

LUCRETIUS AS THEORIST OF
POLITICAL LIFE

RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

SERIES EDITORS: THOMAS L. PANGLE AND TIMOTHY BURNS

Postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives has provoked a searching reexamination of the works of past political philosophers. The reexamination seeks to recover the ancient or classical grounding for civic reason and to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The series responds to this ferment by making available outstanding new scholarship in the history of political philosophy, scholarship that is inspired by the rediscovery of the diverse rhetorical strategies employed by political philosophers. The series features interpretive studies attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which censorship and didactic concern impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. *Recovering Political Philosophy* emphasizes the close reading of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life. The editors encourage manuscripts from both established and emerging scholars who focus on the careful study of texts, either through analysis of a single work or through thematic study of a problem or question in a number of works.

PUBLISHED BY PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

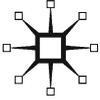
Lucretius as Theorist of Political Life

By John Colman

LUCRETIUS AS THEORIST OF
POLITICAL LIFE

John Colman

palgrave
macmillan



LUCRETIUS AS THEORIST OF POLITICAL LIFE

Copyright © John Colman, 2012.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2012 978-1-137-29231-5

All rights reserved.

First published in 2012 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-45086-2

ISBN 978-1-137-29232-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137292322

Chapter 5 originally appeared as "Lucretius on Religion," *Perspectives on Political Science*, Fall 2009, Vol. 38, No. 4, 228–239 and is reprinted here by permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Beth

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

<i>Note from the Series Editors</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction Designing and Turbulent Epicureans	1
1. The Proem to Book I: Philosophy and the City	11
2. The Discovery of Nature and the Problem of the Infinite and Eternal	31
3. Philosophic Resignation: Living beyond Hope and Fear	61
4. O' Mortal, O' Fool, O' Criminal, O' Memmius	95
5. Gods of the Philosophers and Gods of the City	115
Conclusion The Modern Reversal	131
<i>Notes</i>	147
<i>Bibliography</i>	165
<i>Index</i>	171

This page intentionally left blank

NOTE FROM THE SERIES EDITORS

Palgrave's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series was founded with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives. This invigorating challenge has provoked a searching reexamination of classic texts, not only of political philosophers, but also of poets, artists, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series publishes studies that endeavor to take up this reexamination and thereby help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as studies that clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The interpretative studies in the series are particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which both censorial persecution and didactic concerns have impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life.

Recent works on *De Rerum Natura* have focused on the significant effect that the recovery of Lucretius's poem had upon modern Enlightenment thinkers. John Colman examines instead the poem in the light of the poet's own intention, in the poet's original context. Colman highlights Lucretius's claim to be the first to write a genuinely philosophic poem and to find thereby a place for philosophy in Rome. Colman thus illuminates the enormous cultural problem that Lucretius confronted and attempted to solve or to mitigate by his poetic presentation of science: Rome and its culture was hostile to philosophy and philosophic science. But why? At the center of Lucretius's presentation of his materialist physics,—Colman shows—is a teaching on the deep psychological reasons

for this hostility, combined with an attempt to diminish the hostility and its sources. Lucretius focuses on the question of what the discovery of nature and natural necessity means for the status and significance of human freedom and of political life in its passionate attachment to freedom. The Lucretian philosophic study of humanity's fear of death, and erotic response to that fear, reveals the character of the gulf that separates the philosophic life from the life moved by political ambition and civic attachments. Lucretius's conception of the philosophic life, in its relation to civic culture, distinguishes his understanding profoundly—Colman concludes—from the much more politically and technologically ambitious or hopeful project of Lucretius's modern appropriators.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Whatever is good in this book is credited to brilliant teachers. To Christopher Kelly, Christopher Bruell, Robert Faulkner, and Waller Newell, I hope the words found here are a small recompense for all your generosity and the learning you tried—hopefully with some success—to impart to me. A great debt of gratitude is owed to the editors of this series, Thomas Pangle and Timothy Burns, for allowing me to be a part of their project. My thinking on Lucretius, and much besides, has benefitted from many a late night symposia with my colleague Marc D. Guerra. To my parents, no words can capture what is owed. Finally, for Beth, without you “the village” would be too small.