PLAGUES AND CLASSICAL LITERATURE

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During this coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown, it occurred to me to read a few of the descriptions of plagues in some classic texts of Western civilization. In times like these, which are unprecedented for almost all of us, it is good to get some historical perspective by reflecting upon man's previous experiences of epidemics.

In this essay I will examine the infamous Plague of Athens (430–426 B.C.) and its description in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides and by Lucretius in his philosophical poem *On the Nature of Things*. These two writings reveal some common characteristics of an epidemic: the devastating consequences, the virtues and vices of humanity, the important role that an individual's and a culture's worldview plays in handling the epidemic, and, easily overlooked, the author's purpose in writing about the plague. By meditating upon their lessons for us, we should be better equipped to handle the challenges of the current pandemic, alleviate any excessive fears that we have, and help others navigate these troubled, but not uncharted, waters.

THUCYDIDES AND THE PLAGUE OF ATHENS

While engaged in a life and death struggle for power with Sparta, Athens was struck by a deadly epidemic (430 B.C.) that returned again in 429 B.C. and during the winter of 427–426 B.C. Carrying away up to 100,000 members of its populace, the disease was clearly an important factor in the eventual defeat of Athens by Sparta and its allies, a defeat which is sometimes credited with the ultimate demise of Athenian democracy but most certainly resulted in the demise of Athens as an imperial power.

Our source for the plague is Book 2, chapters 47–54 of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (c. 455–400 B.C.), a contemporary who served as a general of the Athenian forces and is justly considered one the greatest ancient historians.[1] Because of the vast superiority of their naval forces, the Athenians, following the advice of their leader Pericles, had abandoned the countryside, leaving it to Sparta, and crowded into Athens. The strategy would probably have worked had it not been for entrance of a plague via the Athenian port of Piraeus. Thucydides wrote that plague, which affected other areas, but none so badly

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as Athens, seemed to have originated in Ethiopia in upper Egypt. Given the war, it is not surprising that some thought that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the reservoirs that the Athenians depended upon for their water supply.

Thucydides, who himself suffered from the plague, stated that the plague "did more harm and destroyed more life than almost any other single factor" in the war (I:23). He carefully describes the terrible symptoms—fever, redness and inflammation of the eyes, sore throats leading to bleeding and "unnatural and unpleasant breath" (II:49). This was followed by sneezing and hoarseness, then coughing, and painful vomiting. Finally, the body developed pustules and ulcers. In addition, victims experienced an internal burning sensation and a thirst that led some to plunge into the water tanks for relief, a relief that sadly did not come. Death usually followed within seven or eight days. Unfortunately, even those who survived often perished from an "uncontrollable diarrhoea" (II.49). Survivors might suffer from the loss of the use of fingers, toes, and genitals, and even the complete loss of memory of who they were and what had happened to them. On the other hand, those who did not succumb to the first onslaught of the disease were generally able to avoid a second fatal attack. Birds and animals either did not touch the many unburied corpses or died after eating the flesh.

Doctors had no idea how to treat the disease and often died from their contact with the afflicted. Strong and weak alike suffered and die. Treatments that worked for some did not work for others, which probably meant that the treatments had nothing to do with curing the disease.

Thucydides' account pays close attention not only to the physical symptoms but also to the religious, psychological, and social consequences of the plague. The failure of traditional religious practices is noted. "As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not" (II:53) Prayers in the temple brought no relief, so that "in the end people were so overcome by their sufferings that they paid no further attention to such things" (II:47).

The psychological effects were devastating. "The most terrible thing of all was the despair into which people fell when they realized that they caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness" (II:51). The fear of catching the plague meant that people would not care for the sick and those who "made it a point of honour to act properly" often fell victim to the disease (II:51). Such hopelessness led to grave social consequences as well.

