

# The Vessel Analogy At The Opening of Lucretius Book Six

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2023 at 7:06 PM

I'd like to ask for input on this question about the opening of book six of Lucretius involving the "vessel" analogy. The text is below, but here's the question:

It appears that Lucretius is separating out two aspects of the defects in the "jar" - (1) the jar is leaking and cannot be filled due to leaks caused by the holes, and (2) that the jar tainted all that it took in as with a foul odor.

As to (1) It seems to me that the leaks can be pretty well identified with the analogy of the [Danaides](#), and it's pretty easy to draw a lesson that we are not able to achieve the full amount of pleasure that we otherwise could obtain without the leaks.

But what of (2) as to the jar tainting what it takes in with a foul odor. Does anyone know if this is a reference to another Greek story? Or does anyone have reasonable speculation on why Lucretius chose this second aspect of corruption to include? What does the "tainting" action of the jar add to the illustration?

Other than the opening of book one where Epicurus is breaking the chains underneath the glowering face of the gods, as was used in the artwork by [David Baldone](#) that we feature on the front page, I am thinking that this "Vessel" picture gives us a very appealing image to illustrate the limits of pleasure issues. So if indeed the vessel analogy is ripe for use in new Epicurean artwork, it would help to flesh out what references attracted Lucretius to use this illustration.

## [Quote from Lucretius - Bailey](#)

[Bailey-6:09] For when he saw that mortals had by now attained well-nigh all things which their needs crave for subsistence, and that, as far as they could, their life was established in safety, that men abounded in power through wealth and honours and renown, and were haughty in the good name of their children, and yet not one of them for all that had at home a heart less anguished, but with torture of mind lived a fretful life without any respite, and was constrained to rage with savage complaining, he then did understand that it was the vessel itself which wrought the disease, and that by its disease all things were corrupted within, whatsoever came into it gathered from without, yea even blessings; in part because he saw that it was leaking and full of holes, so that by no means could it ever be filled; in part because he perceived that it was tainted as with a foul savor all things within it, which it had taken in.

[Here's](#) the Munro version for comparison. And here's [Rouse](#) with the Latin.

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### **Post by “Don” of September 13, 2023 at 7:29 PM**

For anyone who wants the "clickable" Latin, here is the link to Perseus:

[Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, Liber Sextus, line 1](#)

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### **Post by “Don” of September 13, 2023 at 9:04 PM**

Here is a section of Plato's Gorgias that talks about "leaky vessels"

[Plato, Gorgias, page 493](#)

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of September 13, 2023 at 9:11 PM**

Here's a footnote from Melville: "the vessel itself | Produced the flaw: a Platonic analogy (cf. Gorgias 493a ff.), but one which links to a complex of imagery within the poem: see above on 3. 936, 1003, and cf. Epicurus fr. 396."

In his translation at 3.936 he refers to the leaky vessel as an "ungrateful mind".

I see [Don](#) already linked to the Gorgias text 👍

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### **Post by “Don” of September 13, 2023 at 9:44 PM**

[Godfrey](#) 's reference cites Epicurus fragment 396:

[ U396 ]

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, VI.9:

For when he saw that whatever men's needs demanded,  
so far as may be, to keep their lives in safety,  
was there at hand already for their use,  
that men had all they could want in the way of wealth  
and honor and praise, and pride in successful children;  
Yet, at home each was perpetually disquieted  
and the mind was enslaved by all its bitter complaints;  
He understood that the trouble was in the container  
and because of some flaw in it, everything would go bad  
no matter how many excellent things were put into it:  
Partly because there were holes and things flowed through them  
and there was no possibility of filling it up,  
And partly because what did get in was spoiled,  
so to speak, by the nauseous taste there was inside.  
The truth was what he used to purify hearts with  
and he set a limit to fear as to desire;  
He explained what it is that all of us really want  
and showed us the way along a little path  
which makes it possible for us to go straight there.

Cf. Horace, Epistles, I.2.54:

Jars left contaminated will carry their taint to any contents whatsoever.  
Spurn all delights; any joy that is purchased with pain will be harmful.  
Greed is forever unsatisfied – vow to keep definite limits.

## Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2023 at 10:02 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Spurn all delights; any joy that is purchased with pain will be harmful.

Wow that's hard to reconcile with Epicurus. Apparently Horace has to be handled with care and I know I have not taken the time to follow the changes that took place in his views.

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## Post by "Don" of September 13, 2023 at 11:06 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

#### [Quote from Don](#)

Spurn all delights; any joy that is purchased with pain will be harmful.

Wow that's hard to reconcile with Epicurus. Apparently Horace has to be handled with care and I know I have not taken the time to follow the changes that took place in his views.

Not sure if this helps, but here's the entire letter from whence that line comes from:

[The Project Gutenberg eBook of THE WORKS OF HORACE, by C. Smart, A.M..](#)

EPISTLE II.

TO LOLLIUS.

He prefers Homer to all the philosophers, as a moral writer, and advises an early cultivation of virtue.

While you, great Lollius, declaim at Rome, I at Praeneste have perused over again the writer of the Trojan war; who teaches more clearly, and better than Chrysippus and Crantor, what is honorable, what shameful, what profitable, what not so. If nothing hinders you, hear why I have thus concluded. The story is which, on account of Paris's intrigue, Greece is stated to be wasted in a tedious war with the barbarians, contains the tumults of foolish princes and people. Antenor gives his opinion for cutting off the cause of the war. What does Paris? He can not be brought to comply, [though it be in order] that he may reign safe, and live happy. Nestor labors

to compose the differences between Achilles and Agamemnon: love inflames one; rage both in common. The Greeks suffer for what their princes act foolishly. Within the walls of Ilium, and without, enormities are committed by sedition, treachery, injustice, and lust, and rage.

Again, to show what virtue and what wisdom can do, he has propounded Ulysses an instructive pattern: who, having subdued Troy, wisely got an insight into the constitutions and customs of many nations; and, while for himself and his associates he is contriving a return, endured many hardships on the spacious sea, not to be sunk by all the waves of adversity. You are well acquainted with the songs of the Sirens, and Circe's cups: of which, if he had foolishly and greedily drunk along with his attendants, he had been an ignominious and senseless slave under the command of a prostitute: he had lived a filthy dog, or a hog delighting in mire.

We are a mere number and born to consume the fruits of the earth; like Penelope's suitors, useless drones; like Alcinous' youth, employed above measure in pampering their bodies; whose glory was to sleep till mid-day, and to lull their cares to rest by the sound of the harp. Robbers rise by night, that they may cut men's throats; and will not you awake to save yourself? But, if you will not when you are in health, you will be forced to take exercise when you are in a dropsy; and unless before day you call for a book with a light, unless you brace your mind with study and honest employments, you will be kept awake and tormented with envy or with love. For why do you hasten to remove things that hurt your eyes, but if any thing gnaws your mind, defer the time of curing it from year to year? He has half the deed done, who has made a beginning. Boldly undertake the study of true wisdom: begin it forthwith. He who postpones the hour of living well, like the hind [in the fable], waits till [all the water in] the river be run off: whereas it flows, and will flow, ever rolling on.

Money is sought, and a wife fruitful in bearing children, and wild woodlands are reclaimed by the plow. [To what end all this?] He, that has got a competency, let him wish for no more. Not a house and farm, nor a heap of brass and gold, can remove fevers from the body of their sick master, or cares from his mind. The possessor must be well, if he thinks of enjoying the things which he has accumulated. To him that is a slave to desire or to fear, house and estate do just as much good as paintings to a sore-eyed person, fomentations to the gout, music to ears afflicted with collected matter. Unless the vessel be sweet, whatever you pour into it turns sour. Despise pleasures, pleasure bought with pain is hurtful. The covetous man is ever in want; set a certain limit to your wishes. The envious person wastes at the thriving condition of another: Sicilian tyrants never invented a greater torment than envy. He who will not curb his passion, will wish that undone which his grief and resentment suggested, while he violently plies his revenge with unsated rancor. Rage is a short madness. Rule your passion, which commands, if it do not obey; do you restrain it with a bridle, and with fetters. The groom forms the docile horse, while his neck is yet tender, to go the way which his rider directs him: the young hound, from the time that he barked at the deer's skin in the hall, campaigns it in the woods. Now, while you are young, with an untainted mind imbibe instruction: now apply yourself to the best [masters of morality]. A cask will long preserve the flavor, with which when new it was once impregnated. But if you lag behind, or vigorously push on before, I neither wait for the loiterer,

nor strive to overtake those that precede me.

