

Episode Seventy-Eight - Ethical Issues Arising In The Formation of Societies

Post by "Cassius" of July 3, 2021 at 3:27 PM

Welcome to Episode Seventy-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. 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 visit EpicureanFriends.com where you will find our goals and our ground rules. If you have any questions about those, please be sure to contact us at the forum for more information.

In this Episode 78 our goal was to read approximately Latin lines 1105 - 1240 of Book Five, but due to the important ethical implications of the subject we covered only a small part of that. So today our discussion will break well short of the material that we read, and we will come back next week to tackle the rest. Now let's join Martin reading today's text:

Latin Lines 1105 - 1240

Munro Notes-

1105-1135: every day men of genius invented improved methods of life : cities were built, lands and cattle allotted at first according to merit ; but soon the discovery of gold gave all power to the wealthy : men would not learn how little was needed for happiness; they therefore sacrificed everything for power and eminence, often when they had reached the summit, only to be again dashed down : let men thus struggle on along the path of ambition, since they have no true enjoyment, being really the slaves of their own dependents.

1136-1160: thus kings were overthrown, and anarchy followed ; till nations weary of violence established laws and constitutions : then fear of punishment restrained men, as injustice generally recoils on the wrongdoer, and if he escape punishment, he cannot escape the terrors of conscience.

1161-1193: men believed in and worshipped gods, because they saw with their waking minds and still more in sleep shapes of preterhuman size and beauty and strength: as these shapes were ever present and as their might appeared.so great, they deemed them to be immortal; and to be blessed, because they could do such deeds and had no fear of death : they saw too the seasons change, and all the wonders of the heaven ; they therefore placed their gods in

heaven and believed all things to be governed by their providence.

1194-1240: what misery men brought on themselves by assigning to the gods such powers and passions! the ceremonies of superstition shew not genuine piety which consists rather in despising such things: true when we look up to heaven and think of its beginning and end, this fear of the gods is apt to seize on us: nay who does not dread the thunder, lest it be a presage of divine vengeance I think too of generals and armies whelmed in the sea; of all men's glories dashed down to the dust by some hidden power: no wonder that men abase themselves before the gods.

Browne 1743

[1117] But if men would govern their lives by the rule of true reason, to live upon a little with an even mind, would be the greatest riches. This little no man can fear to want; but men strive to be renowned and powerful, that their fortune may stand firm upon a lasting foundation, and the wealthy cannot fail to live at ease. All absurd! For those who labor to reach the highest honors make a very unhappy journey in the end. Envy, like a thunderbolt, strikes them from the pinnacle of their glory, and tumbles them down with scorn into an abyss of misery. So that it is much safer, as a subject, to obey, than to wish for empire and to govern kingdoms. Let those that will tire themselves in vain, and spend their blood and their sweat in climbing the narrow track of ambition (for the highest of them all are blasted with envy, as with a thunderbolt; and the higher they are, they are the more exposed) since they depend wholly upon others for their wisdom, and try things more by their ears than by their understanding. This is the present case; it always was so, and ever will be.

[1136] Those kings being slain, the former majesty of their thrones, and their proud sceptres, were laid in the dust; and the diadem, the noble ornament of kings, all stained with blood, is now trodden by vulgar feet, and weeps over its expiring honors; for we eagerly spurn at what we too much feared before. The government now returned to the rabble, and the very dregs of the people, whilst everyone reached at empire, and the supreme power for himself. And therefore the wisest among them taught the rest to settle a magistracy, and to establish laws, by which they would be governed. Men grew weary of living in a state of force, and were worn out with continual bickering among themselves, and therefore, of their own accord, more readily fell under the power of Laws and the bonds of justice; for every one, in his resentment, pursued his revenge with more violence than the equity of the laws would now allow him.

[1151] And therefore men were tired of this hostile way, which soured all their pleasures of life with the fears of punishment; for force and wrong entangle the man that uses them, and commonly recoil upon the head that contrived them. Nor is it easy for that man to live a secure and pleasant life who by his conduct breaks through the common bonds of peace. Though he has the cunning to deceive both gods and men, his heart always trembles for fear of being discovered; for men often talk in their sleep, and are said to reveal things when they are delirious by a disease, and to bring to light their plots that had been long concealed.

