

Episode Forty-Eight - Nature Speaks To Us About Death

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Welcome to Episode Forty-Eight of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. Be aware that none of us are professional philosophers, and everyone here is a self-taught Epicurean. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please check back to [Episode One](#) for a discussion of our goals and our ground rules. If you have any question about that, please be sure to contact us at Epicureanfriends.com for more information.

In today's episode, we will cover roughly lines 931-1023 from Book 3 of the Latin Text. In this episode we will hear Nature speak to us about death, and Lucretius will compare the myths of Tityus, Sisyphus, and Tantalus to the tortures that actually exist for some people on Earth.

Munro Notes

931-977: if nature were to say to you or me 'why lament your death? if your life has been a pleasant one, why not go to rest satisfied with the feast? if the contrary, why not end your troubles? for I have nothing new to give you, if you were to live for ever': we must allow her words to be true: if an old man were to bemoan himself, would she not with justice thus chide? 'a truce with tears; the fault is your own, if you have not had enjoyment': make way for others: they too will follow you, as you now follow those before you; life is but a limited tenure: what took place before our birth is nothing to us; judge from this of what the future will be after our death.

978-1023 : the stories told of hell are really true of this life: Tantalus, Tityos, Sisyphus, the daughters of Danaus, are but types of people tormented here by various lusts and passions: Tartarus too, Cerberus and the furies have no existence; but are pictures of the various punishments of crime in this world; and even if these are escaped, the tortures of conscience make a hell of earth.

Browne 1743

But if the Nature of Things should offer to speak of a sudden, and upbraid the folly of any one of us in a manner like this: Prithee, Man, Why is it that thou indulgest thyself in such sharp sorrow

and complaints? Why dost thou groan and weep because thou shalt die? If your life past has been agreeable to you, and all the abundant delights of it did not pass your mind as through a sieve, and perished without pleasure to you, why do not you, as a guest plentifully regaled with life, take your leave - and, fond Fool, enjoy your sweet repose with a cheerful mind? But if the good things thou has received have been idly squandered and are gone, and life is grown a burden to you, why do you covet more, that may come to the same unhappy end, and vainly die away like those that were before, and not rather put a period to thy life and all thy cares? For there is nothing further I can contrive or invent that can please thee more. Things always continue the same; if thy body was not to decay by years, nor thy limbs grow feeble by age, things will ever remain the same, tho' thou were to go on and live forever, and much more so if thou wert never to die. What could we say but that Nature gave a very just reproof, and set the case in a very proper light?

But the wretch that deploras his death beyond all bounds, may not she deservedly cry out the louder upon such a one, and chide him in sharper note: Get thee gone with thy tears, thou booby, and leave sobbing. If he be an old fellow, and far advanced, that complains: Dost thou fret thyself that hast run through all the delights of life? Because thou are reaching after absent pleasures, thou despisest the present, and so thy life passes away imperfect, and without relish, and death stares thee in the face before thou art aware, before thou has enough, and canst go off the stage satisfied and full of joy. It is high time to take thy leave of everything that does not agree with thy age; come, make way cheerfully for others, there is no help for it.

I think Nature, upon such occasions, would act justly, and, by such a rebuke, use him as he deserves, for old things must be thrust off, and give way as new come, and one thing must needs be repaired by another; but nothing sinks into Hell, or descends into the dark shades. There must still be a stock of matter to produce future generations, all which likewise, when their race is run, shall follow thee, nor did things less pass away in the ages before than they do now, and so shall they do for the ages to come, for beings never cease to rise from the ruins of one another, and life was given to none for a property, but to all for use. Look back, then, how that infinite tract of time that vanished before we were in being, how it has no relation to us; and the nature of all time to come will be of the same concern to us after we are dead. And now does anything show dreadful in death? Has it anything melancholy in its appearance? Is it not more serene than the softest sleep?

