

Episode 152 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 08 - The New Education 01

Post by "Joshua" of December 8, 2022 at 6:39 AM

[The passage from Lucretius, Book 1 (regarding a chorale performance at Notre Dame, 2017)]

Quote

Stefan Girardet

(referring to Epicurus:)

*Therefore the vivid power of his mind prevailed,
and forth he marched far beyond the flaming walls
of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable
universe in thought and imagination; whence
victorious he returns, bearing his prize: the
knowledge of what can come into being and what
cannot: how each thing has its powers limited
and its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore
Superstition is now in turn cast down and
trampled underfoot—a victory that exalts us
to heaven.*

—Lucretius, *De rerum natura* I: 172-75 —after Loeb Classical Library

Display More

Quote

Quote Therefore the lively power of his mind prevailed,
and forth he marched far beyond the flaming walls
of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable
universe in thought and imagination;
whence victorious he returns bearing his prize, the
knowledge what can come into being,
what can not, in a word, how each thing has its powers limited

and its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore
Superstition is now in her turn cast down and
trampled underfoot, whilst we by the victory are exalted
high as heaven.

Display More

(The un-amended Loeb text, for comparison)

This passage is one that will come up on next week's podcast, so it's actually good to get a chance to address a few points here. There are three key issues that complicate a simple reading of the text. We know from Thoreau's journal that he read the first hundred lines of Lucretius and then moved on--his only comment on the text or the poet is in reference to this passage, which he cites as a good description of Prometheus. This is probably *not* obtuseness on his part--it's exactly the kind of layered texture and metaphorical posture--allowing for open interpretation--that poetry is known for, which is presumably why Epicurus has so little time for it. But it's worth mentioning because of what comes next.

After Epicurus seizes a boon for mankind, Lucretius says that with this new knowledge "Superstition" (*religio*) is "cast down" and "trampled underfoot". The word foot is appropriate, because it is primarily in the footnotes that competing scholars have offered their opinions on that word *religio*. Superstition? Religion? *False* religion?

Quote

Lucretius seizes the opportunity of stating that men think things are done by divine power because they do not understand how they happen, whereas he will show how all things are done without the hand of the gods — a bold proposition truly, but one which, translated into modern language, means simply that natural phenomena are subject to definite laws, and are not unintelligible miracles. Lucretius fails to perceive that definite physical laws are consistent with the work of God and the difficulty of reconciling the two ideas, unreal as it seems to us, has been felt by able men even now-a- days, when the conception of divine power is very different from any present to the mind of Lucretius. To most of us the very conception of a law suggests a lawgiver, while he, to prove the existence of laws, thought it necessary to deny the action of beings who could set those laws at nought.

-Fleeming Jenkin, *The Atomic Theory of Lucretius*, 1868

There is an undercurrent in the western approach to Lucretius to view his rejection of the myths and worship of the pagan gods as containing an important doctrinal Christian truth, but only part of it. In much the same way, certain Muslim apologists have noticed that the claim "there is no god" is simply the first part of the *Shahada*.

Then we have the final line: "we by the victory are exalted as high as heaven". This is where the largest shift takes place in the text above. The Notre Dame setting has it: "*a victory that exalts us to heaven.*" Instead of 'as high as heaven', this victory exalts us 'to heaven'.

TL;DR

Maybe I'm splitting hairs here, but it would seem to be important to know how these passages can be so easily misread. If 1.) you leave out the preceding passage identifying Epicurus, and if 2.) you say that the problem is merely *superstition* or false religion, and if 3.) you further suggest that a victory over false religion exalts us "to" heaven, we're suddenly looking at a very different reading of a rather important passage.

Of course, I can have no idea what the actual thought process was at Notre Dame, and I have not listened to the piece itself.