man and disease. Only recently mankind began to have the upper hand – or at least the appearance of it – in the battle against pathogens. The first explorations of America, only a few hundred years ago, bear the evidence of the influence of disease on the functioning of civilization. Smallpox and measles, brought to the Americas by Europeans, decimated native populations and gave ample opportunity to the explorers to overtake their lands and claim them as their own. However, the

European conquistadors faced their own new, yet unseen, enemies in the New World, in the form of yellow fever. The sociopolitical impacts of these viruses and either the presence or lack of immunity in certain populations are astounding. Had it not been for smallpox and measles killing the natives of the Americas, and yellow fever scaring away strong European forces, the United States might not have acquired land and become a country as it did.¹

As the world becomes more interconnected and globalized, the landscape that viruses affect has grown larger. Although the modern world has yet to encounter a single pandemic as devastating as the 1918 influenza outbreak, that killed an estimated forty-to-sixty million people, the fear of such an event occurring is certainly present. One needs look only at the numbers to understand why the fear of disease is so strong, even with the availability of modern medicine and treatments. In the 20th century alone, smallpox has killed nearly 300 million people and almost 40 million have been infected with HIV/AIDS.² These are but two of the many viruses that affect human life and have dictated geographic, economic, and religious changes throughout history.

Although vaccines have eradicated many viruses that ravaged the developed world up until the 20th century (e.g. smallpox, measles, and polio), the 21st century has ushered in a new era of plagues that threaten these triumphs of medicine. The coronavirus SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) made headlines in the early 2000s as it spread from Asia to over two dozen countries before it was controlled a

¹ Oldstone (2009) 3

² Oldstone (2009) 4 – influenza outbreak

few months later after infecting over 8000 individuals, tragically killing 774.³

Despite the fact that the outbreak was halted before it became an epidemic, the search for a vaccine still continues because little is known about the immunology and pathogenesis of SARS and similar coronaviruses. Unfortunately, SARS is not the only virus without a fail-proof vaccine. If anything, the transition from the end of the era of smallpox to the beginning of the threat of global epidemics is accompanied by a growing rift between what is known about and what is not known about viruses.

Among the general population, sensationalized news reporting exacerbates the lack of adequate knowledge on viruses that threaten to become epidemic. Whereas in the past, evidence of devastating outbreaks was found only among those who had survived and told their tale; now the endless cycle of news updates from around the world allows the greater part of the population to witness diseases ravaging those both near and far. The social impacts of such awareness are intriguing, particularly as was seen in the most recent outbreak of Ebola in Africa. Although there existed a mild concern in developed countries at first for the distress of those in the midst of the outbreak, not until Ebola was found in the United States did a nationwide panic ensue. The social and moral ramifications of such attitudes, that regard the plight of others as not our concern until it likewise becomes our own plight, are significant, especially when they concern disease. Is it a natural human instinct to avoid what could cause death until it becomes unavoidable? Or is it an indication of moral decline and disruption of civilization in the face of disease and death?

³ CDC

The international community has been aware of Ebola since 1976, when it first appeared in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. Since then, there have been multiple recurrent outbreaks in Africa and sporadic incidents in the United States and Europe, all leading up to the recent epidemic in western Africa. Ebola is a virus in the Filoviridae family. Five different Ebola virus species have been identified since its initial appearance in the 1970s, with the most pathogenic being the *Zaire ebolavirus* (ZEBOV) currently affecting West Africa. The case-fatality rate ranges from 25% in the least pathogenic *Bundibugyo ebolavirus* to 90% in the *Zaire ebolavirus*.⁴ Although scientists and researchers have discovered much about this family of viruses that usually cause hemorrhagic fevers through the recent epidemics, our knowledge of these viruses still has significant gaps that hinder our ability to make adequate plans to prevent the further transmission of the virus.

One important aspect of Ebola is that it originates from animal reservoirs – that is, the natural hosts of the virus are animals. In particular, scientists have traced Ebola back to fruit bats, monkeys, chimpanzees, gorillas, and porcupines.⁵ Thus the virus usually originates from rural regions before it is found in urban and metropolitan areas. The transmission from animals to people, and then among people, follows a path through direct contact with blood, secretions, organs, or bodily fluids of the infected species. Burials and burial sites are common locations of transmitting and contracting the virus, because of the close proximity and interaction with the infected deceased -- Thucydides, Lucretius, and Virgil all notably comment on burial sites and rituals contributing to the chaos and disorder

⁴ Marzi et al. (2011)

⁵ WHO – Ebola factsheet

of a society battling a plague. Once infected, the virus has an incubation period of two to twenty-one days, although people do not become infectious until they begin to display symptoms. The morbidity of Ebola is evident by its symptoms, including fever, muscle pain, headaches, and sore throat at first; these are followed shortly by vomiting, diarrhea, impaired kidney and liver function, and both internal and external bleeding.⁶

These symptoms are brought about supposedly by multiple actions of the virus. During studies of early Ebola outbreaks during the 1970s and later in the 1990s, mRNA evidence was found that suggested the activation of multiple cytokines. Cytokines are small proteins that are instigated in cell signaling. When released by certain cells, they affect the behavior of other cells particularly in immune responses and most commonly stimulate the movement of cells towards sites of inflammation or infection. In cases of acute Ebola, the cytokines were found to cause several forms of shock, or low blood perfusion to tissues in the body, and certain defects in vascular permeability.⁷ Thus, the hemorrhagic feature of Ebola likely arises from the action of cytokines. Furthermore, during the symptomatic phase of Ebola, certain soluble glycoproteins found in the circulatory system resemble viral glycoproteins produced by the editing of the same gene. Thus, it has been suggested that these glycoproteins act as an immunologic decoy, effectively tricking the immune system into not responding to the actual viral infection. The lack of an immune response due to the immunosuppressive mechanisms used by

⁶ WHO

⁷ Peters, LeDuc (1999) xii.

the virus contributes greatly to the morbidity and mortality of the virus, and augments the fear it incites.

Until the summer of 2015, the only treatment for these frightening, morbid symptoms was supportive care via rehydration with oral and intravenous fluids or the treatment of specific symptoms. The 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa has, as of November of 2015, infected 28,594 individuals and killed 11,314 of those infected, reviving the necessity of searching for a vaccine and an effective means of halting further transmission of the virus.⁸ In the midst of the outbreak, a study sponsored and led by the WHO brought a novel Ebola virus vaccine to Guinea. The vaccination trial began in affected Guinean communities in March 2015 by using a ring vaccination strategy also employed in the eradication of smallpox. The intensive strategy involves not only identifying a patient as newly infected with Ebola, but also then tracking down their contacts and second-degree contacts. Particularly in rural areas, where populations are dispersed, the ring vaccination method requires immense skill and dedication not only by the vaccinators, but also by the communities affected.⁹ Nevertheless, the recombinant, replication-competent vesicular stomatitis virus-based candidate vaccine, which expresses the glycoprotein of the *Zaire ebolavirus* has so far proved 100% efficacy. The vaccine itself works by causing a transient systemic infection, thereby producing a rapid immune response against surface proteins of the Ebola virus.¹⁰ The results of the Phase III efficacy trial suggest that the vaccine, entitled rVSV-ZEBOV has the

⁸ CDC

⁹ Lancet (2015) 830

¹⁰ Henao-Restrepo, et al. (2015)

potential to be highly effective in preventing Ebola and can best protect a population when delivered via ring vaccination during an outbreak. The establishment of a functional vaccine against Ebola virus is a monumental step both in furthering our understanding of viruses and in decreasing and preventing further deaths caused by the virus.

But what about those to whom the vaccine is not yet available, or those to whom the vaccine is arriving too late, with family members and friends already dead from the virus? The psychological and physical devastation of such a plague cannot easily be ignored, nor have similar plagues that overwhelmed entire populations been disregarded in the past. A significant portion of the population of West Africa has been lost to Ebola, leaving a region already underdeveloped in infrastructure and having only recently emerged from a period of political instability and conflict in an even more perilous situation.

Yet even as the plague of Ebola appears to be diminishing for the majority of the world, its threat is not ended. As the end of the second year of the outbreak approaches, the latent effects of the Ebola virus are becoming known. A British nurse who contracted Ebola in January and was believed to have made a full recovery, was taken to the hospital in October 2015 on account of delayed complications from the virus. Another individual, 39-year-old Pauline Cafferkey, was hospitalized in the isolation unit at the Royal Free Hospital in London in mid-October, also suffering from “an unusual late complication” of Ebola contracted in Sierra Leone.¹¹ The post-Ebola symptoms of American doctor Ian Crozier are

¹¹ Washington Post

perhaps the most studied, as he was one of the first to contract Ebola in Sierra Leone in September 2014 and then be transferred back to Emory Hospital in Atlanta for treatment. Although he left the hospital in October with no evidence of the virus in his blood, two months later he had developed inflammation and high blood pressure in his left eye. Fluid from his eye revealed very high levels of the virus that is believed to have caused the inflammation and the strange effect of changing his eye color from blue to green.¹²

These three patients observed in the developed world likely provide a hint as to what post-Ebola symptoms might emerge amidst the wreckage the virus has already wrought. In recounting her own post-Ebola symptoms, Nina Pham, a nurse at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital who contracted the virus from a patient at the hospital, stated that she is “frightened by the unknown possible long-term effects of Ebola and experimental treatments used to save her life.”¹³ As one of the few Americans to encounter Ebola first-hand, and in many ways as unprepared as those in West Africa in how to protect herself and her patient, Pham offers a rare insight into the difficulties experienced by underdeveloped countries in combating plagues.