[1161] And now I'll show the cause that first dispersed the notions of the gods throughout the world, and filled the towns with altars, and ordered solemn rites to be performed, and holy ceremonies now in use, when victims smoked on every sacred fire; and whence that fixed horror in the minds of men, that builds new temples to the gods in every corner of the earth, and compels men to celebrate their festivals: 'tis not so hard a thing to show the cause.

[1169] For men, in the beginning of the world, were used to see divine and glorious forms, even when awake; and in their sleep those images appeared in more majestic state, and raise their wonder. And these they thought had sense. They fancied that they moved their limbs and spoke proud words, suitable to the grand appearance they showed, and to the mightiness of their strength. They ascribed eternity to them, because a constant stream of images incessantly came on, in form the same (that could not change) and then, they could not die, because no power, they thought, could crush beings so strong in force, so large in size. And they thought them infinitely happy, because they were never vexed with the fears of death, and likewise in their dreams they saw them do things strange and wonderful with ease, and without fatigue.

[1183] Besides, they observed the motions of the heavens were regular and certain, that the various seasons of the year came orderly about, but could discover nothing of the causes of these revolutions, and therefore they had this resort: they ascribed every thing to the power of the gods, and made every thing depend upon their will and command. The habitation and abode of these gods they placed in the heavens, for there they saw the sun and moon were rolled about; the moon, I say, they observed there, and the day and the night, and the stars serenely bright, and the blazing meteors wandering in the dark, the flying lightning, the clouds, the dew, the rain, the snow, the thunder, the hail, the dreadful noises, the threatenings and loud roarings of the sky.

[1194] Unhappy race of men! To ascribe such events, to charge the gods with such distracted rage. What sorrows have they brought upon themselves? What miseries upon us? What floods of tears have they entailed upon our posterity? Nor can there be any piety for a wretch with his head veiled, to be ever turning himself about towards a stone, to creep to every altar, to throw himself flat upon the ground, to spread his arms before the shrines of the gods, to sprinkle the altars abundantly with the blood of beasts, and to heap vows upon vows. To look upon things with an undisturbed mind, this is Piety.

[1204] For when we behold the celestial canopy of the great world, and the heavens spread over with the shining stars; when we reflect upon the courses of the sun and moon, then doubts – that before lay quest under a load of other evils – begin to awake, and grow strong within us. What! Are there gods endued with so great power that can direct the various motions of all the bright luminaries above? For the ignorance of causes gives great uneasiness to the doubting mind of man. And hence we doubt whether the world had a beginning, and shall ever have an end; how long the heavens (the walls of this world) shall be able to bear the fatigue of such mighty motions, or whether they are made eternal by the gods, and so shall forever roll on, and despise the strong power of devouring age.

[1218] Besides, what heart does not faint with a dread of the gods? Whose are the limbs that will not shrink, when the scorched earth quakes with the horrible stroke of lightning, and the roaring thunder scours over the whole heavens? Do not the people and the nations shake? And proud tyrants, struck with fear of those avenging powers, tremble every limb, lest the dismal day were come to punish them for the baseness of their crimes and the arrogance of their speeches?

Munro 1886

[1117] But were a man to order his life by the rules of true reason, a frugal subsistence joined to a contented mind is for him great riches; for never is there any lack of a little. But men desired to be famous and powerful, in order that their fortunes might rest on a firm foundation and they might be able by their wealth to lead a tranquil life; but in vain, since in their struggle to mount up to the highest dignities they rendered their path one full of danger; and even if they reach it, yet envy like a thunderbolt sometimes strikes and dashes men down from the highest point with ignominy into noisome Tartarus; since the highest summits and those elevated above the level of other things are mostly blasted by envy as by a thunderbolt; so that far better it is to obey in peace and quiet than to wish to rule with power supreme and be the master of kingdoms. Therefore let men wear themselves out to no purpose and sweat drops of blood, as they struggle on along the strait road of ambition, since they gather their knowledge from the mouths of others and follow after things from hearsay rather than the dictates of their own feelings; and this prevails not now nor will prevail by and bye anymore than it has prevailed before.

[1136] Kings therefore being slain the old majesty of thrones and proud scepters were overthrown and laid in the dust, and the glorious badge of the sovereign head bloodstained beneath the feet of the rabble mourned for its high prerogative; for that is greedily trampled on which before was too much dreaded. It would come then in the end to the lees of uttermost disorder, each man seeking for himself empire and sovereignty. Next a portion of them taught men to elect legal officers, and drew up codes, to induce men to obey the laws. For mankind, tired out with a life of brute force, lay exhausted from its feuds; and therefore the more readily it submitted of its own freewill to laws and stringent codes. For as each one moved by anger took measures to avenge himself with more severity than is now permitted by equitable laws, for this reason men grew sick of a life of brute force.