Thucydides notes the uncertainty over their future led people to become "indifferent to every rule of religion or of law" (II:52). Since it was doubtful that "one would survive to enjoy the name for it," the important Greek value of honor was not followed (II:53). Another reaction to what appeared to be the inevitability of death was that people agreed that "the pleasure of the moment and everything that might contribute to that pleasure" was the most valuable (II:53). In addition to a profligate lifestyle, people no longer feared to break the law since they did not expect to survive long enough to be tried and punished.

Why did Thucydides write his history with its details and careful analysis of the events and persons involved? In Book 1 he eschews the idea that it was written merely to satisfy "the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever" (I:22). This long-term perspective is shown in his reason for his extensive account of the plague, stating that he "described its symptoms," the "knowledge of which will enable it to be recognized, if it should ever break out again" (II:48). Unfortunately, in spite of Thucydides' detailed description of the symptoms, the fact is that scholars have never been able to demonstrate convincingly what the disease was. Among the many proposals, the most likely candidates are typhoid fever, smallpox or measles, a combination of diseases or even that the disease no longer exists.

Beyond seeking to help future ages that might encounter the disease by providing a detailed description of its symptoms, Thucydides saw the great war as a laboratory for the analysis of human behavior. He claims that he will

be satisfied, "if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events that happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future" (I:22). Given the uniformity of human nature, psychological and social consequences of the plague will likely be similar, unless other factors enter in to alleviate the suffering.

LUCRETIUS AND THE PLAGUE OF ATHENS

While Thucydides focused on the religious, psychological, and social consequences of the plague, in his poem "On the Nature of Things," the Roman Lucretius (90s B.C.–50s B.C.?) uses it to argue for Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher who believed that reality consisted solely of indivisible units called atoms and the void in which they existed. The movements, collisions, and combinations of atoms explain empirical phenomena. As Lucretius writes, "Or call them primal atoms, since from them, / Those first beginnings, everything is formed" (I.60–61). Humans have sensation and their actions are guided by reason, which is capable of judging which actions can avoid physical pain and mental distress. Such a philosophy allows people to live a life of reasoned pleasure in which they do not fear death because, while they are alive, they are not dead and, when they die, they no longer exist. Armed thus by Epicurean philosophy man can enjoy tranquility, his highest good.

Lucretius's justly famous philosophical poem is one of the most influential anti-religious poems in the history of Western literature.[2] In addition to accusing religion of being the cause of "deeds both impious and criminal" (I:83), he condemns it as oppressing mankind. Epicurus is praised as the first to take a stand against religion "When human life lay foul for all to see / Upon the earth, crushed by the burden of religion" (I:62-63). It should come as no surprise, then, that Lucretius, writing nearly three hundred years later, would use the famous Athenian plague to combat religious faith.

His attack on religion is three-pronged: a vivid description of the horrific symptoms of the plague, a declamation of the failures of religious practice, and a rationalistic explanation of human phenomena.

Lucretius, who depends upon Thucydides's narrative, employs all his considerable rhetorical skills to describe the physical symptoms of the plague.[3] In order to feel the impact of his poetry, his descriptions are worth quoting extensively.

First were their heads inflamed with burning heat
And the two eyes all glowing red and bloodshot.
Then throats turned black inside sweated with blood,
And swelling ulcers blocked the voice's path,
And then the tongue, the mind's interpreter,
Weakened by pain oozed blood, and scarce could move,
Lying heavy within the mouth and rough to touch.
Next, when the disease passed down through the throat
And filled the chest, and poured its flood of ill
Right to the victim's sorrowing heart, why then,
Then truly all the barriers of life
Collapsed. The breath rolled out a noisome stench
Like that of rotting corpses lying unburied; (VI:1145–1155)

Many who survived the initial onslaught of the plague faced its debilitating consequences to their internal organs and their functions.

If a man chanced to escape the ruin of death
Yet later from foul ulcers and black flux
From the bowels, a lingering death awaited him.
Or else a copious stream of putrid blood
With violent headache flowed out through the nostrils,
And all his body's strength flowed into it.
And if a man survived this savage flux
Of noisome blood, yet into his limbs and sinews

And even the genital parts the plague went on (VI: 1199–1207).