How should we, as citizens of the world, approach the plight that plagues inflict upon populations both near and far? Because plagues have been an inherent aspect of human life since the beginning of time, perhaps looking back to the authors of the past and exploring their commentary on struggling with disease can enlighten our own interactions with epidemic disease, particularly as we enter into a time of new and emerging diseases without tried-and-true cures. For as Charles

¹² Washington Post

¹³ Dallas Morning News

Collier astutely states, “Does not every epidemic point the same way, and shew that medicine is but a frail barrier against any disease of nature’s mission.”¹⁴ Medicine is every bit as fallible as mankind itself, an important point to remember in a society that is everyday more dependent on technology and the goods it produces. As ancient societies did not possess modern medical technology, their experiences with disease and plague reveal how mankind and human nature reacts when there is no hope of a cure or remedy to the suffering and pain it is enduring.

¹⁴ Collier (1857) xx.

CHAPTER TWO

Thucydides

“Such was the disaster which fell upon the Athenians, crushing them, with people dying inside the city and the land outside laid waste” (2.54.1).

As the grim concluding words of Thucydides’ account of the Athenian plague confirm, disease and pestilence have been woven into the fabric of humanity since its existence. Thucydides’ historical narrative of the epidemic is one of the earliest written accounts of ancient disease and thus provides an important insight into how the ancient world understood and coped with disease-causing microorganisms. In recounting the events of the Peloponnesian War in the late 5th century BC, Thucydides’ emphasis on historical accuracy, his firsthand encounters in contracting the plague himself, and his notable exclusion of divine intervention create a unique context for exploring the role of disease in human affairs.

Thucydides’ account of the Athenian plague, found in the second book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, expresses the horror and severity of the disease that devastated the city during the summer of 430 BC. Thucydides’ description of the signs and symptoms of the disease are remarkable for someone with a lack of medical training; their vividness and explicitness has also baffled philologists, physicians, and historians alike. Most of the scholarship and debate of the last 500 years on the Athenian plague has revolved around identifying the microorganism

that caused the epidemic rather than exploring its role in Thucydides' *History* given its inclusion and placement in the work.¹⁵ The attempt to bridge the gap between the modern and ancient worlds by attaching a specific microorganism to the Athenian plague is certainly understandable; even in light of the growing wealth of knowledge that modern science has provided regarding disease and sickness, modern technology often has fallen short of providing effective information. Such diseases as smallpox, typhus, bubonic plague, ergotism, and even influenza have been suggested as possible causes, yet not one of these options fully complements Thucydides' signs and symptoms.¹⁶ The lack of consensus among scholars and physicians has led some to suggest that the disease that afflicted the Athenians amidst the Peloponnesian War no longer exists in the modern era, or exists in a mutated form.¹⁷

Underlying the contention among scholars as to the etiology of the Athenian plague are the issues of how disease is conceived and the nature of microorganisms. Only recently have modern science and medicine allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the latter, that in turn affected how disease is defined. As we have become more cognizant of the nature of infectious disease, our methods of defining disease have adapted. In its most basic understanding, a disease is merely a label used to designate a category of sick or infected individuals.¹⁸ As our knowledge of a disease expands, the label necessarily must alter to fit new definitions. In practice, this tendency is seen when scientists discover that a single microorganism is

¹⁵ Morens and Littman (1992)

¹⁶ See Morgan (1994) footnote 2

¹⁷ Holladay and Poole (1979)

¹⁸ Holladay and Poole (1979)

responsible for what was perceived as multiple different diseases due to multiple different labels being associated with a similar group of symptoms, and thus a single label associated with that specific microorganism replaces the many previously associated with it. On the other hand, differentiation can lead to a splitting of names, also with the purpose of using more precise language to better understand and define the symptoms associated with a disease. Ultimately, the name of a disease is merely a code word for medical professionals to relay an abundance of information regarding a disease in a single word or phrase.

Although in the modern age we understand that microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses cause disease, ancient civilizations did not have the conception that their illnesses originated from unseen organisms. Even within the past 50 years our own knowledge of how pathogenic microorganisms propagate and transform has significantly increased. Bacteria and viruses, much like the environment in which they reside, are not static organisms. Mutation and natural selection are instrumental in the survival of these organisms, particularly because their hosts are likewise able to build immunity and instigate genetic changes that enhance their own chances of survival against pathogenic species.

The ability to study species at the microscopic and genetics levels has provided invaluable insight into the relationship between disease-causing organisms and their hosts. Microorganisms are constantly altering their gene expression while interacting with their environment, leading to nearly endless adaptations.¹⁹ Furthermore, both viruses and bacteria possess the ability to

¹⁹ Segal and Hill (2003)

exchange small pieces of genetic information -- bacteria through transformation, transduction, or conjugation, and viruses through their interactions with bacteria. These forms of horizontal gene transfer augment a microorganism's ability to become either more pathogenic, as is seen in the introduction of antibiotic-resistant bacteria strains, or less pathogenic, allowing the microorganism to thrive and survive in symbiosis with its host. It has even been suggested that on account of the beneficial symbiotic relationship that can develop between the host and microorganism, infectious diseases have the tendency to become less pathogenic over time.²⁰ Even today the results of genetic change in favor of symbiosis or pathogenesis can be seen in the existence of both 'good' *Escherichia coli* that inhabit the gastrointestinal tract of most human beings and oftentimes allows for the proper digestion and absorption of nutrients, and pathogenic *E. coli* that can cause diarrhea, vomiting, or in more severe cases, kidney problems.

In addition, host genetics also have a role in determining susceptibility to infection and thus have the ability to transmit this susceptibility to subsequent generations. Notably, however, an infectious disease exerting selective genetic pressure on a host's allele frequencies would require a significant effect on the morbidity and mortality of a pre-reproductive aged population over a significant period of time. This tendency occurs in part because susceptibility to infection typically follows a complex mode of inheritance not dependent on simple Mendelian patterns of inheritance.²¹ Nevertheless, an epidemic with a high mortality rate could have the potential to instigate genetic changes in susceptibility to infection, as was

²⁰ Holladay and Poole (1979)

²¹ Segal and Hill (2003)

seen in an outbreak of rabbit myxomatosis in the 1950s. In a study conducted among wild rabbits a decade following the original outbreak, the rabbits had an increased resistance to the original virus and the virus appeared to be decreasing in virulence.²² As Holladay and Poole succinctly point out, the relative generation times of rabbits and human beings indicate that the genetic changes that took only a decade for rabbits could take centuries for people.

This modern understanding of pathogenicity and the ability of microorganisms to adapt to their environment makes unlikely the existence of infectious diseases that are identical to their predecessors found in the ancient world. In attempting to comprehend Thucydides' explanation of the plague, scholars have begun to address this reality and propose the theory that modern scholars are engaging in a futile effort in attempting to ascribe a known infectious disease to the Athenian plague based on the symptoms and signs presented by Thucydides.²³ Most of the scholarship on Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague endeavors to identify the cause of the outbreak, even if it means omitting details from Thucydides' account, in order better to match a disease to the symptoms.²⁴

Such attempts merely to identify the disease that devastated Athens beginning in the summer of 430 BC leads one to question whether Thucydides desired his efforts to be so reduced. At the beginning of his *Histories*, Thucydides declares that he is relating the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and

²² Holladay and Poole (1979) 285

²³ Holladay and Poole (1979), Page, Morgan (1994), and Coughanower (1985) among others claim this theory given modern scientific evidence and the lack of a clean match with a known infectious disease

²⁴ refer to Holladay and Poole for an extensive discussion of attempted diagnoses

the Athenians because he believes it to be more worthy of relation than any war that had preceded it (*Thuc.* 1.1). Thus, his inclusion of the plague of Athens ought to be considered in the context of its inclusion in Thucydides' history, rather than simply to be analyzed for its medical relevance to the modern world. Notably, Thucydides does relate his reasoning for describing the plague, stating:

All speculation as to its origin and its causes, if causes can be found adequate to produce so great a disturbance, I leave to other writers, whether lay or professional; for myself, I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again (2.48.3).

Although he does intend for his account of the signs and symptoms of the outbreak to inform presumed students of medicine and suggests that other writers speculate on the cause of the outbreak, perhaps modern scholars have taken this suggestion too strongly in their own attempts to reveal its microscopic origins. It seems more likely that his opening statement and purpose were directed towards those more informed in the art of medicine during and following his time.

Yet even Thucydides' stated reason for describing the plague does not seem to encompass its true purpose in the narrative of the Peloponnesian War. His *History* as a whole is concerned with the truthful relation of the events, battles, and speeches that occurred during that war, but it is evident that his work is more than mere history. Rather, his work is a commentary on both the moral and physical state of Athens and Greece amidst the changing times of the late 5th century BC. The inclusion of the Athenian plague in this narrative thus necessitates that it be interpreted and understood in this context, as a commentary on both the physical state of Athens, and also its moral and ethical condition.

One need only examine the rhetoric and language to discern that Thucydides did not record his account of the plague purely for the benefit of medical efforts to understand the plague. Scholars have shown through studies of his terminology and verb usage that Thucydides was most likely familiar with at least half of the Hippocratic corpus and utilized a special medical vocabulary in these chapters to describe the symptoms and signs of the disease as accurately as possible.²⁵ As Page suggests, over forty words found in chapters 49 and 50 are not found elsewhere in the entire *History* and likely correlate to a standard medical vocabulary that had been established by this time.²⁶ In a way, the description of the symptoms and signs of the outbreak read much like a head-to-toe assessment of the human body afflicted with the disease. Yet there is a literary flair and a careful attention to rhetorical detail that elevate what could have been a simple list of symptoms to an impressive recollection of the horrors of disease. The opening lines of the description of the symptoms set the stage for the terror to follow, as Thucydides states:

As a rule, however, there was no ostensible cause; but people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath (2.49.2).

