

Comparison of Lucretius', Seneca's and Virgil's understanding of fate

[Life](#)



Lucretius, Seneca, and Virgil on Gods, Fate, and Mankind

Topic #6: Write an essay comparing Lucretius', Seneca's, and Virgil's views of fate. You may want to consider the authors' treatment of gods, humans, and both entities roles in the world. How do these authors' understandings affect our understanding of fate and the world?

There appears to be a universal understanding among all people that life and suffering are intimately intermingled. One's suffering and endurance of hardship defines life. Because of this global experience of human existence, many attempt to explain the nature of human life and purpose. Oftentimes, these explanations of life include human interaction with supernatural divinities and fates. Latin philosophers prove to be no exception to this intellectual pursuit. The Roman civilization informs much of the Western world's understandings of philosophy, providence, and purpose today. Notably, Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca, and Virgil's *Aeneid* remain strong influences on comprehension of human suffering and the human experience. Lucretius, Seneca, and Virgil all discuss gods, fate, and mankind, coming to different conclusions through their choice of scientific, philosophical, or literary evidences, respectively.

All groups of people have some explanation for how the world works. Oftentimes, this explanation is supernatural – the world is run by some divine entity. The belief in the nature of this entity greatly informs the perception of fate and free will. Although Roman religion endorsed the pantheon of Latin gods, Lucretius, Seneca, and Virgil each had their own understanding of how the gods interacted with humanity and the world.

<https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-lucretius-senecas-and-virgils-understanding-of-fate/>

Lucretius' view of the gods might have been considered blasphemy from the point of view of an Ancient Greek or Roman, which he addresses by writing "you may think yourself / beginning to study blasphemy - ' that first step / to a life of crime'" (On the Nature of Things, 1. 80-83). However, he does not view his philosophy as blasphemy at all, but rather, a truthful accounting of the world. Instead of believing the gods are invested in the lives of men, he claims to " have learned that nothing / can come from nothing, then we shall see straight through / to what we seek: whence each thing is created / and in what manner made, without god's help" (On the Nature of Things, 1. 155-158). Because Lucretius believes the gods cannot create anything new, he believes they are not of consequence to his worldview. In fact, the gods have so little to do with the world and man that he claims " that gods more certainly never made the world / for you and me: it stands too full of flaws" (On the Nature of Things, 2. 180-181). Although Lucretius seems almost Socratic in that he cannot attribute imperfection to the gods, the Epicurean philosophy holds that the gods have no impact on the lives and fate of man.

Seneca, on the other hand, believes the gods are so involved with the lives of men that the gods are the actual causes of fate. He believes " God's attitude to good men is a father's; his love for them is a manly love" (" On Providence" 30-31). Instead of the gods being remote beings, Stoics regard the gods as having an intimate relationship with mankind, almost that of a parental figure, which tests and shapes man. Seneca further attempts to " reconcile you with the gods, who prove best to men who are best...between men and the gods there subsists a friendship, with virtue as its bond" (" On Providence," 29). Not only are the gods incorporated into the lives of men,

<https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-lucretius-senecas-and-virgils-understanding-of-fate/>

these supernatural beings have positive intentions. These gods love mankind and wish to help man improve himself. Seneca continues that providence “ does not treat the good man like a toy, but tries him, hardens him, and readies him for himself” (“ On Providence,” 29). Stoicism does not hold the gods as insignificant beings with no interest in the running of the world; instead, these divine entities are seeped in the life of man, forming parent-like relationships based on love.

Virgil appears to combine aspects of Lucretian and Stoic philosophy. In accordance to Greek and Latin mythology, the gods are viewed as divinities larger than life, with great impacts on man. However, these impacts may be negative or positive, depending on how the god is swayed. Because the future kingdom created by Aeneas is prophesied to level Carthage, a favorite city of Juno, this goddess actively seeks vengeance from Aeneas. Throughout the Aeneid, she tries and delays Aeneas from reaching Italy. Although Juno cannot change fate, she can delay the process, claiming “ If I cannot sway Heaven, I will awaken Hell! / I concede Aeneas the rule of Latium, / And Lavinia his bride by iron fate, / But to draw it out and delay the issue, / That I may do, and destroy both nations” (Aeneid, 7. 381-387). Like Seneca's belief of the gods' involvement with humankind, Virgil expresses Juno's involvement in Aeneas' trials. However, Juno does not have a paternal relationship with Aeneas, but rather, one of resentment and hatred. On the other hand, Jupiter repeatedly sets Aeneas on his course to settle in Italy. Although Jupiter has a positive effect on Aeneas, it is not done with the love Seneca describes. When Aeneas has remained in Carthage long enough, “ Jupiter said to Mercury: / ' Go now, my son, summon the Zephyrs, / Glide <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-lucretius-senecas-and-virgils-understanding-of-fate/>

down on your wings and speak to the Trojan / Idling in Carthage. He seems to have quite forgotten, / In his infatuation, the cities given him by Fate” (Aeneid, 4. 251-255). Because Zeus sends Mercury to remind Aeneas of his prophecy, Virgil demonstrates the close interactions between gods and men. However, Virgil also shows the nature of the relationships, which do are not uniform ones of love or hate, by detailing the mixed motivations of Juno and Jupiter.

Every culture, time period, and religious group has its own view of fate. Nonetheless, the concept of attempting to explain the course of an individual's life is common to all human beings. Although Lucretius, Seneca, and Virgil experienced Roman culture and religion, each developed his own view of destiny.

