

Lucretius EpicureanFriends PDF Reference Edition - General Comments

Post by "Cassius" of October 5, 2019 at 6:23 AM

In preparation for the upcoming series of Skype sessions to read and talk through Lucretius, I am putting together a "Reference Edition" PDF which contains three of the best Public Domain translations (1743 Daniel Brown, Hugh Munro, and Cyril Bailey). When put together and bookmarked in a single PDF, it is easy to compare alternative translations to get the best fix on the original meaning of the text.

I will post that new PDF here soon, and we can use that ensure that everyone participating in the podcast series has free access to the same version being discussed in the podcast. In the meantime the separate PDF editions [are available here](#). I am envisioning that each podcast would be about an hour in length, with the first fifteen minutes or so of each podcast dedicated to a reading from the text, followed by discussion of that reading each week.

Of course there are many other and more modern translations, of which the Martin Ferguson Smith edition is in my view the best, but those are not in the public domain and would present copyright issues that would limit what we could do with those texts. There are also public domain "poetic" versions, notably the Emery Leonard version, but those versions take such a large degree of poetic license in translation that they are not the most suitable for rigorous study of the original meaning of the text.

Let me go ahead and say that I want to focus on [the 1743 edition](#) as the main text to organize the discussion. We can and will of course use the other editions for comparison in each discussion, but it makes sense to pick one translation to use at the start of each discussion/podcast, and that's where we should use the 1743 edition uniformly. Each of the three translations has strengths and weaknesses, and some passages in some texts seem more clear and accurate and well-worded than others. [Here](#) is a side-by-side example of one passage from the various texts compared to each other

I believe the 1743 Edition is the best for the purpose of reading at the beginning of each session for the following reasons:

1. **The Cyril Bailey Edition**, even though the most recent of the three, appears to me to make editorial choices in word selection which at time deviate from the literal meaning in significant ways. Of the three translators, Baily also expresses in his commentaries the most criticism of Epicurean ethics and epistemology, and so in passages that are somewhat obscure I do not believe his editorial decisions are to be trusted as the most friendly and accurate to Epicurus / Lucretius' intent. He clearly did not consider his own ethics to be Epicurean, so I question how well he understood the material, or a least how

sympathetically he was willing to view it. I do not believe it makes good sense to trust an enemy of a position to convey it accurately and sympathetically.

2. **The Hugh Munro Edition** appears to be significantly more literal and faithful to the original intent than the Cyril Bailey version, and for those reasons alone are to be preferred over Bailey. It also appears to me in reading his commentaries that Munro was much more of an admirer of Epicurus than Bailey, and therefore more likely to convey his meaning sympathetically. However it is also my observation that Munro tends to be so literal that his syntax and choice of words is frequently significantly more complex for a modern reader to follow. It appears to me that in most cases the improvements we see in the Bailey version over Munro are mostly that Bailey modernized Hugh Munro's language so that it flows better to the modern ear. But in many ways it appears to me that when someone wants the most literal translation they should always compare what they are reading against Munro's version. If I had to choose one of the two for studying an obscure passage, I would always choose Munro.
3. **The 1743 Edition** was published by a translator who appears unknown (Daniel Browne was the publisher, not the translator). Counterintuitively, due to its age, in many cases it is actually written more clearly to the modern ear than either Munro or Bailey. It is almost as if the 1743 translator more intuitively understands the original intent of the text and shapes it into simpler and more direct form than Munro or Bailey. And here is the most important reason of all for choosing the 1743 edition: regularly throughout the text in critical sections where shades of meaning are important, the 1743 translator makes word choice selections that are different, but to my observation likely more sensible, than either Munro or Bailey or other modern translators. Is it possible that in remaining anonymous the 1743 translator felt more free to convey Lucretius accurately, and not hold back on Lucretius' anti-religious and anti-Academic message? Over time I will come back and add to this list, but here is an example:
 1. At around line 450 of Book 1 there is an important discussion of the "properties" of the elements and the "qualities" of combined bodies. In this connection Lucretius makes the point that the properties are eternal and unchanging, but that the qualities vary with time, place, and circumstance. Most modern translators use the word "accidents" to translate this varying quality, but the original text is "eventum" and the 1743 translator logically calls them "events." I know not everyone will agree with this, but to me the two words "accident" and "event" have very different connotations. "Accident" can be read to imply that the circumstance is totally "random" and "unpredictable" - similar to "chaotic." It is my view that this is a very unfortunate choice of words, because the qualities of combined bodies are not "chaotic" but rather strictly determined by the local circumstances under which they occur. It is my view that this is an example of modern translators missing the point of Lucretius, subconsciously thinking along the lines that the universe is "accidental" when in fact Epicurus taught (for example in the letter to Herodotus) that the action of the universe is strictly "determined" by the nature of the elements and the limited ways they can combine (limited by their properties). Perhaps "accidents" is also a nod to the religious perspective, in which the only

alternatives are God vs Chaos, rather than the "natural law" universe based on the properties of the atoms? At any rate, combined with other examples I will list later, I believe this word choice shows that the 1743 translator was more "in tune" with Lucretius / Epicurus on this very important point.