By reiterating his previous statement that there was no apparent cause of the plague Thucydides sets himself apart from the epic tradition and perhaps introduces a new source for human calamity -- the behavior of human beings themselves.

²⁵ Page 99-110; Morgan (1994)

²⁶ Page 97

Thucydides' narrative of the Athenian plague is the earliest extant historical account of an epidemic in the ancient world -- the use of plagues in a mythological narrative is first seen in Homer. In the *Iliad*, the main action of the poem is instigated through a plague sent by Apollo to punish the Greeks and Agamemnon for defying the wishes of the priest of Apollo. The disease is thus the physical demonstration of divine displeasure and implies a world where there is no distinction between the physical and moral, as each is intimately connected through cause and effect.²⁷ Such a worldview was not uncommon among Greek thinkers, where justice and the balance of the universe are maintained by the divine powers of the gods.

Yet Thucydides omits mention of the role of the gods throughout the majority of his work, and instead focuses on the role of human action in the determination of history. Whereas any other contemporary Greek author might have exaggerated the influence of a disputed oracle given to the Athenians and its role in the plague, Thucydides glosses over it and even discounts its varied interpretation of *limos* and *loimos*, stating, "... for the people made their recollection fit in with their sufferings" (2.54.3).

By removing divine intervention and prophecy as a sources of human calamity, Thucydides places the responsibility and consequences of their actions back upon human beings, and presents himself with the opportunity to uncover the true nature of humanity in the face of absolute devastation. After relating the specific physical manifestations of the disease, Thucydides ventures into the

²⁷ Mittlestadt (1968) 146

psychological and social ramifications of the epidemic. He carefully notes that unlike ordinary disease, the grievous nature of the outbreak baffled all description and no remedy could be found that worked universally. The hopelessness experienced by the city is palpable, as the strong and weak, the attended to and the neglected, are all seized by illness and death. Thucydides recounts:

By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when anyone felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance, and left them a much easier prey to the disorder; besides which, there was the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep, through having caught the infection in nursing each other. This caused the greatest mortality (2.51.4).

Thus not only are the physical sufferings and ailments of the diseased Athenians described in pity-inducing detail, but also their spirit and attitude toward the disease is utter despondence. This psychological turmoil and despair, often before the actual physical symptoms had arisen, adds yet another layer of dramatic pathos to Thucydides' account. Particularly because this downward spiral into desolation and anguish comes immediately following the Funeral Oration of Pericles, praising the Athenians to the uttermost, the contrast is all the more evident.²⁸

Indeed the context of the narrative where the plague is placed is notable. Thucydides chooses to depict perhaps the most devastating event to the Athenians in the course of the Peloponnesian War immediately following Pericles' Funeral Oration, his praise of the greatness of Athens and its democracy. It has been observed that Thucydides often compresses events and omits moments in history to best suit his purpose, as he has done with Pericles' speech, that occurred in the

²⁸ Middlestadt (1968) 147

winter of 431 BC, and the plague, that did not arise until the summer of 430 BC.²⁹

Yet what is Thucydides' purpose in juxtaposing these two remarkably notable moments in Athenian history? Pericles, in words of comfort to those grieving the loss of brothers, fathers, and sons, extols the character and courage of the Athenians, their role as the innovators of Greece, and their lifestyle that permits both luxury and dutifulness. In describing the nature of the Athenians as compared to other Greeks, Thucydides states:

And yet if with habits not of labor but of ease, and courage not of art but of nature, we are still willing to encounter danger, we have the double advantage of not suffering hardships before we need to, and of facing them in the hour of need as fearlessly as those who are never free from them (2.39.4).

Yet only a few chapters later, Thucydides reveals the cowardice of the Athenians in facing the inevitability of death from the plague. Disease is an invisible foe whose dangers and hardships the Athenians are unable to approach without despair of life and fear of death. Such a reaction upon contracting a disease that Thucydides himself describes as nearly too grievous to endure (and as one who suffered through the disease himself, such a statement is unlikely to be an exaggeration) is unsurprising.

Although Thucydides does not seem to reprimand the Athenian populace for their despair over the disease, their subsequent actions that lead to the complete loss of order, stability, and morality in society perform an important role in his inclusion of the plague in his narrative. As the disease ran its course throughout the population, Thucydides comments that not one person was spared from its impacts, whether directly or indirectly. Both the strong and weak were affected, as were

²⁹ Tracy (2009) 92

those who were neglected and perished due to the fear of others; likewise, those who ventured to care for those afflicted found death to be the consequence of their compassion. Interestingly, only those who had recovered from the disease were able to care for the sick and dying without any fear of death, because Thucydides claims that the disease never struck twice fatally. Although others praised those who had survived the initial attack of the plague, Thucydides rather ironically states that the survivors also congratulated themselves on conquering the disease, and possessed the “vain hope” that they were safe from any future disease (*Thuc.* 2.51).

Furthermore, Thucydides describes the state of Athens, ravaged by the disease, as spiraling into chaos and anarchy. The plague has varied effects on the population - it either kills indiscriminately, or leaves survivors and unaffected Athenians amidst an imploding society. As the plague progressed, “men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane” (*Thuc.* 2.52.3). The usual burial rites were discarded, and bodies were buried in the most shameless modes, usually by throwing a corpse on the pyre of another and thus allowing the bodies to be burned. Thucydides also describes other forms of lawless extravagance, stating:

Men now did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying... they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as like things of a day (2.53.1-2).

Thus the society that Pericles lauded for being courageous in the face of danger and in all manners morally upright had descended into utter chaos and anarchy. Men plundered the property and wealth of those who had died from the disease and

acted without honor and, in their own perverse way, attempted to enjoy what life they believed was remaining for themselves. No longer did fear of the gods or human laws restrain or dictate their actions, as the Athenians took on the mindset that it mattered not whether they worshiped the gods or not. No one expected to live long enough to answer for his offenses, and thus those afflicted determined to live as they wished, regardless of morality or honor.

The Greek authors preceding Thucydides had formed narratives in which the gods were active participants in the lives of men. During the catalytic moment in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis to her father, Chryses, the priest of Apollo in the town that the Greeks had sacked. At Agamemnon's refusal, Chryses prays to Apollo, who responds by sending a plague upon the Trojans. Thus, disregarding the gods leads to devastation and plague for the Greeks. Not until Agamemnon has humiliated Achilles by taking his own war prize and returning Chryseis to her father does Apollo relieve the Greeks of the pestilence. As is typical of Greek religion, there exists a mutual give-and-take relationship between the gods and men.

However, Thucydides complicates this concept of the relationship between gods, men, and religion in his plague narrative. As mentioned before, Thucydides notably excludes the gods from his recounting of the Peloponnesian Wars, even from his description of the early days of Greece. Whereas the Agamemnon and Achilles of Homer routinely encountered the gods and were often guided and manipulated by the gods, Thucydides presents their history without mythologizing their deeds and actions (*Thuc.* 1.9-11). Likewise, the Athenian plague begins with no

source -- no discontented god has inflicted disease upon the Athenians on account of their disobedience or immorality. Rather, Thucydides reverses the usual cascade of events and makes the plague itself the source of disregard of the gods and the moral deterioration of society. Thus the gods are neither a source of misery for humans, nor do they provide relief from human suffering. For Thucydides, human nature must contend with itself in facing the reality of death through disease, as there are no gods either to blame or to plead with for redemption from their physical and psychological woes. Yet human nature is fallible, as Thucydides acknowledges through the Athenians inability to cope with the disease. However, not until Lucretius uses the Athenian plague for his own purposes does a philosophical approach to the fallibility of human nature -- and how perhaps it can be cured -- begin to take shape.

Thucydides refrains from imparting any discernable guidance on how to approach the reality of death within the plague passage itself. The narrative of the plague ends rather abruptly with a brief mention of an oracle given before the beginning of the war which Thucydides implies could have been interpreted differently depending on the circumstances, and thus was the history of the plague. However, Pericles' speech following the plague passage can perhaps illuminate Thucydides' opinion on how the reality of death ought to be approached, and why he bookends the plague narrative with Pericles' speeches.

Scholars have addressed the latter question with varying interpretations that attempt to understand the role of Pericles or of the greater narrative, but not of the plague itself. Tracy suggests that Thucydides organizes the speeches of Pericles

around the plague in order to enhance the character and distinction of Pericles. For Tracy, Pericles is the infallible, unchanging leader of the Athenians, someone who praises and reprimands as needed, but ultimately has the Athenians' best interest in mind when making his decisions as their leader and military commander.³⁰

Middlestadt views the plague episode as symbolic of the trajectory of the work as a whole; just as the pathology and progress of the disease is elucidated from head to toe in the plague narrative, so too is Thucydides documenting the deterioration of Athenian society and its self-destructive ambition through the entire narrative of the Peloponnesian Wars.³¹

Pericles' speech following the end of the plague and coming after suffering heavy losses and setbacks at Potidaea lends credence to both Tracy and Middlestadt's arguments, yet also seems to possess the salve to heal the suffering of the Athenians, if only they accept it. As Thucydides recounts, the Athenians approach Pericles full of despair and with every intention of laying the blame upon him for their sufferings both in war and disease. Pericles, unsurprised at their indignation and anger towards him, responds both to restore their confidence and relieve their resentment.