[1151] Thence fear of punishment mars the prizes of life; for violence and wrong enclose all who commit them in their meshes and do mostly recoil on him from whom they began; and it is not easy for him who by his deeds transgresses the terms of the public peace to pass a tranquil and a peaceful existence. For though he eludes God and man, yet he cannot but feel a misgiving that his secret can be kept for ever; seeing that many by speaking in their dreams or in the wanderings of disease have often we are told betrayed themselves and have disclosed their hidden deeds of evil and their sins.

[1161] And now what cause has spread over great nations the worship of the divinities of the gods and filled towns with altars and led to the performance of stated sacred rites, rites now in fashion on solemn occasions and in solemn places, from which even now, is implanted in mortals a shuddering awe which raises new temples of the gods over the whole earth and prompts men to crowd them on festive days, all this it is not so difficult to explain in words.

[1169] Even then in sooth the races of mortal men would see in waking mind glorious forms, would see them in sleep of yet more marvelous size of body. To these then they would attribute sense, because they seemed to move their limbs and to utter lofty words suitable to their glorious aspect and surpassing powers. And they would give them life everlasting, because their face would ever appear before them and their form abide; yes and yet without all this, because they would not believe that beings possessed of such powers could lightly be overcome by any force. And they would believe them to be preeminent in bliss, because none of them was ever troubled with the fear of death, and because at the same time in sleep they would see them perform many miracles, yet feel on their part no fatigue from the effort.

[1183] Again they would see the system of heaven and the different seasons of the years come round in regular succession, and could not find out by what causes this was done; therefore they would seek a refuge in handing over all things to the gods and supposing all things to be guided by their nod. And they placed in heaven the abodes and realms of the gods, because night and moon are seen to roll through heaven, moon day and night and night's austere constellations and night-wandering meteors of the sky and flying bodies of flame, clouds, sun, rains, snow, winds, lightnings, hail, and rapid rumblings and loud threatful thunderclaps.

[1194] O hapless race of men, when that they charged the gods with such acts and coupled with them bitter wrath! What groanings did they then beget for themselves, what wounds for us, what tears for our children's children! No act is it of piety to be often seen with veiled head to turn to a stone and approach every altar and fall prostrate on the ground and spread out the palms before the statues of the gods and sprinkle the altars with much blood of beasts and link vow on to vow, but rather to be able to look on all things with a mind at peace.

[1204] For when we turn our gaze on the heavenly quarters of the great upper world and ether fast above the glittering stars, and direct our thoughts to the courses of the sun and moon, then into our breasts burdened with other ills that fear as well begins to exalt its reawakened head, the fear that we may haply find the power of the gods to be unlimited, able to wheel the bright stars in their varied motion; for lack of power to solve the question troubles the mind with doubts, whether there was ever a birth-time of the world, and whether likewise there is to be any end; how far the walls of the world can endure this strain of restless motion; or whether gifted by the grace of the gods with an everlasting existence they may glide on through a never-ending tract of time and defy the strong powers of immeasurable ages.

[1218] Again, who is there whose mind does not shrink into itself with fear of the gods, whose limbs do not cower in terror, when the parched earth rocks with the appalling thunderstroke and rattlings run through the great heaven? Do not peoples and nations quake, and proud

monarchs shrink into themselves smitten with fear of the gods, lest for any foul transgression or overweening word the heavy time of reckoning has arrived at its fulness?

Bailey 1921

[1117] Yet if a man would steer his life by true reasoning, it is great riches to a man to live thriftily with calm mind; for never can he lack for a little. But men wished to be famous and powerful, that their fortune might rest on a sure foundation, and they might in wealth lead a peaceful life; all in vain, since struggling to rise to the heights of honour, they made the path of their journey beset with danger, and yet from the top, like lightning, envy smites them and casts them down anon in scorn to a noisome Hell; since by envy, as by lightning, the topmost heights are most often set ablaze, and all places that rise high above others; so that it is far better to obey in peace than to long to rule the world with kingly power and to sway kingdoms. Wherefore let them sweat out their life-blood, worn away to no purpose, battling their way along the narrow path of ambition; inasmuch as their wisdom is but from the lips of others, and they seek things rather through hearsay than from their own feelings, and that is of no more avail now nor shall be hereafter than it was of old.

