

Episode Three - So Great Is the Power of Religion To Inspire Evil Deeds!

Post by "Charles" of January 11, 2020 at 4:22 PM

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EDIT FROM CASSIUS: Because we did not get to this paragraph during Episode Two, I am pasting the text to be discussed in Episode three here, to be followed by the comments relevant to this paragraph that have already been posted. Charles' post follows and then the rest in order:

Welcome to Episode Three of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who lived in the age of Julius Caesar and 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 my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you line by line through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. Be aware that none of us are professional philosophers, and everyone here is a self-taught Epicurean. 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.

Before we get started with today's episode let me remind you of our three ground rules.

First: The opinions stated on this podcast are those of the people making them. Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, not to tell you what we think Epicurus might have said or should have said, in our opinions.

Second: In this podcast we won't be talking about modern political issues. How you apply Epicurus in your own life is entirely up to you. Over at the Epicureanfriends.com web forum, we apply this approach by following a set of ground rules we call "Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean." Epicurean philosophy is not a religion, it's not Stoicism, it's not Humanism, it's not Libertarianism, it's not Atheism, and it's not Marxism or anything else - it is unique in the history of Western Civilization, and as we explore Lucretius's poem you'll quickly see how that is the case.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1389-episode-three-so-great-is-the-power-of-religion-to-inspire-evil-deeds/?postID=6076#post6076>

Third: Please be willing to re-examine whatever you think you already know about Epicurus. Lucretius will show that Epicurus was not focused on fine food and wine, like some people say, but neither did he teach that we should live like a hermit on bread and water, as other people say. Epicurus taught that feeling - pleasure and pain - are what Nature gave us to live by, and not gods, idealism, or virtue ethics. More than anything else, Epicurus taught that the universe is not supernatural in any way, and that means there's no life after death, and any happiness we'll ever have comes in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

As we get started today, remember that the home page of this podcast is LucretiusToday.com, and there you can find a free copy of the version of the poem from which we are reading, and links to where you can discuss the poem between episodes at Epicureanfriends.com.

This is the text that will be covered in Episode Three. The Latin version of Book One has this as beginning at approximately line 81.

[The 1743 Latin version is here.](#)

1743 Daniel Browne Version: But in these things, I fear, you will suspect you are learning impious rudiments of reason, and entering in a road of wickedness. So, far from this, reflect what sad flagitious deeds Religion has produced. By her inspired, the Grecian chiefs, the first of men, at Aulis, Diana's altar shamefully defiled with Iphigenia's blood; her virgin hair a fillet bound, which hung in equal length on either side of her face. She saw her father, covered with sorrow, stand before the altar; for pity to his grief the butchering priests concealed the knife. The city, at the sight, overflowed with tears; the virgin, dumb with fear; fell low upon her knees on the hard Earth; in vain the wretched princess in distress pleaded that she first gave the honored name of Father to the King; but hurried off, and dragged by wicked hands, she, trembling, stood before the altar. Alas! not as a virgin, the solemn forms being duly done, drawn with pleasing force to Hymen's noble rites, but a chaste maid, just ripe for nuptial joy, falls a sad victim, by a father's hand, only to beg a kind propitious gale for Grecian ships. Such scenes of villainy Religion could inspire!

Munro Version: This is what I fear herein, lest haply you should fancy that you are entering on unholy grounds of reason and treading the path of sin; whereas on the contrary often and often that very religion has given birth to sinful and unholy deeds. Thus in Aulis the chosen chieftains of the Danaï, foremost of men, foully polluted with Iphianassa's blood the altar of the Trivian maid. Soon as the fillet encircling her maiden tresses shed itself in equal lengths down each cheek, and soon as she saw her father standing sorrowful before the altars and beside him the ministering priests hiding the knife and her countrymen at sight of her shedding tears, speechless in terror she dropped down on her knees and sank to the ground. Nor aught in such a moment could it avail the luckless girl that she had first bestowed the name of father on the king. For lifted up in the hands of the men she was carried shivering to the altars, not after due performance of the customary rites to be escorted by the clear-ringing bridal song, but in the

very season of marriage, stainless maid mid the stain of blood, to fall a sad victim by the sacrificing stroke of a father, that thus a happy and prosperous departure might be granted to the fleet. So great the evils to which religion could prompt!

