

Episode One Hundred Twenty-Six - Letter to Pythocles 01 - Introduction - On The Basic Approach of Epicurean Philosophy

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Welcome to Episode One Hundred Twenty Six of Lucretius Today.

This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

I am your host Cassius, and together with our panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the ancient Epicurean texts, and we'll 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.

If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

Today we begin [Epicurus' Letter to Pythocles](#). Now let's join Joshua reading today's text:

Bailey

[84] CLEON brought me a letter from you in which you continue to express a kindly feeling towards me, which is a just return for my interest in you, and you attempt with some success to recall the arguments which lead to a life of blessedness. You ask me to send you a brief argument about the phenomena of the sky in a short sketch, that you may easily recall it to mind. For you say that what I have written in my other works is hard to remember, even though, as you state, you constantly have them in your hands. I was glad to receive your request and felt constrained to answer it by pleasant expectations for the future.

[85] Therefore, as I have finished all my other writings I now intend to accomplish your request, feeling that these arguments will be of value to many other persons as well, and especially to those who have but recently tasted the genuine inquiry into nature, and also to those who are involved too deeply in the business of some regular occupation. Therefore lay good hold on it, keep it in mind, and go through it all keenly, together with the rest which I sent in the small epitome to Herodotus.

First of all then we must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky, whether they are dealt with in connection with other doctrines or

independently, than peace of mind and a sure confidence, just as in all other branches of study.

[86] We must not try to force an impossible explanation, nor employ a method of inquiry like our reasoning either about the modes of life or with respect to the solution of other physical problems: witness such propositions as that 'the universe consists of bodies and the intangible,' or that 'the elements are indivisible,' and all such statements in circumstances where there is only one explanation which harmonizes with phenomena. For this is not so with the things above us: they admit of more than one cause of coming into being and more than one account of their nature which harmonizes with our sensations.

[87] For we must not conduct scientific investigation by means of empty assumptions and arbitrary principles, but follow the lead of phenomena: for our life has not now any place for irrational belief and groundless imaginings, but we must live free from trouble.

Now all goes on without disturbance as far as regards each of those things which may be explained in several ways so as to harmonize with what we perceive, when one admits, as we are bound to do, probable theories about them. But when one accepts one theory and rejects another, which harmonizes as well with the phenomenon, it is obvious that he altogether leaves the path of scientific inquiry and has recourse to myth. Now we can obtain indications of what happens above from some of the phenomena on earth: for we can observe how they come to pass, though we cannot observe the phenomena in the sky: for they may be produced in several ways.

[88] Yet we must never desert the appearance of each of these phenomena, and further, as regards what is associated with it, must distinguish those things whose production in several ways is not contradicted by phenomena on earth.

HICKS

Epicurus to Pythocles, greeting.

[84] In your letter to me, of which Cleon was the bearer, you continue to show me affection which I have merited by my devotion to you, and you try, not without success, to recall the considerations which make for a happy life. To aid your memory you ask me for a clear and concise statement respecting celestial phenomena; for what we have written on this subject elsewhere is, you tell me, hard to remember, although you have my books constantly with you. I was glad to receive your request and am full of pleasant expectations.

[85] We will then complete our writing and grant all you ask. Many others besides you will find these reasonings useful, and especially those who have but recently made acquaintance with the true story of nature and those who are attached to pursuits which go deeper than any part of ordinary education. So you will do well to take and learn them and get them up quickly along with the short epitome in my letter to Herodotus.

In the first place, remember that, like everything else, knowledge of celestial phenomena, whether taken along with other things or in isolation, has no other end in view than peace of mind and firm conviction.

[86] We do not seek to wrest by force what is impossible, nor to understand all matters equally well, nor make our treatment always as clear as when we discuss human life or explain the principles of physics in general – for instance, that the whole of being consists of bodies and intangible nature, or that the ultimate elements of things are indivisible, or any other proposition which admits only one explanation of the phenomena to be possible. But this is not the case with celestial phenomena: these at any rate admit of manifold causes for their occurrence and manifold accounts, none of them contradictory of sensation, of their nature.

[87] For in the study of nature we must not conform to empty assumptions and arbitrary laws, but follow the promptings of the facts; for our life has no need now of unreason and false opinion; our one need is untroubled existence. All things go on uninterruptedly, if all be explained by the method of plurality of causes in conformity with the facts, so soon as we duly understand what may be plausibly alleged respecting them. But when we pick and choose among them, rejecting one equally consistent with the phenomena, we clearly fall away from the study of nature altogether and tumble into myth. Some phenomena within our experience afford evidence by which we may interpret what goes on in the heavens. We see how the former really take place, but not how the celestial phenomena take place, for their occurrence may possibly be due to a variety of causes.

[88] However, we must observe each fact as presented, and further separate from it all the facts presented along with it, the occurrence of which from various causes is not contradicted by facts within our experience.