Lucretius transforms the more dispassionate and scientific prose of Thucydides into lurid images that are meant to shock the reader into a recognition of the horrors the sufferers of the Athenian plague underwent. In doing so, he prepares the way for his more direct attack on religion.

The ineffectiveness of religious piety is portrayed by his depiction of the plague-devastated temples.

And all the holy temples of the gods
Death filled with lifeless bodies, and everywhere
The shrines of the celestials, which the priests
Had filled with guests, stood loaded high with corpses
For reverence now and worship of the gods
Counted for little, present grief was all (VI:1267-1272).

In some ways this is not very different from what Thucydides reported, but it needs to be understood in the context of the whole of Lucretius's poem and its thesis.

Lucretius wants to deny any role of the gods and their wrath in the plague because he believes that the religious interpretation of the plague's origins creates emotional turmoil.

And all those other things in earth and sky
Which men observe, and tremble, wondering,
Their hearts laid low through fear of gods, oppressed,
Crushed down to earth, because their ignorance
Of causes makes them yield to power divine
Kingdom and Empire over all that is (VI:54-59).

It may come as somewhat of a surprise, then, to discover that Lucretius and the Epicureans did not deny the existence of the gods. In their view the gods are ideal beings that "live free from care" (VI:62). They are "those quiet beings" who exist "in untroubled peace" (VI:77). They are not affected by external events; therefore, they "are not tossed by violent waves of wrath" (VI:78). Thus, fear of the gods is the result of a false understanding of the gods and creates an irrational distress that unnecessarily upsets the tranquility promoted by the Epicureans as man's good.

If the gods do not cause plagues, then what does? Not surprisingly, Lucretius return to his general atomistic theory.

First, I have shown above that there are atoms
Of many things needful to support our life,
And, in contrast, many must fly around
That bring disease and death . . . (VI:1093–1095).

He then continues with his specific explanation of the cause of plagues by atoms.

. . . When these some chance
Has massed together, and the atmosphere
Has been disordered by them, the air becomes diseased.
And all this power of pestilence and plague
Either comes in from without, or down from above,
Like clouds and mists, or often forms and springs
From the earth itself, when damp has made it rot,
Struck by unseasonable rains and sun. (VI:1095–1102).

In his atomistic explanation it is important to notice that Lucretius states that plagues happen "by chance." Plagues are events that just happen randomly. They have no deep moral explanation. The only non-random moral factor involved is how humans respond to them. With a rational explanation and the awareness that there is nothing to fear from the gods or death one can endure them with tranquility, even if one finally succumbs to them.

THUCYDIDES AND LUCRETIUS COMPARED

Before discussing directly the relevance of the Athenian

plague and its literary treatments by Thucydides and Lucretius, I want to compare the two authors. Four general categories will be employed: genre, nature, religion and reason, and finally the consequences of the plague along with the human response to them.

The discussion of the **genre** or the kind or category to which a piece of literature corresponds helps us understand not only the style but also the purpose of an author. In the case being examined in this essay, Thucydides is writing an historical account, whereas Lucretius has composed a philosophical poem. The importance of this difference becomes immediately apparent.

The prose of Thucydides is literal and analytical, even restrained. His stance is what traditionally has been called objective, and he has rightly been hailed as a great and model historian. This does mean that he is not arguing a point. As we shall see, to be persuasive as an historian he needs to present his case with close attention to the facts, use literal language, and keep his emotions under control. The reader is asked to stand back and critically examine the events and their causes and consequences. If Thucydides appeared to be more personally involved in the narrative, the reader would be suspicious of the reliability of his account.

As a piece of philosophical poetry, *On the Nature of Things* is an apologetic for Epicurean philosophy and a polemic against religion in particular. This explains its organization and style. Lucretius states this view forcefully and explicitly at the beginning. He does not seek to keep his personal investment in the issues under wraps. While not changing the facts that Thucydides left for him, he radically changes his presentation of them. The symptoms of the plague are described in graphic poetical language, using metaphors intended to sweep the reader along emotionally. By doing so Lucretius makes the reader feel the force of his position and the centrality of these arguments not only to Lucretius but also to the life of the reader, indeed to mankind as a whole.