In his opening, Pericles reprimands the Athenians for allowing fear utterly to derail them, stating, "[it is] not like you to be so confounded with your domestic afflictions as to give up all thoughts of the common safety" (*Thuc.* 2.60.4). Although he acknowledges the unexpectedness of the plague amidst the war, he states:

³⁰ Tracy (2009) 93

³¹ Middlestadt (1968) 150-154

Born, however, as you are, citizens of a great state, and brought up, as you have been, with habits equal to your birth, you should be ready to face the greatest disasters and still to keep unimpaired the luster of your name. For the judgment of mankind is as relentless to the weakness that falls short of a recognized renown, as it is jealous of the arrogance that aspires higher than its due (2.61.4)

Thus, for Pericles, the might of the Athenian name and character ought to instill courage in the individual in the face of the disaster, so that he might better protect the commonwealth as a whole. Indeed, it is unbecoming of the Athenians to have reached a state of despair and cowardice in the face of death, be it as they were raised to confront the greatest of disasters and challenges without faltering. As Thucydides suggests through Pericles' speech, the ability of the Athenians to confront death unwaveringly is not by reliance on the gods' strength and power or their ability to persuade the gods to do their will, but upon their own upbringing and the concept that strength of the individual in such situations is essential for maintaining society. Yet is relying on such internal and personal strength to confront that most terrifying of foes, death, feasible?

Thucydides himself seems circumspect of the individual's ability to overcome the fear of death on his own accord. Although Thucydides professes Pericles' speech as convincing to the community, particularly in the need to continue the war, nevertheless private individuals continued to suffer under their losses from the war and plague. Private ambitions, interests, and fears persisted and prevented a full recovery from the plague and war. As Middlestadt suggests, the Athenians were

destroyed by their “fever of ambition,” much like the physical fever and illness that decimated the city and its people.³²

Thucydides’ narrative of the plague possesses all the qualities of a well-written science-focused text on disease, yet reverberates with pathos on account of the despair of human nature in the face of death and disease. He details the rapid destruction of a society driven by ambition, and yet terrified of death and loss. Both his history of the Peloponnesian Wars and the plague narrative itself are innovative in their scientific nature, excluding any extraneous mythological context or interference. The result is a narrative of human nature in its purest, and often direct, form and allowing for later imitation and interpretation. In short, Thucydides’ work redefines the art of writing history in the ancient world, and his plague narrative in particular allows one of the first glimpses into mankind responding to the horrors of death through widespread plague and disease.

³² Middlestadt (1968) 154

CHAPTER THREE

Lucretius

Lucretius is no stranger to confronting the woes of humanity through ghastly imagery, as is evident not only in the stark and grim opening of his second book but also in the finale of the *De Rerum Natura*. The concluding scene Lucretius presents has troubled editors and scholars alike in their many attempts to deconstruct and analyze the finale of the poem. After six books devoted to explaining the nature of the universe and thence how people ought to view and confront life, the poem inexplicably closes with the doom and devastation of a plague. Although many scholars attribute the seemingly unfinished ending of the poem to Lucretius' death, the details included in those final verses seem too significant to be anything other than the ending Lucretius intended. But what point is Lucretius attempting to make with the plague as his final words, especially when critics and readers alike consider the entire structure and direction of the work? Or more importantly, how does his view of humanity confronting the plague influence the reader's perception of humanity and life upon completing the poem? A comparison to a historical account of the Athenian plague by Thucydides, from which Lucretius likely based his depiction of the plague, will be essential in uncovering Lucretius' purpose, particularly when considering how his account differs from that of Thucydides. Furthermore, consideration of passages from previous books in the *De Rerum Natura*, such as those regarding the fear of death inflicted by Religion and worldly

desires, in light of the plague passage, should better reveal how the reader has been prepared for this final scene. Thus Lucretius' ending with the plague was not an accident, but a thoughtfully considered ending that persuades readers to observe the trials of another from afar and hence fully conform to the philosophical doctrine Lucretius administers.

Scholars have attempted to elucidate the final lines of the poem through varying methods, with some seemingly more successful than others. R.S. Kilpatrick, for example, approaches the plague from a purely scientific stance and attempts to determine the epidemiology of the plague. Although Kilpatrick's efforts reveal Lucretius' extensive use of medical terminology and practice, such a scientific interpretation does not seem to clarify the ending from a philosophical perspective more likely Lucretius' intention.³³ Perhaps the most unreasonable and hasty interpretation of the final scene is that of editors Munro and Bailey, who suggest that Lucretius misinterpreted and mistranslated Thucydides' historical account of the Athenian plague. However, they apparently did not consider that the discrepancies might be intentional, rather than the result of a misunderstanding of the Greek author.³⁴

In his own account of the plague, Lucretius appears completely to omit or change one word or phrase in order to modify the historical plague to fit his own purposes. Such omissions include the specific context and historical spread of the plague that evolved from the theory that the Peloponnesians had poisoned wells to cause the disease. He also altered such specifics as the effect on the doctors from

³³ Kilpatrick 1996

³⁴ Commager (1957) 105

continuously being exposed to those who were sick, the compassion of those who had survived towards all those dying and suffering, and that the year of the plague was otherwise free from disease or catastrophe.³⁵ Thus it appears as though Lucretius had two main objectives if he consciously altered his work from that of Thucydides. First, in abandoning most of the historical context (although he does concede that the plague arose from the land of Egypt, *veniens Aegypti finibus ortus*, and affected the people of Athens, *incubuit tandem populo Pandionis omni*) Lucretius otherwise generalizes and universalizes the outbreak (*Luc.* 6.1141,1143). Although the references noted above make his account more specific, they could have been included to benefit his Roman readers. Ancient readers, familiar with Thucydides' account of the plague, would be able to recognize Lucretius' allusion to it, and possibly attempt to understand why Lucretius deviates from the historical reading.

Second, Lucretius' omissions seem to remove any and all perception of the hope found in Thucydides. No longer is there compassion from those who have survived for the dead and dying, nor for the doctors attempting to fight the disease, and least of all for all humanity. Instead, Lucretius presents a bleak portrayal of the human race amid the death and destruction of the disease -- those who have survived do not feel sympathy towards those who are sick, but rather scorn and shun the sickbeds and completely disregard the well-established funeral rites in their rush to cremate the bodies. Furthermore, the doctors whose courage and selflessness Thucydides admires, Lucretius does not allow to live, thus destroying any hope that goodness and morality will allow one to survive the scourges of the

³⁵ Bright (1971)

plague. When these omissions are taken in context of the rest of the poem, Lucretius obviously has not erred, but rather has deftly emphasized the main philosophical points of the work by amending an historical event to suit his purpose. The plague kills and ravages the entire city and surrounding rural areas indiscriminately, and both the good doctors and the wicked men perish regardless.

In addition, J.H. Phillips and H.S. Commager swiftly come to Lucretius' defense against the accusations of Munro and Bailey, by declaring that an author so well versed in the teachings of Epicurus would hardly be so unfamiliar with Greek as to misinterpret the writings of Thucydides. Commager, and Phillips in a similar manner, suggests that Lucretius does not utilize plague imagery to articulate a specific doctrine, but rather uses symbolic imagery effectively and memorably to conclude the poem.³⁶ Both emphasize Lucretius' use of physical manifestations of illness to describe an underlying psychological sickness, in order to comment on the moral and emotional aspects of such sicknesses. Although this interpretation seems valid in understanding the presence of the plague, it is not entirely satisfactory that the plague is merely symbolic for psychological illness. Their argument does not relate the entire trajectory of the work, but treats the plague as a distinct event. Thus it does not elucidate the doctrines of Epicurus, an effort that Lucretius endeavored to accomplish.

However, the element missing from Commager and Phillip's arguments is perhaps found in Timothy Stover's understanding of the final scene and how it functions as the conclusion to Lucretius' philosophy. Stover argues that the plague is

³⁶ Commager (1957)

the ultimate conclusion to the ‘demythologization’ of natural phenomena, and thus acts as a sort of consolation to the newly-converted Epicurean. This interpretation is particularly persuasive, because it accounts for the plague scene within the trajectory of the work as a whole. Stover relies heavily on an analysis of Lucretius’ uses of *quondam* before recounting both mythological and historical tales, noting that both times in which *quondam* is used before a myth, the myth is shortly thereafter undercut and denied by Lucretius of having any rational truth.³⁷ The other five times in which *quondam* is used occur prior to a historical recounting. Thus Stover asserts that the plague scene should not be interpreted as myth but as loosely historical truth. The other main point Stover makes is that “demythologizing” the plague would fit quite nicely into the overall theme of the sixth book in uncovering the physical truths of natural phenomena, such as thunder and earthquakes. By uncovering these truths, Lucretius is replacing the prior belief that such natural phenomena were caused by actions of the gods with their natural sources, and is thus eliminating the need to fear the gods, and fear death. The elimination of gods and the fear of death is crucial to understanding the purpose of the conclusion of the plague.

Early in the first poem, Lucretius presents a theme that consistently reappears throughout the remaining five poems -- the acceptance of death as a natural and inevitable event in the human life cycle. It appears so often that one could even say his ultimate purpose in the *De Rerum Natura* is to persuade the reader to reject his fear of death, first by accounting for the existence and physical

³⁷ Stover (1999) 71

nature of atoms (and therefore the soul), and then through overcoming the precepts that nourish a fear of death. Early in the first book, Lucretius explains how an ignorance of the nature of life is directly related to a fear of death:

nam si certam finem esse viderent
aerumnarum homines, aliqua ratione valerent
religionibus atque minis obsistere vatū.
nunc ratio nulla est restandi, nulla facultas,
aeternas quoniam poenas in morte timendum.
(1.107-111)

For if men were seeing that a limit has been set of calamity, by some rational explanation they would find strength to resist Religion and also the threats of the seers. But as it is, they have no reason, no faculty to stand against it, since one must fear eternal penalty in death.

