

Episode Four - Recap of Opening Sections of Book One

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Welcome to Episode Four 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 we'll 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 any other philosophy - 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.

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.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1399-episode-four-recap-of-opening-sections-of-book-one/?postID=6434#post6434>

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.

Today's episode is going to be devoted to a review of what we have read so far, with special emphasis toward explaining how Epicurus was both a vigorous opponent of supernatural religion, while at the same time using himself the word "gods" to refer to true nature of what a divine being would be like if we happened some time in the future to fly out into space and come across one. Whatever else you may end up concluding about Epicurus' view of divine beings, we know for certain that Epicurus held that true divine beings are not supernatural; they did not create the universe, they do not control the universe, and they do not intervene in any way at all in the affairs of human beings.

Whether you think the Epicurean theory of divine beings is interesting and helpful, or whether you it is irrelevant because they have no concern or connection with us, just keep in mind that whenever an ancient Epicurean referred to gods, we know for sure that those gods were nothing like Yahweh, or Jehovah, or Jesus, or Allah, or any of the standard definition of gods we use today.

With that, let's get started with today's discussion:

The part of the poem we have read so far from the [1743 Daniel Browne edition](#) is as follows:

MOTHER of Rome, Delight of Men and Gods, Sweet Venus; who with vital power does fill the sea bearing the ships, the fruitful Earth, all things beneath the rolling signs of Heaven; for it is by Thee that creatures of every kind conceive, rise into life, and view the Sun's bright beams. Thee, Goddess, Thee the winds avoid; the clouds fly Thee and Thy approach. With various art the Earth, for Thee, affords her sweetest flowers; for Thee the sea's rough waves put on their smiles, and the smooth sky shines with diffused light. For when the buxom Spring leads on the year, and genial gales of western winds blow fresh, unlocked from Winter's cold, the airy birds first feel Thee, Goddess, and express thy power. Thy active flame strikes through their very souls. And then the savage beasts, with wanton play, frisk over the cheerful fields, and swim the rapid streams. So pleased with thy sweetness, so transported by thy soft charms, all living Nature strives, with sharp desire, to follow Thee, her Guide, where Thou art pleased to lead. In short, Thy power, inspiring every breast with tender love, drives every creature on with eager heat, in seas, in mountains, in swiftest floods, in leafy forests, and in verdant plains, to propagate their kind from age to age.

Since Thou, alone, doest govern Nature's laws, and nothing, without Thee, can rise to light, without Thee nothing can look gay or lovely; I beg Thee a companion to my lays, which now I sing of Nature, and I devote to my dear Memmius, whom Thou art ever pleased, sweet Goddess, to adorn with every grace. For him, kind Deity, inspire my song, and give immortal beauty to my verse. Meantime, the bloody tumults of the war, by sea and land, compose, and

lay asleep. For Thou, alone, mankind, with quiet peace, canst bless; because it is Mars Armipotent that rules the bloody tumults of the war, and He, by everlasting pains of love, bound fast, tastes in Thy lap most sweet repose, turns back his smooth long neck, and views thy charms, and greedily sucks love at both his eyes. Supinely, as he rests, his very soul hangs on thy lips. This God, dissolved in ease, in the soft moments when thy heavenly limbs cling round him, melting with eloquence, caress, great Goddess, and implore a peace for Rome.

For neither can I write with cheerful strains, in times so sad, nor can the noble House of Memmius desert the common good in such distress of things. The hours you spare, apply with close attention to my verse, and, free from care, receive true reason's rules; nor these my gifts, prepared with faithful pains, reject with scorn before they are understood. For I begin to write of lofty themes, of Gods, and of the motions of the sky, the rise of things, how all things Nature forms, and how they grow, and to perfection rise, and into what, by the same Nature's laws, those things resolve and die; which as I write I call by various names; sometimes it is matter, or the first principles, or seeds of things, or first of bodies, whence all else proceed.

For the whole nature of the Gods must spend an Immortality in softest peace, removed from our affairs, and separated by distance infinite; from sorrow free; secure from danger; in its own happiness sufficient, and nothing of ours can want, is neither pleased with good, nor vexed with evil.

Indeed mankind, in wretched bondage held, lay groveling on the ground, galled with the yoke of what is called Religion; from the sky this tyrant shewed her head, and with grim looks hung over us, poor mortals, here below; until a man of Greece, with steady eyes, dared look her in the face, and first opposed her power. Him not the fame of Gods, nor thunder's roar, kept back, nor threatening tumults of the sky; but still the more they roused the active virtue of his aspiring soul, as he pressed forward, first to break through Nature's scanty bounds. His mind's quick force prevailed; and so he passed by far the flaming limits of this world, and wandered with his comprehensive soul over all the mighty space; from thence returned, triumphant; told us what things may have a being, and what cannot; and how a finite power is fixed to each; a bound it cannot break. And so Religion, which we feared before, by him subdued, we tread upon in turn. His conquest makes us equal to the Gods.

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!