Both authors adhere to the idea of the constancy of **nature**. Thucydides is concerned with the nature of man in the social and political realm. As quoted previously, Thucydides asserts that human nature does not change and so his work can serve as a guide not only for understanding the Peloponnesian War but also for future conflicts. History has supported him. His masterpiece is still being mined as a guide to how unchanging human nature, its beliefs and behavior, affect society generally and even geopolitics.[4] Lucretius treats of man as part of the cosmos, the realm of atoms and the void. The chance collisions and combinations of atoms are what always explain natural phenomena. Man is a part of this reality and must learn to deal with it in whatever time or place he finds himself. Thus, the constancy of nature is the basis for the appeal of both writers to all times. Indeed, it is difficult to see how any writing for the distant past could be relevant to us if this were not so.

Both writers are concerned with the relationship of **religion and reason**, and, although it may not appear to be true at the first glance, both offer a critique of religion from the viewpoint of the truths of reason. In considering their respective critiques it is crucial to remember what they mean by religion. Both writers, the Greek Thucydides and the Roman Lucretius, have in mind the popular polytheism of their day in which the quite fickle gods intervene in human affairs, and their devotees seek to win their favor or placate their anger by offering sacrifices.

As has been shown, Lucretius rejects this theology. The gods are perfect models of Epicurean tranquility. Thus, they do not intervene in human affairs, which would disturb their tranquility, and, thus, sacrifices to them have no effect. This religion or any religion, such as Christianity, that believes that the gods or God is active in human history is false and creates a model for the human life that does not have as its end tranquility. As we shall see, according to Lucretius, it is positively destructive to it.

Thucydides, the dispassionate historian, is more subtle. His approach is to ignore the theological apparatus of the traditional Homeric myths and to seek to discover

whatever actual historical events are hidden in the conflict between Greece and Troy. He famously discredits the purported prophecies concerning the plague as being merely twisted to have them refer to the plague and posits that their interpreters will twist them in a new way to find a fulfillment in some future events (II:54). His conclusion is that in the face of the unrelenting calamity of the plague, the failure of prayers in the temple and the unreliability of divine oracles were shown to be "equally useless" with result that people "paid no further attention to such things" (II:47). Although not explicitly rejecting the popular religion of his day, with his dismissive "such things" Thucydides reflects the growing religious skepticism of the educated Athenian elite of his day.

The plague's grave **consequences and the human response** to it are clearly described by both authors. Thucydides describes the despair that people felt before the seemingly inexplicable and invincible plague. Such hopelessness led to the abandonment of traditional religious institutions, adherence to the law, and the code of honor. It also revealed the cracks in Athenian democracy. Thucydides was neither a democratic nor an antidemocratic ideologue. However, he did recognize that the populace needed strong and wise rulers who were men of integrity serving the good of the people and not their own selfish interests. In Pericles they had such a ruler, and Athens probably would have succeeded in the war with Sparta in spite of the plague. Unfortunately, the second wave of the plague took Pericles with it, and the rulers that followed were not strong, wise, or unselfish. Thus, the plague was a crucial element in the end of Athens golden age, its empire, and permanently damaged its democracy. At the same time, Thucydides is hopeful that his description of the plague and of the war will enable future generations to avoid the errors of his time and find more reasonable and effective solutions.

While following Thucydides in his description of the disastrous social consequences of the plague, Lucretius focuses on its effect on the individual psyche. The fear and despair ultimately are not due to the plague but to the individual's worldview or philosophy of life. Religion, as understood by Lucretius, creates this despair because it both distresses humans by placing them under the hand of wrathful gods but, paradoxically, also gives a false hope that the reality of the plague can be overturned by prayers and sacrifices. According to the Epicurean worldview, the plague occurs by the random movements of invisible atoms, as does all reality, and is beyond the capacity of humans to control it. The reasonable response is to accept this reality and avoid the mental distress that comes with false beliefs and the fear of death.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I want to utilize the four general categories from the previous section so that we can benefit from the insights of these two ancient authors in the midst of the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic. For easy reference, I will express these concluding thoughts in the form of bullet points under each category.