Lucretius laments the ignorance of men and their tendency to rely upon seers and interpretations of religion in order to understand life and why such calamities occur. These lines are also part of his introduction to and condemnation of religion, a crucial element to understanding the plague scene as it relates to the poem as a whole. According to Lucretius, religion is a major cause of human oppression and consequently a fear of death – if the gods exist, as religion implies, there will always be reason to fear whether or not one has pleased or offended the gods. Thus, he suggests, people will act in horrific, illogical ways in order to please or make amends to the gods, so to avoid what they believe will be a painful death in the pits of Acheron.

Notably, the final scene of the plague portrays people committing dreadful deeds on account of their fear of death. Some men who had survived the initial symptoms of the plague went on to sever their manly parts in a mad attempt to prolong their own lives, and thus ironically ended any hope of producing future

generations. Nor moreover did those who remained healthy venture to visit those who were sick, nor did they fulfill the proper burial rites but instead burned the bodies of their kin on the funeral pyres of others in their rush to discard the disease. All of these horrible actions Lucretius describes as being done out of a *metuentes limina leti* or the *acer metus mortis* and *timentis mortis* (6.1208, 1212, 1240). Neither reason nor logical thinking that compelled the actions of those surrounded by the plague, but the fear of death.

Furthermore, not only does the fear of death drive people to act in irrational ways under the influence of religion, but also that fear encourages the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure, despite its harmful consequences. In the fourth book of the work, Lucretius closely examines Venus, the mythological embodiment of love with whom he so beautifully opened the first book. What he uncovers contradicts the life-giving Venus of the first book and indicates his movement and encouragement of the reader from mythology to reality. In describing his view of love, Lucretius states:

ulcus enim vivescit et inveterascit alendo,
inque dies gliscit furor atque erumna gravescit,
si non prima novis conturbes volnera plagis
volgivaque vagus Venere ante recentia cures
aut alio possis animi traducere motus.
(4.1068-1072)

For the sore grows strong and becomes chronic by nourishing, and excitement grows and hardship grows day by day, if you do not confuse the first wounds with new blows and strolling after some publicly strolling Venus before you cure recent wounds or you are able to turn the movements of your thoughts to another.

Extensive plague imagery found in this passage is hard to ignore, as Lucretius speaks of the sores and wounds which love inflicts upon the human body. He is even mild in this description; shortly after he reduces love simply to lust, bodily fluids,

and the painful encounter of bodies. Venus is no longer the fruitful and beautiful mother goddess of the earth, but she becomes the direct cause of the plague of love and desire. Like religion, Venus causes men and women alike to act in foolish ways that are ultimately detrimental to their health – the wounds of love only fester and increase one's hardships as time goes on. There is no freedom from the wounds, as they become confused, and the mind turns to another Venus before curing the wounds inflicted by the previous one.

Thus Lucretius draws the reader to recognize the effects of a plague on humankind while at the same time reinforcing his doctrine on the fear of death. Human beings fear the end of life because it means the end of fulfilling desire, a goal that Lucretius clearly interprets to be an ever-growing, chronic wound. Rejecting the necessity and control of desire is crucial, according to Lucretius, to overcoming the fear of death and consequently living a truly happy, fulfilled life. By depicting desire as a wound and transforming Venus from a bountiful goddess to a painful plague, Lucretius encourages the reader to heal the wounds of love and to abstain from additional infliction, while further preparing the reader for his final test.

Lucretius' choice of words is particularly calculated in his use of plagues to lead the reader to true happiness. While speaking of the wounds of love, Lucretius uses *plagis* to describe the new blows of love, a word in itself wrought with meaning. Throughout the work, Lucretius uses *plagis* to mean either blows, wounds, or plague depending on the context. However, even in differing contexts, he seems to use *plagis* in a way that connects more ambiguous concepts in the early books to more

concrete examples in the later books. While describing the movements of atoms, Lucretius foreshadows future discussions of *plagis*, stating:

multa videbis enim plagis ibi percita caecis
commutare viam retroque repulse reverti,
nunc huc nunc illuc, in cunctas undique partis.

For there you will see many things having moved by hidden blows to change their course and beaten back return again, now this way, now that way, in all directions.
(2.129-131)

Although clearly in this context Lucretius intends *plagis* to be understood as a blow and not a plague, the content of the lines nevertheless relates to the concepts of the plague of love and the final plague. According to Lucretius, love is a hidden, unseen blow that changes the course of the mind (*animi traducere motus*) and ultimately leads to a confused course of life. Furthermore, human beings keep returning to the *plagis* of love, despite being beaten before and tossed about in all directions. Thus, although he does not state it explicitly, Lucretius from the beginning prepares his reader to understand that the *plagis* and the inherently associated fear of death should ultimately be avoided.

Reexamination of Lucretius' condemnation of the fear of death makes his motive for emphasizing the fear of death during the plague clearer in light of a passage from the third book. Structurally, the third book functions almost as a turning point. The overall work journeys from mythology to reality, the unseen becoming seen, the mysterious becoming elucidated.³⁸ Fittingly, Lucretius, in the middle of the third book, chooses to illuminate the nature of the soul in respect to death before fully arriving into the reality of the world and confronting the reality of

³⁸ Stover 1999

death. In his argument against the fear of death in the third book, he rejects the common notion that death is to be feared because it will most certainly be painful by saying:

scire licet nobis nihil esse in morte timendum
nec miserum fieri qui non est posse, neque hilum
differre an nullo fuerit iam tempore natus,
mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit.
(3.866-869)

We can know that nothing ought to be feared by us in death nor that he who is not cannot become miserable, and that it makes not one jot of difference whether or not he was ever born now at any time, when immortal death has taken away his mortal life.

Understanding and accepting this argument and his logical condemnation of all mythical matter through rational reasoning provided by nature indicates the adoption of Lucretian philosophy by the reader. Death is certain for all who are living, and because there is no existence after death, according to Lucretius, one cannot live life to the fullest without accepting this concept rather than fearing it. For as Lucretius postulates, a fear of death leads to excess desire for what one does not have, because for one that fears death there is the constant feeling of not accomplishing or achieving all that one could in a short lifetime. As a result, one desires love, wealth, and other fleeting entities, despite the fact that:

nec calidae citius decedunt corpore febres,
textilibus si in picturis ostroque rubenti
iacteris, quam si in plebeia veste cubandum est.
(2.34-36)

Not more quickly do hot fevers withdraw from the body, if you should be tossed on pictured tapestry and blushing purple, than if one must lie abed in a poor man's blanket.

Thus Lucretius primes his reader to understand the futile, often-dire consequences of excess desire and fear of death. Pain, suffering, and ultimately death attack life, regardless of one's status, wealth, or connections, an idea essential for the reader of Lucretius to understand and to accept before confronting the final scene.

Furthermore, one scene, when understood in its own context and also as a precursor to the final plague scene, illuminates what Lucretius hopes the reader to understand so as to live the most fulfilled life possible. In the third book, when Lucretius is unearthing the nature of the soul, he speaks again on the consequences of fearing death:

et saepe usque adeo, mortis formidine, vitae
percipit humanos odium lucisque videndae,
ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum
obliti fontem curarum hunc esse timorem:
hunc vexare pudorem, hunc vincula amicitiae
rumpere et in summa pietate evertere suadet
(3.79-84)

And often, the fear of death, hatred of life and of seeing the light seizes men, so that they sentence themselves to death in their sorrowing heart, forgetful that this fear is the source of cares, this fear vexes honor, breaks the bonds of friendship, and persuades humankind to overturn in highest piety.

Lucretius attests the breakdown of all the bonds of society and the individual to the fear of death and of seeing the true nature of the world. Essentially, he describes in more general terms what the reader will encounter in full and vivid detail three books later. Lucretius not only asserts what the consequences of the fear of death are, but also indicates what aspects of life might flourish upon ridding oneself of the fear of death. Friendship, honor, and a life free from cares cannot be achieved when one constantly fears the end of life and thus worries and strains to achieve worldly

goods that will also vanish with the passing of time. However, it seems as though Lucretius' hope is that his reader would not fall prey to such actions, because Lucretius has conditioned him to understand death as a natural element of life, rather than an unnatural ending inflicted by the gods or some other mystical being. Thus a reader, who has overcome the fear of death that so often accompanies Lucretius' *plagis*, will view the men acting irrationally on account of the plague and know of their mistakes and how to avoid making such mistakes themselves.

The final lines of the poem are filled with shocking, horrific imagery of the physical manifestations of disease and the actions of men under the pressure of death. Yet within all the turmoil and frenzy of the plague, Lucretius still emphasizes the futility of the fear of death and the necessity of abandoning it as to avoid the utter destruction and breakdown that society experiences. While recounting the many dead bodies lying unburied and the spread of sickness to other creatures, Lucretius almost imperceptibly states:

nec ratio remedi communis certa dabatur.
nam quod ali dederat vitalis aeris auras
volvere in ore licere et caeli templa tueri,
hoc allis erat exitio letumque parabat.
(6.1226-1229)

No sure and general remedy was found by method. For what had given one the power to draw the breath of life into his lips and to behold the realms of heaven, this to another was destruction and prepared their death.

