

Sunday, November 30 - Zoom Meeting - 12:30 PM - Topic: Session One of Book Review of Lucretius - Lines 1 - 214 (The Introduction, Up to Start of Atomism)

Post by "Cassius" of November 30, 2025 at 1:55 PM

Meeting Summary (AI - Not Proofed - May Be Inaccurate!)

This meeting focused on discussing Lucretius' poem "On the Nature of Things" (De Rerum Natura) and its relationship to Epicurean philosophy. Participants explored the opening passages of the poem, particularly the invocation to Venus, and debated its symbolic meaning within Epicurean thought. The group also discussed approaches to studying Epicurean philosophy, the relationship between Lucretius and Epicurus, and plans for systematically working through the text in future meetings.

Key Concepts or Theories:

- Lucretius as a faithful transmitter of Epicurean philosophy rather than an innovator
- The symbolic interpretation of Venus in the opening of De Rerum Natura
- The relationship between Empedocles' concepts of love and strife and Lucretius' Venus and Mars
- The distinction between popular religious understanding and philosophical interpretations of deities
- The importance of primary sources in understanding Epicurean philosophy

Important Questions Raised:

- Why does Lucretius begin his Epicurean poem with an invocation to Venus when Epicureans rejected traditional religious beliefs?
- Is Venus meant to symbolize nature, pleasure, or something else in the poem's opening?
- How did Epicureans reconcile their theological views with participation in religious ceremonies?
- What is the best approach for newcomers to begin studying Epicurean philosophy?

Key Takeaways and Summary of Learning Objectives

- Lucretius' poem "On the Nature of Things" represents a faithful attempt to communicate Epicurean philosophy rather than an extension or modification of it
- The opening invocation to Venus can be understood as a literary device, a form of flattery to Memmius (the poem's dedicatee), and a symbolic representation of natural forces
- The group plans to systematically work through Lucretius' text in future meetings, focusing on both content and the significance of its presentation order
- Different readers approach Epicurean philosophy from different starting points, with varying opinions on which introductory texts are most appropriate

Topic 1: The Venus Invocation in Lucretius

The meeting began with an extensive discussion about why Lucretius opens his Epicurean poem with an invocation to Venus, which seems contradictory to Epicurean theology. Several interpretations were offered. Tau suggested it serves dual purposes: as a poetic device and as flattery toward Memmius (the poem's dedicatee), who claimed descent from a hero in Aeneas' army. By addressing Venus as "mother of Aeneas' sons," Lucretius creates an ancestral connection that would appeal to Memmius. Raphael proposed that Venus represents a symbol of natural forces rather than a literal deity, suggesting educated Romans would understand this symbolism. Cassius noted that the specific attributes described in the opening passage might more precisely represent pleasure rather than nature in general, as there's no mention of pain or fear. Joshua contributed that Lucretius was heavily influenced by Empedocles, who described forces of love and strife in nature, which Lucretius transformed into Venus and Mars.

Relevant Q&A

Dave: Who was Lucretius writing to? Who was this Memmius pointed to?

Joshua: He dedicates the poem to Gaius Memmius, a Roman politician who was exiled to Athens and bought the derelict house that belonged to Epicurus. Cicero wrote to Memmius asking him not to tear down the house, as it was a pilgrimage site for Epicureans. The poem may have been part of a campaign to convince Memmius to preserve this important Epicurean landmark.

Dave: I thought the Greeks really considered their gods to be individuals residing somewhere.

Raphael: The educated Greeks and Romans knew that these stories (mythos) were conjured up by poets. They understood them as symbolic personifications of forces of nature.

Topic 2: Approaches to Epicurean Philosophy

The group discussed various approaches to studying and understanding Epicurean philosophy. Dave observed that most new members of the forum mention reading DeWitt as their introduction to Epicureanism, wondering why this particular text seems to be the common starting point. Tau shared that he came to Epicureanism through other sources and only read DeWitt later, expressing criticism that DeWitt "takes too many liberties" and presents

speculation as fact. Patrikios agreed that DeWitt might not be the best starting point for newcomers, suggesting that more accessible modern works might serve better as introductions. Raphael emphasized the importance of primary sources, arguing that readers should begin with Epicurus' own words before moving to interpretations. The discussion highlighted the challenge of finding appropriate entry points for people at different stages of understanding.

Relevant Q&A

Dave: I usually look at the About section of anyone that joins. It seems like every single person says their reading is DeWitt. Nobody comes in from some other material or reading background. I wonder why that is.

Cassius: People probably pick up the emphasis we place on it on the forum. They likely lurk for a while before setting up an account, see the reading list, and notice that book is included.

Tau: I joined the forum after I studied Epicureanism for some time. I only read DeWitt's book much later, and I was never impressed with it because he takes too many liberties and presents stuff as fact when he has absolutely no ground to do that.

Cassius: There are many different opinions about many different things, and that's part of what we discuss.

Topic 3: Lucretius as Transmitter of Epicurean Philosophy

Cassius established his position that Lucretius was attempting to faithfully and accurately represent Epicurus rather than extend or modify Epicurean philosophy. He suggested that Lucretius likely had Epicurus' books "On Nature" in front of him and was following not only the content but also the sequence of Epicurus' presentation. Tau agreed, noting that this would explain the heavy emphasis on physics in Lucretius' poem, as Epicurus' "On Nature" primarily dealt with physics. The group discussed the value of Lucretius as a well-preserved, extensive text from someone attempting to explain Epicureanism about 200 years after Epicurus, at a time when there had been sufficient opportunity to process and develop the philosophy. Joshua mentioned David Sedley's book "Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom," which attempts to reconstruct Epicurus' "On Nature" using Lucretius as a guide.

Relevant Q&A

Cassius: I'm coming to this with a position that Lucretius is doing everything he can to faithfully and accurately represent Epicurus. I do not think that Lucretius is trying to extend anything, or change anything, or improvise, or improve anything in Epicurus. Not everybody takes that position, and there are some articles out there that imply that Lucretius, for example, on the

swerve, was improvising.

Tau: Lucretius was not really a philosopher himself, he was a brilliant poet, but he didn't try to philosophize or push Epicureanism further. He didn't try to develop the philosophy. He just tried to put the philosophy in the most beautiful words he could.

Actionable Next Steps / Assignments

- Continue reading the opening sections of Lucretius' "On the Nature of Things" for next week's discussion
- Post in the thread if you have comments or suggestions about how to better organize future discussions
- Consider reading George Santayana's essay "Three Philosophical Poets" which includes analysis of Lucretius
- Explore David Sedley's "Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom" for scholarly perspective

Supplemental Resources and Readings

- George Santayana's essay "Three Philosophical Poets" (examining Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe)
- David Sedley's "Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom"
- The Oxford Handbook chapter on Epicurean theology
- Side-by-side translations of Lucretius created by Cassius
- Multiple translations of Lucretius available on Cassius's webpage (Latin, Cyril Bailey, Samuel Dunster, H.A.J. Monroe)