Bailey Version: Herein I have one fear, lest perchance you think that you are starting on the principles of some unholy reasoning, and setting foot upon the path of sin. Nay, but on the other hand, again and again our foe, religion, has given birth to deeds sinful and unholy. Even as at Aulis the chosen chieftains of the Danai, the first of all the host, foully stained with the blood of Iphianassa the altar of the Virgin of the Cross-Roads. For as soon as the band braided about her virgin locks streamed from her either cheek in equal lengths, as soon as she saw her sorrowing sire stand at the altar's side, and near him the attendants hiding their knives, and her countrymen shedding tears at the sight of her, tongue-tied with terror, sinking on her knees she fell to earth. Nor could it avail the luckless maid at such a time that she first had given the name of father to the king. For seized by men's hands, all trembling was she led to the altars, not that, when the ancient rite of sacrifice was fulfilled, she might be escorted by the clear cry of 'Hymen', but in the very moment of marriage, a pure victim she might foully fall, sorrowing beneath a father's slaughtering stroke, that a happy and hallowed starting might be granted to the fleet. Such evil deeds could religion prompt.

Supplemental Material:

This from [Diogenes of Oinoanda](#):

Fr. 20

[So it is obvious that wrong-doers, given that they do not fear the penalties imposed by the laws, are not] afraid of [the gods.] This [has to be] conceded. For if they were [afraid, they] would not [do wrong]. As for [all] the others, [it is my opinion] that the [wise] are not [(reasoning indicates) righteous] on account of the gods, but on account of [thinking] correctly and the [opinions] they hold [regarding] certain things [and especially] pains and death (for indeed invariably and without exception human beings do wrong either on account of fear or on account of pleasures), and that ordinary people on the other hand are righteous, in so far as they are righteous, on account of the laws and the penalties, imposed by the laws, hanging over them. But even if some of their number are conscientious on account of the laws, they are few: only just two or three individuals are to be found among great segments of multitudes, and not even these are steadfast in acting righteously; for they are not soundly persuaded about providence. A clear indication of the complete inability of the gods to prevent wrong-doings is provided by the nations of the Jews and Egyptians, who, as well as being the most superstitious of all peoples, are the vilest of all peoples.

On account of what kind of gods, then, will human beings be righteous? For they are not righteous on account of the real ones or on account of Plato's and Socrates' Judges in Hades. We are left with this conclusion; otherwise, why should not those who disregard the laws scorn

fables much more?

So, with regard to righteousness, neither does our doctrine do harm [not does] the opposite [doctrine help], while, with regard to the other condition, the opposite doctrine not only does not help, but on the contrary also does harm, whereas our doctrine not only does not harm, but also helps. For the one removes disturbances, while the other adds them, as has already been made clear to you before.

Are there other Epicurean texts directly on point on the corrupting power of religion?

Am I also not remembering that someone famous in the Middle Ages made a comment about Lucretius' line "So great is the power of religion to persuade to evil deeds!" being one of the most memorable of the poem that would live forever? or as long as poetry survives.... or something like that?

[This below is a hint of it](#), but not the full quote:

"When a single day brings the world to destruction, only then will the poetry of the sublime Lucretius pass away." This judgment by the Roman poet [Ovid](#), written in the generation after Lucretius's death, has been echoed by such writers as Voltaire and [George Santayana](#); the author of *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things) holds a place in world literature as one of the great philosopher-poets.

[Another hint of it:](#)

The most obvious and famous result of this attitude is Lucretius' extreme hostility to traditional religion—which, in his view, is neither reasonable or natural and is the source of endless anxiety and cruelty. And responses to his poem often begin and end with that. Voltaire, as one might expect, enthusiastically approved the most famous line in the poem attacking traditional religion: "That shows how much/ religion can turn mankind to evil" (1.134), and the energy of that endorsement is matched by any number of people who turned away from Lucretius in horror for this irreligious stance.

And Martin Ferguson Smith, but again not the full quote:

12. **101:** A famous line (*tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*), which **Voltaire** predicted would last as long as the world.



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Are there others?

I seem to recall the story of Jephthah having to sacrifice his daughter, not her in particular but from the result of a vow he made to secure victory over a battle.