[1136] And so the kings were put to death and the ancient majesty of thrones and proud sceptres was overthrown and lay in ruins, and the glorious emblem on the head of kings was stained with blood, and beneath the feet of the mob mourned the loss of its high honour; for once dreaded overmuch, eagerly now it is trampled. And so things would pass to the utmost dregs of disorder, when every man sought for himself the power and the headship. Then some of them taught men to appoint magistrates and establish laws that they might consent to obey ordinances. For the race of men, worn out with leading a life of violence, lay faint from its feuds; wherefore the more easily of its own will it gave in to ordinances and the close mesh of laws. For since each man set out to avenge himself more fiercely in his passion than is now suffered by equal laws, for this cause men were weary of leading a life of violence.

[1151] Thence fear of punishment taints the prizes of life. For violence and hurt tangle every man in their toils, and for the most part fall on the head of him, from whom they had their rise, nor is it easy for one who by his act breaks the common pact of peace to lead a calm and quiet life. For though he be unnoticed of the race of gods and men, yet he must needs mistrust that his secret will be kept for ever; nay indeed, many by speaking in their sleep or raving in fever have often, so 'tis said, betrayed themselves, and brought to light misdeeds long hidden.

[1161] Next, what cause spread abroad the divine powers of the gods among great nations, and filled cities with altars, and taught men to undertake sacred rites at yearly festivals, rites which are honoured to-day in great empires and at great places; whence even now there is implanted in mortals a shuddering dread, which raises new shrines of the gods over all the world, and constrains men to throng them on the holy days; of all this it is not hard to give account in words.

[1169] For indeed already the races of mortals used to perceive the glorious shapes of the gods with waking mind, and all the more in sleep with wondrous bulk of body. To these then they

would assign sense because they were seen to move their limbs, and to utter haughty sounds befitting their noble mien and ample strength. And they gave them everlasting life because their images came in constant stream and the form remained unchanged, and indeed above all because they thought that those endowed with such strength could not readily be vanquished by any force. They thought that they far excelled in happiness, because the fear of death never harassed any of them, and at the same time because in sleep they saw them accomplish many marvels, yet themselves not undergo any toil.

[1183] Moreover, they beheld the workings of the sky in due order, and the diverse seasons of the year come round, nor could they learn by what causes that was brought about. And so they made it their refuge to lay all to the charge of the gods, and to suppose that all was guided by their will. And they placed the abodes and quarters of the gods in the sky, because through the sky night and the moon are seen to roll on their way, moon, day and night, and the stern signs of night, and the torches of heaven that rove through the night, and the flying flames, clouds, sunlight, rain, snow, winds, lightning, hail, and the rapid roar and mighty murmurings of heaven's threats.

[1194] Ah! unhappy race of men, when it has assigned such acts to the gods and joined therewith bitter anger! what groaning did they then beget for themselves, what sores for us, what tears for our children to come! Nor is it piety at all to be seen often with veiled head turning towards a stone, and to draw near to every altar, no, nor to lie prostrate on the ground with outstretched palms before the shrines of the gods, nor to sprinkle the altars with the streaming blood of beasts, nor to link vow to vow, but rather to be able to contemplate all things with a mind at rest.

[1204] For indeed when we look up at the heavenly quarters of the great world, and the firm-set ether above the twinkling stars, and it comes to our mind to think of the journeyings of sun and moon, then into our hearts weighed down with other ills, this misgiving too begins to raise up its wakened head, that there may be perchance some immeasurable power of the gods over us, which whirls on the bright stars in their diverse motions. For lack of reasoning assails our mind with doubt, whether there was any creation and beginning of the world, and again whether there is an end, until which the walls of the world may be able to endure this weariness of restless motion, or whether gifted by the gods' will with an everlasting being they may be able to glide on down the everlasting groove of time, and set at naught the mighty strength of measureless time.

[1218] Moreover, whose heart does not shrink with terror of the gods, whose limbs do not crouch in fear, when the parched earth trembles beneath the awful stroke of lightning and rumblings run across the great sky? Do not the peoples and nations' tremble, and proud kings shrink in every limb, thrilled with the fear of the gods, lest for some foul crime or haughty word the heavy time of retribution be ripe?