The seemingly academic category of literary **genre** can help us in some very practical ways.

1. Examine the style of the written and oral descriptions of COVOD-19. Do they employ literal or metaphorical language? Are they more analytical or emotive?
2. What is the purpose of the writer or speaker? Is it explicitly stated or left unspoken? Even if he or she is essentially relaying information, realize that there is a purpose to it.
3. Does the type of language reflect the purpose? For example, a strongly emotive presentation is unlikely to have a merely or even primarily informative purpose.

The question of the worldview of a speaker or writer touches upon the question of **nature**—both human and of reality in general.

1. Is the problem of COVID-19 understood solely or primarily in terms of biology and chemistry? While these are essential, this is a reductionist view of the human person, leaving out entirely essential aspects of human nature.
2. When the problem is seen as primarily or solely biological, the solutions will be too. Once again, the coronavirus is a biological problem. Nevertheless, any solution that ignores the rest of human nature will not resolve the problem and will potentially create additional ones.
3. Exclusive focus on the biological treatment of the disease could result in a draconian implementation of social distancing and sheltering that ignores man's social nature.

The question of nature leads directly to the issue of the relationship between **religion and reason**. I shall be writing from the viewpoint of a convinced Christian.

1. A purely materialistic view of reality leaves God out and thus prevents people from a key solution to the pandemic—prayer to the God who reigns in heaven and on earth.
2. Specifically, the philosophy of Epicurus does not allow for the view that human moral behavior affects the natural world. In other words, there is no point in self-examination that leads to repentance, whether individual or national, to ward off the evil of a plague.
3. On the other hand, the Christian faith believes reason is a gift of God and encourages the efforts of science to discover the biological causes of COVID-19 and to develop a cure.
4. Christianity's support of reason and thus of science also rejects irrational or anti-rational responses to the pandemic. The idea that one can ignore or flaunt the laws of nature in the name of faith in God, perverts the biblical meaning of faith and makes a mockery of faith in the eyes of reasonable people.

The last category is consequences and the **human response.**

1. Expect medical experts not to know what to do and even to disagree among themselves when faced with a new disease that has reached the level of an epidemic.
2. 2,000 plus years of medical advances should enable us to get the upper hand on the pandemic before it results in the widespread despair and breakdown of society that occurred in classical Athens.
3. Expect governments not to react quickly enough to a crisis caused by an unexpected and previously unknown disease.
4. Plagues return, since the causes remain, and claim new victims when there is no known cure or vaccine. Be suspicious of those who deny this.
5. Be on the lookout for national and international changes. Plagues cause significant changes in the political realms, both domestic and international.
6. Beware of those who claim to know the cause of the problem and have an agenda extraneous to the treatment of the disease, such as economic profit or garnering votes.
7. Epidemics confront us, as do all mortal threats, with ultimate questions about the meaning of life and challenge us to consider or even formulate a worldview as we seek to respond to them. We should reflect upon our beliefs and values, especially at this time.

The careful examination of the writings and ideas of Thucydides and Lucretius from over two millennia ago on the Plague of Athens has shown some striking parallels to our contemporary struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that the parallels and the reflections of these brilliant minds and capable authors both will help us manage successfully the challenge of our day and also lead us to begin a lifelong habit of consulting classical writings in order to avoid being trapped by the limited perspectives of our own time.

ENDNOTES:

1. I am using the translation by Rex Warner for the Penguin Classics edition of 1954.

2. I am using the Oxford World Classics 1997

translation by Ronald Melville.

3. His description of the plague is found in VI:1090–1286.

4. This can be seen in the discussions about the so-called Thucydides Trap in which war almost always results when one great power challenges and threatens to displace another. The name derives from the thesis of Thucydides, "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" (I:23).