Lucretius, the founder of Epicurean philosophy, views fate through a scientific lens rather than a theological one. In order to comprehend his understanding of fate, Lucretius first explains his perception of the nature of the world, a nature which “ breaks up all things / into their atoms; no thing dies off to nothing...But things are made of atoms; they are stable. / Until some force comes, hits them hard, and splits them, / or seeps to their inner parts and makes them burst, / nature brings no destruction to our sight” (On the Nature of Things, 1. 215-221). Lucretius' view of the components of existence is similar to a modern scientific understanding. He believes that nature is composed of atoms, particles that have their own movement. The movement of these atoms is the basis of life, and “ Thus is the world renewed / always, and mortal things trade life for life. / One nation grows,

and another wastes away; / the ranks of the living change in one brief hour” (On the Nature of Thing, 2. 75-79). The motion of atoms determines life; likewise, the course of life is determined by the course of atoms. Lucretius concludes that fate is not determined by a supernatural force, but by the random movement of particles. He describes his theory as “ atoms never, by swerving, make a start / on movement that would break the bonds of fate / and the endless chain of cause succeeding cause, / whence comes the freedom for us to live on earth? / Whence rises, I say, that will torn free from fate...and likewise swerve aside at times and places / not foredained, but as our mind suggests?” (On the Nature of Things, 2. 253-260). One may interpret Lucretius to mean that atoms are actually subject to fate, as they cannot initiate movement or move intentionally, and therefore humans are subject to destiny as well. However, because Lucretius believes atoms are the cause of nature, he believes they cause fate as well. Therefore, Lucretius views fate as coincidence, a result of the random movement of atoms.

In contrast to the Lucretian doctrine, Seneca has a drastically altered concept of fate. Seneca's Stoic philosophy claims the gods are intrinsically involved with man's life. Instead of atoms randomly determining destiny, the gods challenge men by use of life events. Seneca gives much advice on the nature and man's response to fate. He implores man to “ not, I beseech you, dread the things which the immortal gods apply to our souls like goads; disaster is virtue's opportunity” (“ On Providence,” 37). Although fate often has difficulties in store for humankind, these should be viewed as opportunities from the gods to prove one's worth. These evils of destiny “ are not punishment but paternal correctives...Good men accept them

<https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-lucretius-senecas-and-virgils-understanding-of-fate/>

willingly, for they offer themselves freely to the decrees of eternal fate" ("On Providence," 27). Men may take comfort in knowing that the difficulties of fate are no random misfortune; instead, they are trials sent from a loving divinity who wants mankind's improvement. Seneca summarizes the Stoic outlook on life and fate when he writes, "What is the duty of the good man? To offer himself to Fate...Gold is tried by fire, brave men by misfortune" ("On Providence," 42). Seneca believes that fate is intentionally created to test the virtue of man. Each human's fate is intentionally chosen by the gods as a challenge of the person's goodness. There is no arbitrary coincidence in fate; instead, all life events are created to test the worth of the human by a benevolent supernatural being.

Although Virgil's view of fate may appear to incorporate ideas from both Epicurean and Stoic philosophy, aspects of his beliefs are markedly different. Fate in the *Aeneid* is neither random coincidence, as per Lucretius, nor created by the gods, as Seneca believes. Instead, fate is the end goal, which cannot be changed by god or man. However, gods do have the ability to impact the mankind's course that ultimately leads to destiny. Although Juno acknowledges that she cannot prevent Aeneas' settling Italy completely, she does have the ability to delay the event and cause as much trouble for Aeneas as possible. When Venus is concerned for Aeneas' fate, Jupiter reassures her that "Your people's destiny / Remains unmoved...I have not changed my mind. Your son - / I will speak at length, since you are so worried, / Unrolling Fate's scroll and revealing its secrets" (*Aeneid*, 1. 307-313). Jupiter's speech cements Virgil's belief that fate is immutable - Aeneas and his descendants' destiny is unchanged, and the scroll of fate has been

<https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-lucretius-senecas-and-virgils-understanding-of-fate/>

written, indicating destiny is fixed. However, the means to which fate occurs can still be influenced by the gods. When Aeneas has been in Carthage for long enough, Jupiter sends Mercury to remind him “ about your own realm, your own affairs? / The ruler of the gods – and of the universe – / Has sent me down to you from bright Olympus...What are you thinking of, wasting your time in Libya? / If your own glory means nothing to you, / Think of the inheritance you owe to Ascanius – / A kingdom in Italy and the soil of Rome” (Aeneid, 4. 298-309). Because Jupiter and Mercury remind Aeneas of his prophecy, the gods seem to be the ones who execute fate. Therefore, destiny is a course of events, bound to happen. However, the length of time and amount of suffering man must endure in the implementation of destiny is subject to change to the wills of the gods.

Lucretius, Seneca, and Virgil attempt to explain the purpose of mankind's life through the context of the divine and fate. Lucretius believes random coincidence is the nature of life, whereas Seneca believes hardships are intentionally chosen by benevolent gods. Virgil appears to be of a middle path: fate itself is unchanging, but the gods can sway the course of events leading to destiny. These philosophies inform our understanding of the world today. However, comparing and contrasting them allows one to examine the intricacies in each argument, and allow an individuals to form their own more informed understandings of the world, divinity, and destiny, if they so choose.