

3.6 What role does God play in human existence? A Roman Perspective

Sources: <http://liberator.net/articles/SloanGary/Lucretius.html> (accessed June 4, 2010);
http://classics.mit.edu/Carus/nature_things.html (accessed June 4, 2010).

Background: Titus Lucretius Carus (99-55 BC), better remembered as Lucretius, was a Roman poet and early humanist philosopher who argued for a materialist view of history. Lucretius was a devotee of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. In Lucretius' view, the Gods existed in a separate world from humans and did not interfere with this one. The Earth operated according to the laws of nature, and these laws, not the whims of the Gods, shaped history. In the poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), Lucretius called on Romans to abandon superstition and adopt a rational and scientific view of nature and human events. The following excerpts are from this poem. Examine the excerpts and answer questions 1 — 3.



Bust of Lucretius (Wikipedia)

On the Nature of Things

by Lucretius, 50 BC

“This terror, then, this darkness of the mind,
Not sunrise with its flaring spokes of light,
Nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse,
But only Nature's aspect and her law, . . .
Fear holds dominion over mortality
Only because, seeing in land and sky
So much the cause whereof no wise they know,
Men think Divinities are working there.
Meantime, when once we know from nothing still

Nothing can be create, we shall divine
More clearly what we seek: those elements
From which alone all things created are,
And how accomplished by no tool of Gods.”

“Such are the crimes to which Religion leads.
I own with reason: for, if men but knew
Some fixed end to ills, they would be strong
By some device unconquered to withstand
Religions and the menacings of seers.”

Questions

1. According to Lucretius, what force can remove “terror” and “darkness of the mind?”
2. How does Lucretius view the impact of religion on human society?
3. This poem was written more than 2,000 years ago. In your opinion, are Lucretius' ideas relevant today?