2. In the opening of Book 2, I consider Bailey's phrase "all such power belongs to reason alone" to be an absolutely awful phrase that Epicurus / Lucretius would never have endorsed, given the Canonical focus on the senses over logic / reason. But that is the phrase Bailey uses: "But if we see that these thoughts are mere mirth and mockery, and in very truth the fears of men and the cares that dog them fear not the clash of arms nor the weapons of war, but pass boldly among kings and lords of the world, nor dread the glitter that comes from gold nor the bright sheen of the purple robe, can you doubt that **all such power belongs to reason alone**, above all when the whole of life is but a struggle in darkness?" Munro has this as "But if we see that these things are food for laughter and mere mockeries, and in good truth the fears of men and dogging cares dread not the clash of arms and cruel weapons, if unabashed they mix among kings and caesars and stand not in awe of the glitter from gold nor the brilliant sheen of the purple robe, how can you doubt that this is wholly the prerogative of reason, when the whole of life withal is a struggle in the dark?" However the 1743 Edition has this much more neutrally as "But if these things are vain and all grimace, and the truth is that nor the fears of men, nor following cares fly from the sound of alarms or cruel darts, but boldly force their way among the kings and mighty of the earth; nor do they homage pay to shining gold, nor the gay splendor of a purple robe. **Do you doubt but all this stuff is want of sense**, and all our life is groping in the dark?" I presume that Munro has probably made an attempt to be literal, and his version can be justified if we consider "reason" to refer to "true reason" in the Epicurean sense. We could give the same license to Bailey as well, but his "reason ALONE" seems to me to be the worst possible choice if it is read, as many will, following Plato, to mean "reason without reference to and superior to the senses." In my view the 1743 Edition is a significantly better choice and actually uses the word "sense," which evokes the senses over reason, in the way the term "common sense" is generally used. At the very least the 1743 edition will not plant in the mind of a new reader (the target audience of Lucretius!) the idea that reason/logic is superior to the senses and has no use for them.

One unfortunate fact is that while I have a transcription of Book 1 complete, and that will let us get started for probably five sessions, in the interim I am going to have to work hard to get the remaining five books fully transcribed. Each has been started [at the Epicureanfriends wiki](#), but considerably more work will be done to finish them. If anyone has any time to help I would greatly appreciate the assistance. Both the original PDF text and the work that has been done already [is available here](#). If you have time to contribute, just type up the text in pure ascii (no bold, underlines, or italics) and send me a private message and/or post it here in this thread and I will add it into the wiki for use in the final version we use with the podcast. As I work on

this myself I am adding the transcription to the wiki immediately, so if you don't see the transcribed text in the appropriate page for the 1743 edition you can be sure that that part has not been transcribed and you will not be wasting your effort.

As of this writing Book One is fully complete, and portions of the following books are also ready. Next in line to be finished is Book 2, which is only about halfway complete. [**If you are able to help, this is the place to start.**](#) (UPDATED LINK TO GOOGLE DOC.) You will note that I am adding line numbers in brackets to the beginning of each paragraph, but it is not necessary to worry about those at this point, especially since they are necessarily approximations and not easy to dig out of the text.

I should add that the work that is going to be necessary to finish the 1743 transcription is a measure of my confidence that it is the best for our use. I already have the Bailey and Munro editions fully transcribed, and if I thought they were suitable I would use one of those already finished. However I started this project trying to use first Bailey, then Munro, and I found the result so unsatisfactory, and the 1743 edition so superior, that I think it is worthwhile to finish the transcription so that our final work is the most useful that is possible. And that is even despite the fact that the 1743 edition uses the old style "f" for "s" in some words! (As we transcribe we need to substitute the modern typeface, and I should also note that in most cases I am not preserving Capital letters that do not appear at the start of a sentence, except of course for proper names or other words we would expect to be capitalized.)

ALSO as part of planning for a Skype / online series of discussions to be turned into a podcast, I want to break down each book into manageable sections of fifteen minutes or so which can be read aloud and played at the opening of each session. I am in the process of preparing logical divisions now, and I will turn each division into a text-to-speech version which we can use if necessary or appropriate.

HOWEVER it would be optimum, and a long term goal, to get these sections read aloud by volunteer readers from among our Epicureanfriends participants. If you can volunteer to read a section in good-quality audio, please volunteer, because those will no doubt be better than the computer voice. I hope multiple people will be willing to do this for each selection, because even though we will use only one per podcast, I would like to circulate any that are submitted on Epicureanradio.com and use them on other similar opportunities. I think there is hardly any better way to get used to the Epicurean texts than to listen to them being read aloud by a human speaker, because voice inflection conveys meaning that is hard to pick up in the written word. I will be recording versions myself, and I hope you will consider trying it yourself and letting us know so we can make available your versions to other students of Epicurus.

Once we are well underway with the project we should plan to turn to the human-read versions of Lucretius into a freely-available audiobook of the full text of Lucretius, which we can make available freely to the world in addition to the podcast discussion versions.