According to Lucretius, there was no rhyme or reason why one cure might cause one person to live yet another to die, an irrationality integral to his argument against the fear of death. Regardless of health, sickness, the presence of cures, or any other factor, people will encounter death, and so to fear death is ultimately futile and

unproductive in seeking true happiness – the final lesson that Lucretius wishes to convey through the horror and pain of the plague.

Thus the plague scene is not merely a memorable ending or a historical recounting meant to be interpreted from a purely scientific perspective, but the reality of a society that does not follow the philosophy Lucretius has presented. All the previous passages on the effects of the fear of death and the necessity of abandoning that fear were the cups of medicine liberally dosed with honey, beautiful and powerful mythological imagery slowly transforming into nature imagery. The work as a whole travels from mythology to stark reality, as becomes evident in the proem to Venus, in the middle passages where Venus is reduced from goddess to festering lust and the closing poem with scenes of death and plague. Therefore, fittingly, a work journeying from a mythological understanding to a natural understanding should end with the most realistic, bitter draught of them all.

Yet is Lucretius' philosophy achievable, or even desirable, for humankind? Accepting Lucretius' worldview involves rejecting what often brings people comfort in their most difficult times – religion and love. Lucretius certainly reveals the sometimes wicked (and cruel) aspects of religion and presents love in its basest form that conforms to his philosophy; yet by doing so, he must necessarily reject the honorable and selfless forms of religion and love. Although Lucretius, like Thucydides, perceives the fear of death to be the source of many terrible, desperate actions of humankind, avoiding that fear and the accompanying pain seems to be the irrational capstone of Lucretius' exceedingly rationalistic worldview.

CHAPTER FOUR

VIRGIL

“Hic quondam morbo caeli miseranda coorta est
tempestas totoque autumnu incanduit aestu
et genus omne neci pecundum dedit, omne ferarum,
corruptique lacus, infecit pabula tabo.”

Thus begin the concluding lines of Virgil’s third book of the *Georgics*, that in the heat of autumn a plague had descended upon land, giving over all species to death and poisoning the lakes and pastures with its venom (3.478-481). However, the plague that Virgil describes is quite different from its literary predecessors in that the outbreak occurs among livestock and farm animals, as opposed to humans. Because the *Georgics* proclaims to be a handbook on farming, it is only fitting that an incidence of disease ought to be among the farm animals. Yet as scholars have remarked, a number of parallels occur between Virgil’s plague and those of Lucretius and Thucydides, to the point that Virgil has been accused of blatant plagiarism of his predecessors depicting the Athenian plague.³⁹ However, a complete reading of the *Georgics* indicates that Virgil’s intentions in writing a farming handbook differ greatly from those who had written such books before him – Varro, for example.⁴⁰

How then are we to understand Virgil’s *Georgics*, and more significantly, the role of the Nordic plague at the end of the third *Georgic*? As Wilkinson observes, the

³⁹ Flintoff (1983) 86

⁴⁰ Wilkinson (1950) 19-20

Georgics offers sound advice on farming yet does not possess the exhaustive detail and explanation that are seen in the works of Cato and Varro. Wilkinson posits that this occurs because Virgil does not intend the poem to be fully didactic, but was written to delight readers through using a well-established form of poetry as a practical treatise, similar to what Ovid used in his own handbooks on love.⁴¹ Drew likewise sees Virgil's didactic purpose, often adorned with seemingly ornamental digressions, as part of a greater purpose, although his focus is placed more the overall structure and organization of the poem.⁴² On the other hand, some scholars view the *Georgics* as an exposition of Augustan policy, particularly in his program of remembering the ideal rustic origins of the Roman people, because the young Augustus is exalted in the proem as well as invoked multiple times throughout the work.⁴³ However, as the *Georgics* were composed somewhere between 37 and 29 BC, it is unlikely that Augustus (still Octavian and having just defeated Antony at Actium in 31 BC) would have begun to establish the policies that later defined him.

That is not to say that the *Georgics*, as a whole, refrain from reflecting the ideal past of the Roman farmer. Virgil was writing amidst a time of great turmoil as the Republic was coming to a close and the empire was slowly beginning to take shape. The previous century had been defined by seemingly endless civil wars and the introduction to Hellenistic culture in the second century BC. As Rome was rapidly monumentalizing, the Roman elite were embracing the luxurious lifestyle of the Greeks, and they were also paradoxically idealizing the glorious days of Rome's

⁴¹ Wilkinson (1950) 20

⁴² Drew (1929) 243

⁴³ Wilkinson (1950) 21; see Page, Heitland

foundations when the *mos maiorum* was the highest standard upheld.⁴⁴ Roman authors, writing shortly before Virgil began his work on the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, undoubtedly sensed this desire to evoke the past in midst of turbulent and evolving times, as is evident by their inclusion of Rome's rustic origins in their own works. Vitruvius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus speak of the "hut of Romulus" and how it remained in its humble, yet noble, state on the Palatine Hill as a reminder of the greater days of the past, and Cicero quotes Cato the Elder, known for his strictly traditional Roman ways, in admiration.⁴⁵ Livy also dwells much upon the greatness of the ancestors of the Romans, from the rustic, noble hardiness of Romulus to the ideal farmer-statesmen presented in the story of L. Quinctius Cincinnatus, who left his farm to save the Republic and returned again to his plow after averting the disaster.⁴⁶

Thus, in this environment, Virgil began to create the *Georgics* when the nobility largely was relocating to the growing city of Rome and the small farms that had defined early Rome were becoming massive estates known as *latifundia*, often run by the freedmen rather than by a member of the Roman nobility, and the countryside was becoming an escape from politics rather than the center of life itself.⁴⁷ As more substantial textbooks on farming had already been written, and it was unlikely that the nobility of Rome would even have a need to know the practices of farming, why did Virgil embark on such a task? As Miles points out, Virgil was

⁴⁴ Miles (1980) 3

⁴⁵ Miles (1980) 6; Vitruvius (2.15), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.79), Cicero (*De Off.* 2.25.89)

⁴⁶ Livy 3.26-29

⁴⁷ Miles (1980) 14

writing for the political, social, and intellectual aristocracy of Rome, who were themselves undergoing a great change and upheaval.⁴⁸ The overall coherence of the *Georgics* in a way plays on the uncertainty of the times and the vastly different opinions concerning the direction that the Republic should take. Although some scholars have seen the poem as merely a treatise relieved with purple passages, others have argued that there is meaning and coherence to the poem.⁴⁹ In their interpretations, Klingner and Burck not only suggest that there is a purpose and relation to the varying mythological and political passages, but also to the often-violent contrasts from one scene to the next.⁵⁰

Perhaps then the *Georgics* are meant to be read as a commentary on life in the mid-first century BC, a time (as mentioned before) of transformation and upheaval of traditional values, through the filter of the particularly in-vogue and sought-after life of the idealized rustic farmer. Such an interpretation makes sense of the often-dramatic shifts from depicting the harshness of life in the country and the limitations placed on men to the “spontaneous fruitfulness of nature” and ease of a contemplative life in the countryside, as well as the contrasting views of the city as corrupt and yet still capable of victory and glory.⁵¹ In a way, these contrasts somehow reflect the feelings of the nobility, indulging in luxury yet longing for the ideal rustic days of the past and experiencing the height of civil corruption and dissent in the Republic.

⁴⁸ Miles (1980) 3

⁴⁹ Miles (1980) 59, on W. Kroll (1924) 185-197

⁵⁰ Miles (1980) 60

⁵¹ Miles (1980)60

How then ought the plague passage found at the end of the third *Georgics* be interpreted? Although Virgil clearly models his Nordic plague from the Athenian plague as narrated by Thucydides (and reinterpreted by Lucretius) it does not seem to be a mere reproduction. Nor does it seem that it can be rightfully called a, “noteworthy testimonium of veterinary history,” as one scholar has suggested simply because it involves animals instead of people.⁵² Rather, it seems as though Virgil responds to his plague-writing predecessors and presents his own interpretation on the reality of death and how it ought to be confronted. Exploring the similarities and differences among the three accounts of plague, as well revealing possible interpretations of the plague solely in its own context, may elucidate the purpose of the plague passage in the *Georgics*, as well as Virgil’s own cure to the reality of death, if it can be found.

Virgil precedes his description of the Nordic plague with a general account of the diseases and illnesses that occur among farm animals and how they are treated. The influence of Lucretius is evident in Virgil’s word choice, as he states, *Morborum quoque te causas et signa docebo* (“Likewise I will teach you the causes and signs of disease,” 3.440). The *causa morbi* is a concept used by Lucretius beginning in the third book of the *De Rerum Natura* through to the end of his plague narrative to advance his philosophy and expose the source of the fear of death.⁵³ Virgil appears to refer to Lucretius intentionally, both by using *causas morborum* and also by the term *docebo*, suggesting the didactic nature of Lucretius’ poem.⁵⁴ The line also

⁵² Farrell (1991) 85, on Richter (1957)

⁵³ Freudenburg (1987) 61

⁵⁴ Freudenburg (1987) 64

recalls Thucydides' opening statements on the Athenian plague, when he sets out to explain its signs and symptoms.⁵⁵ However, as will be seen, Virgil apparently imitates and alludes to Lucretius in order to make his own statement on human nature and how one ought to approach the reality of death.