And truly, all those dreadful things that are said to be in the shades below are all felt by us whilst we are in this life; nor is there, as they tell us, such a miserable wretch, so stupified with idle fear, as Tantalus, who dreads the fall of the huge impending stone upon him from above; but rather, a vain fear of the gods torments men in this life, and terrifies them with all the ills that Fortune thinks fit to lay upon them. Nor do the vultures dig into the bowels of Tityus, as he lies in Hell, nor can they find in that large breast of his a liver they shall be forever tearing out, tho' his body were ever so big, tho' he not only covered nine acres with his expanded limbs, but could spread them over all the Earth; yet he would not be able to bear eternal pains, nor could he furnish an everlasting meal out of his body. But that man is Tityus, whom by love oppressed the birds of prey devour, and piercing sorrow eats through, or any other impetuous passion

tears in pieces. Sisyphus walks visibly before us in this life - it is he who sets his heart to court the people for honors, for the rods and cruel axes, and is ever repulsed, and retires sad and disappointed; for in vain to hunt after empty power which is never obtained, and to suffer the hardest labor in the pursuit of it. This is to thrust with all one's might the stone up the hill, which again tumbles down upon us from the top, and rolls swiftly into the plain below.

Munro

Once more, if the nature of things could suddenly utter a voice and in person could rally any of us in such words as these: "What hast thou: o mortal, so much at heart, that thou goest such lengths in sickly sorrows? Why bemoan and bewail death? For say thy life past and gone has been welcome to thee and thy blessings have not all, as if they were poured into a perforated vessel, run through and been lost without avail? Why not then take thy departure like a guest filled with life, and with resignation, thou fool, enter upon untroubled rest? But if all that thou hast enjoyed has been squandered and lost, and life is a grievance, why seek to make any addition, to be wasted perversely in its turn and lost utterly without avail? Why not rather make an end of life and travail? For there is nothing more which I can contrive and discover for thee to give pleasure: all things are ever the same. Though thy body is not yet decayed with years nor thy frame worn out and exhausted, yet all things remain the same, ay though in length of life thou shouldst outlast all races of things now living, nay even more if thou shouldst never die." What answer have we to make save this, that nature sets up against us a well-founded claim and puts forth in her pleading a true indictment?

If however one of greater age and more advanced in years should complain and lament, poor wretch, his death more than is right, would she not with greater cause raise her voice and rally him in sharp accents, "Away from this time forth with thy tears, rascal; a truce to thy complaining: thou decayest after full enjoyment of all the prizes of life. But because thou ever yearnest for what is not present, and despisest what is, life has slipped from thy grasp unfinished and unsatisfying, and or ever thou thoughtest, death has taken his stand at thy pillow, before thou canst take thy departure sated and filled with good things. Now however resign all things unsuited to thy age, and with a good grace up and greatly go: thou must."

With good reason methinks she would bring her charge, with reason rally and reproach; for old things give way and are supplanted by new without fail, and one thing must ever be replenished out of other things; and no one is delivered over to the pit and black Tartarus. Matter is needed for after generations to grow; all of which though will follow thee when they have finished their term of life; and thus it is that all these no less than thou have before this come to an end and hereafter will come to an end. Thus one thing will never cease to rise out of another, life is granted to none in fee-simple, to all in usufruct. Think, too, how the bygone antiquity of everlasting time before our birth was nothing to us. Nature therefore holds this up to us as a mirror of the time yet to come after our death. Is there aught in this that looks appalling, aught that wears an aspect of gloom? Is it not more untroubled than any sleep?

And those things sure enough, which are fabled to be in the deep of Acheron, do all exist for us in this life. No Tantalus, numbed by groundless terror, as the story is, fears, poor wretch, a huge stone hanging in air; but in life rather a baseless dread of the gods vexes mortals: the fall they fear is such fall of luck as chance brings to each. Nor do birds eat away into Tityos laid in Acheron, nor can they, sooth to say, find during eternity food to peck under his large breast. However huge the bulk of body he extends, though such as to take up with outspread limbs not nine acres merely, but the whole earth, yet will he not be able to endure everlasting pain and supply food from his own body for ever. But he is for us a Tityos whom, as he grovels in love, vultures rend and bitter bitter anguish eats up or troubled thoughts from any other passion do rive. In life, too, we have a Sisyphus before our eyes who is bent on asking from the people the rods and cruel axes, and always retires defeated and disappointed. For to ask for power, which empty as it is, is never given, and always in the chase of it to undergo severe toil, this is forcing uphill with much effort a stone which after all rolls back again from the summit and seeks in headlong haste the levels of the plain.