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## Post by “Don” of September 13, 2023 at 11:52 PM

Okay, so I'm going to use the Leonard translation from Perseus because it's easy to copy/paste, not because I'm a fan of Leonard:

[Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, BOOK VI, line 1](#)

From my perspective, it's fairly straight forward to understand the vessel metaphor:

The verses start out with Epicurus's observation that everything was going pretty well from a material existence perspective for humankind. Almost everything which a person "most urgently required was ready at hand" (the limit of good things is easy to fulfill and easy to achieve, *Letter to Menoikeus* and elsewhere). And humans had safety, men were lords in "riches, honour, praise" (See VS81)

Quote from VS81 (Saint-Andre trans.)

*One will not banish emotional disturbance or arrive at significant joy through great wealth, fame, celebrity, or anything else which is a result of vague and indefinite causes.*

But humans still weren't happy with all that! Their minds were troubled:

*they yet, O yet, within the home,*

*Still had the anxious heart which vexed life*

*Unpausingly with torments of the mind,*

Epicurus is looking for why this should still be if their material needs were being met, and they had "riches, honour, praise." Aren't those things supposed to make one happy? Aren't they supposed to bring well-being? Epicurus observes they obviously do not!

Epicurus observes that the mind itself - the vessel - is the problem! The mind - the vessel - remains polluted and cracked with erroneous ideas, fears, anxieties, and the like!

Epicurus then teaches how to purge the vessel (the mind) and to repair the cracks so that we can fully experience pleasure! We need to repair the vessel before we can fill it up with pleasures!

*The master, then by his truth-speaking words,  
Purged the breasts of men, and set the bounds  
Of lust and terror, and exhibited  
The supreme good whither we all endeavour,*

And so Epicurus teaches how to purge all those defects in the mind ("the breasts of men" since the mind is said to dwell in the chest) and to set bounds/limits to fears and desires (Leonard: "of lust and terror") and shows the way to experience pleasure, i.e., the "supreme good" (bonum summum). Stallings translates this as:

*And thus with this truth-telling words he washed the heart all clear,  
And set a limit to desire and an end to fear,  
And showed what was the highest good, towards which we all strain,  
And pointed out the route...The strait and narrow path...*

Epicurus taught that we carry around too much worry, fear, anxiety, to be able to enjoy life! Riches, fame, and such aren't enough! We need to banish fear, anxiety, and other such things that are clogging up and cracking our minds - the vessel that wants to experience pleasure!

*mostly vainly doth the human race  
Roll in its bosom the grim waves of care.*

So, I like this line because it goes with my new quickly-become-favorite metaphor. Epicurus calls us not to "roll in..the grim waves of care" but rather to "float on the ocean, and surf the waves." Stallings translates those lines:

*...mankind in vain, for the most part,  
Set the gloomy sea of troubles churning in the heart.*

This terror that is experienced by a mind full of fear and anxiety can only be fixed by "nature's aspect and her law."

*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.*

Stallings simply translates those last lines as:

*The fear and shadows of the mind must be scattered away,*

*... by the look of Nature and her law.*

So it all comes back around to our recent thread on ataraxia and the work of removing fear, anxiety, the darkness and torments of the mind, and instead freeing our minds from the "gloomy sea of troubles" so we can float on the calm ocean of ataraxia and surf the waves of delightful kinetic pleasures!

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### **Post by "Joshua" of September 14, 2023 at 12:47 AM**

The bible also talks in several places about cracked pots and burst wineskins. Apparently it's a popular metaphor.

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### **Post by "Don" of September 14, 2023 at 6:56 AM**

<https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/59113/PDF/1/play/>

RECURRENT IMAGERY AND DIDACTIC TECHNIQUE IN LUCRETIUS' DE RERUM NATURA

by BRIAN P. HILL

Here's an entire paper on lucretius's use of the vessel or jar as a metaphor.