As did his predecessors, Virgil begins his plague narrative with what some scholars have interpreted as problematically vague description of its origin and location. Virgil describes the area using the geographical terms *Alpes*, *Norica*, *Iapydis*, and *Timavi* (*Georgics* 3.474-475). As some scholars note, these four locations in theory could be read together as complete nonsense, because the Alps are in Switzerland, Noricum is in Eastern Austria, the Iapydes are from present-day Croatia, and the Timavus is a river near Trieste.⁵⁶ Everard Flintoff, however, postulates that such a literal reading of the named locations is perhaps flawed and detrimental to understanding Virgil's intent in including the plague. In analyzing the locations, he comes to the conclusion that Virgil likely intended for his readers to envision the area north of Italy as the general setting for his plague.⁵⁷ One commentary suggests that Virgil uses this geographical wording, "to give a great effect of space."⁵⁸ Much like Thucydides and Lucretius, Virgil seems to use ambiguous terms for the geographical origins of the plague not only to heighten the magnitude of the disease, but also to imply its universality. The extent of the plague is also suggested by the inclusion of not only birds, but also of sea creatures washed

⁵⁵ Thucydides 2.48.3

⁵⁶ Flintoff (1983) 88-89

⁵⁷ Flintoff (1983) 89

⁵⁸ Mynors (2003) 250

up on the shore, despite the fact that Noricum would have been landlocked (3.542).⁵⁹

Virgil then delves into the horror and hopelessness of the plague by beginning with the varied signs and symptoms that left the animals melting with disease (3.485). Interestingly, Virgil devotes relatively little space to the description of symptoms compared with Thucydides and Lucretius, and after four lines proceeds to divulge the effects of the plague upon both people and animals.⁶⁰ Much like Thucydides and Lucretius, Virgil dispels any hope that might remain for those enduring the plague, particularly through the role of the divine and religion. Virgil describes a ritual sacrifice thus:

Saepe in honore deum medio stans hostia ad aram
lanea dum nivea circumdatur infula vitta,
inter cunctantis cecidit moribunda ministros;
aut si quam ferro mactaverat ante sacerdos,
inde neque impositis ardent altaria fibris,
nec response potest consultus reddere vates,
ac vix suppositi tinguntur sanguine cultri
summaque ieiuna sanie infuscatur harena
(3.486-493)

Often in midst of divine rites, the victim, standing by the altar, even as the snowy band of the woolen fillet was passed around its brow, fell dying among the delaying ministrants. Or if before that the priest had slain a victim with the knife, yet the alters did not burn with the entrails laid upon it; the seer having been consulted could give no response; the knife beneath the throat is scarce stained with blood, and only the surface sand is darkened with thin gore.

For a victim to die before the sacrifice had occurred would have been a most sinister omen. The failure of the ministrants and the inability of the *vates* to perform his

⁵⁹ Farrell (1991) 85

⁶⁰ Farrell (1991) 85, for breakdown of relative space devoted to symptoms and signs in Thucydides, Lucretius, and Virgil

duties indicate the inadequacy of religion and human effort to stem the tide of the plague.⁶¹ Rather ironically, the victim dies before the divine beings are able to intervene or provide a sign through the victim.

Yet even though this portrayal of the failure of religion seems to correspond with the Lucretian view of religion as the bane of mankind, Virgil, after further depicting the breakdown of rural society, returns to the concept of divine intervention by stating:

quaesitaeque nocent artes, cessere magistri
Phillyrides Chiron Amathaoniusque Melampus.
saevit et in lucem Stygiis emissa tenebris
pallida Tisiphone Morbos agit ante Metumque,
inque dies avidum surgens caput altius effert
(3.549-553)

the sought-after remedies cause harm, the masters fail, Chiron, son of Phillyra, and Melampus, son of Amythaon. Ghastly Tisiphone rages, and let forth into light from Stygian gloom, drives before her Disease and Fear, while day by day rising up she rears higher her greedy head.

Thus, although Virgil suggests the futility of religion in overcoming the effects of the plague, he nevertheless reincorporates mythology into the trajectory of the disease – exactly the opposite of Lucretius’ attempts to eradicate all traces of mythology and the gods from his natural order. Chiron the centaur and Melampus (both famed for their healing powers) become the mythological personifications of medicine with the terrifying Tisiphone, a Fury, as their opponents. The vision of Tisiphone rearing her head and driving forth Disease and Fear undoubtedly recalls the Lucretian image of Religion towering above mankind; yet in alluding so poignantly to Lucretius, Virgil inverts the principles of Epicurean philosophy that Lucretius uses

⁶¹ Clare (1995) 96

to dispel of the fear of the gods and disease.⁶² The mythological masters of medicine may be unable to combat the living hell created by the Fury with her Disease and Fear, but nonetheless mythology and religion still have a role in Virgil's plague and overall worldview.

Virgil recognizes that disease and fear overturn rational life, leaving chaos in their wake. The departure of the *magistri* and disastrous sacrifice upset the regular processes of religion, allowing Disease and Fear to run rampant, without any hope of relief from religion. The upheaval of religion is but one example given by Virgil of the effects of the plague on the natural ordering of society. The animals suffer both physically and psychologically – the hounds and horses are depicted as overcome with madness (*rabies* and *furiis*, respectively), as the horses mangle their own flesh with their teeth in the fury of the disease (3.496, 3.511-514). Their sufferings are also portrayed as if they are people themselves; the pig chokes on the coughs that rack his body, the horse beats his hoof upon the grass in desperation, and his companions moan (*gemitu gravis*) and sob (*longo singultu*) as black blood gushes from their nostrils (3.497-500, 506-508). The narrative reverberates with emotional pathos for the dying animals as they suffer the effects of an human-like plague.

Furthermore, the role of mankind and the natural order is upended amidst the plague. Mankind's efforts to save the suffering animals result only in the more rapid arrival of death, augmenting the hopelessness of combatting the plague. As the oxen perish, the ploughman must take on the planting of seeds for himself:

⁶² Farrell (1991) 86

Ergo aegre rastris terram rimantur, et ipsis
unguibus infodiunt fruges, montisque per altos
contenta cervice trahunt stridentia plaustra
(3.534-536)

Therefore men painfully scratch the earth with rakes, and with their own
fingernails they bury the seeds, and across the lofty hills with straining necks
they drag the creaking cart.

The hopeless upheaval of society is an inevitable consequence of the plague, as has been seen previously in Thucydides' and Lucretius' plague narratives. The pastoral setting of the *Georgics* is particularly conducive to demonstrating how rational life is overturned. The work of the dying farm animals must still be completed, as is evident by the farmers take on the role of animals, scratching the earth and burying the seeds with their own fingernails, and lugging their carts as if they were oxen. As if the image of the farmers fulfilling the roles of their deceased animals was not powerful enough, Virgil also portrays the wolf wandering amongst the sheep without any interest, and the deer amongst the hounds without any cares (3.537-540).

However, the overall tone of Virgil's portrayal of the suffering of man and beast is noticeably different from that of Lucretius. Even though both acknowledge that the reality of death is unavoidable, they each treat suffering and the fear of death drastically differently.⁶³ Lucretius views the fear of death and suffering as avoidable and thus imparts the notion to readers that such feelings are unworthy of pity and are the result of ignorance. Thus, although death has its role in the natural

⁶³ Freudenburg (1987) 66

ordering of the world, the fear of death is an unnecessary creation of mankind that only hinders and harms their pursuit of happiness.

On the other hand, Virgil portrays the suffering of mankind and the fear of death as natural results of disease as opposed to consequences of ignorance.⁶⁴ The suffering of beasts and people deserves pity, not derision, and Virgil openly seems to invite his reader to sympathize with the anguish and misery experienced by those enduring the plague, and to recognize the injustice inflicted by disease upon society. Freudenburg astutely writes that the animals had lived in a remarkably Epicurean manner, because they are portrayed as working hard, eating simple meals, and generally living with few cares.⁶⁵ Virgil acknowledges the Epicurean nature of the lives of animals, stating:

Quid labor aut benefacta iuvant? Quid vomere terras
invertisse gravis? Atqui non Massica Bacchi
munera, non illis epulae nocuere repostae:
frondibus et victu pascuntur simplicis herbae,
... nec somnos abrumpit cura salubris
(3.525-530).

Of what avail is his toil or his services? What avails it, that he turned the heavy clod? And yet no Massic gifts of Bacchus, no feasts, often renewed, did harm to him and his. They feed on leaves and simple grass... no care breaks their healthful slumbers.

Despite their lives ideally lived according to Lucretius' standards, they are afflicted equally by disease and death just as Lucretius' Athenians who fell into moral depravity because of the plague. The sense of injustice portrayed by Virgil over the reality that death and disease strike indiscriminately not only heightens the emotional pathos, but also rejects Lucretius' philosophy. Even those who have lived

⁶⁴ Freudenburg (1987) 67

⁶⁵ Freudenburg (1987) 68

blamelessly and without cares still suffer, and according to Virgil, and deserve pity and compassion.

Returning to the overall context of the *Georgics* and the socio-political climate, some scholars have suggested that the imagery of the rational order overturned and the poignant scene of the oxen's yokemate dying is a commentary on the seemingly endless civil wars of the end of the Republic.⁶⁶ As Gardner notes, Virgil describing the dissolution of bodies as a result of infection with the plague uses language that also metaphorically can represent the breakdown of social units in a society at war with itself.⁶⁷ The concept of a plague symbolically alluding to war is a concept that Virgil obviously gave much thought to, as in his later work, the *Aeneid*, Virgil has Venus describe the sufferings of war as *pestis belli*, a "plague of war."⁶⁸ The correlation between plague and civil war in the *Georgics* is perceivable in his pitiful description of the death of an oxen, where he states:

... it tristis arator
maerentem abiungens fraterna morte iuencum,
atque opere in medio defixa reliquit aratra.
non umbrae aliorum nemorum, non mollia possunt
prata movere animum, non qui per saxa volutus
purior electro campum petit amnis; at ima
soluuntur latera, atque oculos stupor urget inertis
ad terramque fluit devexo pondere cervix
(3.517-524)

Sadly goes the plowman, unhitching the ox who grieves for his fallen brother, and leaves the plow thrust motionless in the midst of his work. Neither the shade of tall groves nor soft fields are able to rouse the spirit of the ox, nor a river curling through the rocks, purer than amber, and seeks the plain, but his sides slacken completely; stupor presses upon his dull eyes, and his neck droops to the earth bending under its own weight.