Bailey

Again, suppose that the nature of things should of a sudden lift up her voice, and thus in these words herself rebuke some one of us: 'Why is death so great a thing to thee, mortal, that thou dost give way overmuch to sickly lamentation? why groan and weep at death? For if the life that is past and gone has been pleasant to thee, nor have all its blessings, as though heaped in a vessel full of holes, run through and perished unenjoyed, why dost thou not retire like a guest sated with the banquet of life, and with calm mind embrace, thou fool, a rest that knows no care? But if all thou hast reaped hath been wasted and lost, and life is a stumbling-block, why seek to add more, all to be lost again foolishly and pass away unenjoyed; why not rather make an end of life and trouble? For there is naught more, which I can devise or discover to please thee: all things are ever as they were. If thy body is not yet wasted with years, nor thy limbs worn and decayed, yet all things remain as they were, even if thou shouldst live on to overpass all generations, nay rather, if thou shouldst never die.' What answer can we make, but that nature brings a just charge against us, and sets out in her pleading a true plaint?

But if now some older man, smitten in years, should make lament, and pitifully bewail his decease more than is just, would she not rightly raise her voice and chide him in sharp tones? 'Away with tears henceforth, thou rogue, set a bridle on thy laments. Thou hast enjoyed all the prizes of life and now dost waste away. But because thou yearnest ever for what is not with thee, and despisest the gifts at hand, uncompleted and unenjoyed thy life has slipped from thee, and, ere thou didst think it, death is standing by thy head, before thou hast the heart to depart filled and sated with good things. Yet now give up all these things so ill-fitted for thy years, and with calm mind, come, yield them to thy sons: for so thou must.'

She would be right, I trow, in her plea, right in her charge and chiding. For the old ever gives place thrust out by new things, and one thing must be restored at the expense of others: nor is any one sent down to the pit and to black Tartarus. There must needs be substance that the generations to come may grow; yet all of them too will follow thee, when they have had their fill

of life; yea, just as thyself, these generations have passed away before, and will pass away again. So one thing shall never cease to rise up out of another, and life is granted to none for freehold, to all on lease. Look back again to see how the past ages of everlasting time, before we are born, have been as naught to us. These then nature holds up to us as a mirror of the time that is to come, when we are dead and gone. Is there aught that looks terrible in this, aught that seems gloomy? Is it not a calmer rest than any sleep?

Yea, we may be sure, all those things, of which stories tell us in the depths of Acheron, are in our life. Neither does wretched Tantalus fear the great rock that hangs over him in the air, as the tale tells, numbed with idle terror; but rather 'tis in life that the vain fear of the gods threatens mortals; they fear the fall of the blow which chance may deal to each. Nor do birds make their way into Tityos, as he lies in Acheron, nor can they verily in all the length of time find food to grope for deep in his huge breast. However vast the mass of his outstretched limbs, though he cover not only nine acres with his sprawling limbs, but the whole circle of earth, yet he will not be able to endure everlasting pain, nor for ever to supply food from his own body. But this is our Tityos, whom as he lies smitten with love the birds mangle, yea, aching anguish devours him, or care cuts him deep through some other passion. The Sisyphus in our life too is clear to see, he who open-mouthed seeks from the people the rods and cruel axes, and evermore comes back conquered and dispirited. For to seek for a power, which is but in name, and is never truly given, and for that to endure for ever grinding toil, this is to thrust uphill with great effort a stone, which after all rolls back from the topmost peak, and headlong makes for the levels of the plain beneath.