Current verses in question in Book 6 are on p.145.

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### **Post by "Don" of September 14, 2023 at 8:31 AM**

For those who haven't seen the graphic from 2017, this seems to hold up pretty well:

# The Full Cup / Fullness of Pleasure Model

"He then perceived that the vessel itself did cause the corruption, and that by its corruption all the things that came into it and were gathered from abroad, however salutary, were spoilt within it; partly because he saw it to be leaky and full of holes so that it could never by any means be filled full; partly because he perceived that it befouled so to say with a nauseous flavor everything within it which it had taken in." Lucretius - Book VI

## All Pleasures Are Good, But There Are 3 Common Errors

## The Goal



1 - **The Uneducated State** - The error of religion and false philosophy; failing to act to study Nature and seal the leaks and holes. The vessel is partly filled with water (representing pleasure), partly with air (representing pain).

2 - **The Stoic / Ascetic State** - The error of living too simply and seeking only "necessary" pleasure - failing to act to fill the vessel with pleasure, thereby allowing unnecessary pain. The only pain we should not seek to eliminate is that which we choose to accept as the price of greater pleasure. See *Letter to Menoecus*: "Often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pain brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure."

3 - **The Vain Desires State** - The error of living too extravagantly and not recognizing the limits of nature - trying to fill the vessel past full so that it is no longer stable and overflows. See PD18: "Bodily pleasure does not increase when the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits of variation."

4 - **The Epicurean Goal of Life** - Stable and full to the brim with pleasure with no room for pain. This is the condition of PD3: "The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together." This is also the *Letter to Menoecus*: "For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure. Wherefore we call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing." Here the vessel is full of pleasure; the water and air (pleasure and pain) do not mix. This vessel is painless, but only because it is full of pleasure!

Vatican Saying 63: *There is also a limit in simple living, and he who fails to understand this falls into an error as great as that of the man who gives way to extravagance.*

## Post by "Cassius" of September 14, 2023 at 9:01 AM

Hey, if Cicero said it, it has to be right! 😊 (I'm mainly referring to the "life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures," according to this translator. Cicero is using a negative slant in all this but I would say that he seems at least to be acknowledging that there are two issues in the "pleasure" part, and the two go hand in hand.)

**Cicero, In Defense of Publius Sestius 10.23:** "He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that the wise do everything for their own interests; that no sane man should engage in public affairs; that *nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures*. But those who said that men should aim at an honorable position, should consult the public interest, should think of duty throughout life not of

self-interest, should face danger for their country, receive wounds, welcome death – these he called visionaries and madmen.” Note: [Here is a link to Perseus where the Latin and translation of this can be compared](#). The Latin is: “nihil esse praestabilius otiosa vita, plena et conferta voluptatibus.” See also here for [word translations](#).

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### **Post by “Don” of September 14, 2023 at 9:41 AM**

My only suggestion would be that vase 1 in the graphic needs some slime, muck, mud, or just nasty things clinging to the rim and sides and sliding into the liquid (pleasure), contaminating it.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of September 14, 2023 at 3:57 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

It appears that Lucretius is separating out two aspects of the defects in the "jar" - (1) the jar is leaking and cannot be filled due to leaks caused by the holes, and (2) that the jar tainted all that it took in as with a foul odor.

For the purposes of brainstorming a graphic I am seeing two different jars here:

- 1) A cracked jar which can't hold wine - lack of gratitude for the good things one already has and irrational desires for things that are unnecessary for a truly happy life - so it is as if there is no pleasures which satisfy.
  - 2) A jar contaminated with dirt or mold (perhaps the wine is also fermenting into vinegar and tastes terrible) - fear and anxiety turn any pleasure into something painful.
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### **Post by “Don” of September 14, 2023 at 7:01 PM**

I wanted to add that I am coming to really like Lucretius's vessel metaphor.

The image of cleaning and repairing the vessel as a metaphor for learning and internalizing the teachings of Epicurus with the resulting clean pot filled with clean liquid symbolizing the calm waters of ataraxia shows that ataraxia is not a sudden epiphany. It takes work to achieve and

maybe even maintain.