⁶⁶ Gardner (2014) 4

⁶⁷ Gardner (2014) 5

⁶⁸ Gardner (2014) 6, referring to *Aeneid* 10.55

The image of the fallen ox and his mourning brother would have resounded with Romans who had lived through the civil wars of Caesar, and then Octavian's concluding victory at Actium. Furthermore, Virgil's use of the adjective *fraternus* recalls his earlier use of the form *frater* in the second book of the *Georgics*, where he praises the life of the happy farmer who lives far from civil strife of Rome and the discord found between brothers.⁶⁹ The devastation that the plague wreaks on the fabric of society, destroying the bonds of family and friendship and causing unjustified deaths, offers a compelling allegory of the consequences of civil war on society.

Despite the narrative's abundant imagery of dissolution and death found in the plague, that narrative could also represent the effects of civil war on society. The final striking difference between Virgil and Lucretius is how they conclude their scenes of death and destruction. Whereas Lucretius ends his entire narrative on the nature of the universe with the devastation of the plague, Virgil follows his plague narrative with the *bougonia*, the epitome of renewal and rebirth. Beginning the fourth book of the *Georgics*, Virgil states that he will "discourse of Heaven's gift, the honey from the skies" (*Protinus aerii mellis caelestia dona exsequar*, 4.1), and in general on the wondrous nature of bees. His description of the hive, with its internal politics and thriving, bustling residents, evokes a drastic contrast from the desolation and misery of the plague.

⁶⁹ Gardner (2014) 13, referring to *Georgics* 2.496

During Virgil's discourse on the plight of Aristaeus, we at last discover what Virgil perceives as the *causa morbi*, as well as his view on what awaits at the conclusion of the plague. Aristaeus, a beekeeper and the son of Cyrene, becomes desperate as his bees begin dying off, and thus consults his mother in hopes of finding a way of recovering his hive. Cyrene sends Aristaeus to the seer Proteus, who in turn narrates the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Proteus ultimately concludes that Orpheus is upset because Aristaeus' advances towards Eurydice caused her death from a snakebite. At the conclusion of Proteus' speech, Cyrene says to her son:

nate, licet tristis animo deponere curas.
haec omnis morbi causa, hinc miserabile Nymphae,
cum quibus illa choro lucis agitabat in altis,
exitium misere apibus. Tu munera supplex
tende petens pacem, et facilis venerare Napaeas
(4.531-535)

Son, dismiss from your mind the sad cares that trouble it. This is the whole cause of the sickness, and hence it is that the Nymphs, with whom she used to tread the dance in the deep groves, have sent this wretched havoc on your bees. You must offer a suppliant's gifts, sue for peace, and pay homage to the gentle Napaeae.

Thus the *causa morbi* in Virgil is not discovered through science and reason, but through myth and the many aspects of the gods that go beyond reason.⁷⁰ Although human suffering will never be completely understood, myth provides a sense of justice to the world where it otherwise would be lacking – e.g., Aristaeus' bees die not without cause, but because he had angered Orpheus. Thus Virgil presents a *causa morbi* that contradicts Lucretius' philosophy, and he provides a new way of confronting the reality of death and disease.

⁷⁰ Freudenburg (1987) 71

Perhaps it is more significant that hope still remaining is found even in times of great desperation and loss, as is evident by the *bougonia* following Aristaeus' sacrifice of the bulls. After fulfilling the funeral dues demanded by Orpheus, Virgil describes the rebirth of the hive:

hic vero subitum ac dictu mirabile monstrum
aspiciunt, liquefacta boum per viscera toto
stridere apes utero et ruptis effervere costis,
immensasque trahi nubes, iamque arbore summa
confluere et lentis uvam demittere ramis
(4.554-558)

But truly they witness a portent, sudden and wondrous in the telling, throughout the entrails, amid the molten flesh of the oxen, bees buzzing and swarming forth from the ruptured sides, then trailing in vast clouds, until at last on a treetop they stream together, and hang in clusters from bending boughs.

The *liquefacta* ox, reminiscent of the animals melted from the plague, gives forth life from its dead carcass. This wondrous sight, depicting the buzzing energy of life, seems to be Virgil's conclusion to the plague narrative. The image found at the beginning of the plague scene, where the dying animals are described as *miseros adduxerat artus... in se ossa minutatim morbo conlapsa trahebat* ("the [fiery thirst] shriveled hapless limbs... as gradually they melted with disease," 3.483-485) is fulfilled and yet inverted in this final scene. Just as society was overturned by the chaos of disease, the death of the sacrificial ox reverts to the order of society and brings about new life and hope for future generations and abundance.

The conclusion of the *Georgics* provides a sense of hope not found in Thucydides' or Lucretius' narratives – mankind and beasts are not afflicted with moral depravity nor are left with the devastation of the plague as their only comfort.

Virgil sees comfort and renewal through myth and death that his predecessors either did not acknowledge (as with Thucydides), or attempted to abolish (as with Lucretius). Although some scholars have seen this as Virgil's way of commending and praising Augustus for his role as the rejuvenator of Rome and implying that post-Actium Rome will be a place of new life and abundance, I believe that Virgil's conclusion can also be applied to how we choose to approach the reality of death through disease.

Thucydides, Lucretius, and Virgil provide their own impression of the reality of death and disease, as well as how mankind ought to approach this reality. They each view death as an inevitable factor of life, and disease as a source of even greater calamity and suffering. Thucydides, however, postulates that the fear of death can be overcome by reminding oneself of the greater good of the community and the importance of acting in a manner beneficial to society, even if it means enduring misfortunes individually. Lucretius takes a radically different stance that focuses on the individual in his pursuit of happiness -- an individual can only overcome the fear of death through knowledge and recognizing that mythology, gods, and religion are all constructs of mankind that act to hold us in ignorance and prevent us from achieving true happiness and relief from the fear of death. Thus, Lucretius' plague acts to show the result of a society that does not conform to his philosophy, and also tests the readers in their own attempts to overcome the fear of death.

Only Virgil, however, includes the role of mythology and the gods in both further inciting the plague (as in the failure of Chiron and Melampus, and the raging

disease and death brought on by Tisiphone), and also in providing hope and a renewal of life at the conclusion of the plague. As a society entering a time of emerging diseases that medicine cannot always keep up with or combat, as well as a time of greater global connection that encourages the spread of new diseases, Virgil's outlook on life and on approaching the reality of death seems to be the healthiest and perhaps most realistic of the three views considered. As Thucydides showed, the Athenians still struggled with their individual misery at the end of the plague and did not seem to find ultimate comfort in their strivings for the greater good. And as Virgil demonstrated through the death of animals living the Epicurean life, Lucretius' philosophy does not always provide the perfect buffer to the reality of death -- nor does the idea of death being the final end in a mechanistic world and thus ought not to be feared particularly resonate or provide comfort.

How then should modern humankind approach the reality of death, particularly as it assaults us in new and varying ways? Modern medicine and technology will not always be able to shield humankind from the devastation of disease, nor will man always be able to understand why disaster strikes. In many ways, the modern world is no different from the ancient world in that death will always be a reality, no matter how advanced medicine and technology become.

While reflecting upon his experiences living through the cholera epidemic of the late 19th century in Naples, Italy, the Swedish physician Axel Munthe declares the following about his experience with death:

“It is only since I have seen [Death] operating on a large scale that I have begun to understand something of the tactics of the warfare. It is a fascinating study, full of mystery and contradictions. It all seems at first a bewildering chaos, a blind meaningless slaughter full of confusion and blunders. At one moment Life, brandishing a new weapon in its hand, advances victoriously, only to retire the next moment, defeated by triumphant Death. It is not so. The battle is regulated in its minutest details by an immutable law of equilibrium between Life and Death. Wherever this equilibrium is upset by some accidental cause, be it pestilence, earthquake or war, vigilant Nature sets to work at once to readjust the balance, to call forth new beings to take the place of the fallen.”⁷¹

Munthe’s description of death parallels what was seen in the Athenian plague depicted by Thucydides and Lucretius, as well as the Nordic plague portrayed by Virgil. Contradictions, chaos, and seemingly meaningless slaughter define the reality of society experiencing disease and death. Munthe, however, recognizes a source of hope amidst the triumphs of death – Nature, who restores the equilibrium of life and death when it is upset by pestilence and plague.

Munthe understood that there is a balance to life that necessitates death. Death is a terrifying reality to confront, particularly in midst of a plague or war when the loss of life can reach an astounding magnitude. Nature, however, is the restorer of life and balance, as Munthe suggests and Virgil implies through the *bougonia*, the rebirth of bees from a natural source.

⁷¹ Munthe (1929) 125-126

Hope can be found even in the most desperate of situations, when technology fails and society is in chaos. One need only remember that life is a continuous cycle kept in balance by the forces of life and death. When death oversteps its boundaries, Nature will necessarily bring forth new life. Thus the greatest hope in the life of man lies in remembering that even upon death new life will necessarily follow, and man ought to live the best life he can up until that point.

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