

Episode Five - On Resisting The Threats of Priests And Poets

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Welcome to Episode Five 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: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, not to tell you our opinion of what we think Epicurus might have said or should have said.

Second: We won't be talking in this podcast about modern political issues. How you apply Epicurus in your own life is entirely up to you. Our approach is what we call "Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean." Epicurean philosophy is not the same as Stoicism, or Humanism, or Libertarianism, or Atheism, or Marxism it is a unique philosophy of its own, and as we explore Lucretius you'll quickly see how that is the case.

Third: Lucretius will show us that Epicurus did not advocate a life of luxury, like some people say, but neither did he advocate a minimalist simple life, as others 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 Five. The Latin version of Book One has this as beginning at approximately line 105.

[1743 Daniel Browne Edition:](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1409-episode-five-on-resisting-the-threats-of-priests-and-poets/?postID=6569#post6569>

But still I fear your caution will dispute the maxims I lay down, who all your life have trembled at the poets' frightful tales. Alas! I could even-now invent such dreams as would pervert the steadiest rules of reason, and make your fortunes tremble to the bottom. No wonder! But if Men were once convinced that death was the sure end of all their pains, they might with reason then resist the force of all Religion, and contemn the threats of poets. Now we have no sense, no power, to strive against prejudice, because we fear a scene of endless torments after death.

And yet the nature of the soul we know not, whether formed with the body, or at the birth infused; and then, by death cut off, she perishes as bodies do; or whether she descends to the dark caves and dreadful lakes of Hell; or, after death, inspired with heavenly Instinct, she retires into the Brutes, as our great Ennius sung, who first a crown of laurels ever green brought down from Helicon; which gained him fame through all the Italian Coasts. And yet this man, in never-dying numbers, describes the stately Palaces of Acheron, where nor our souls or bodies ever come, but certain spectres strange and wonderous pale; from whence he tells how Homer's ever celebrated shade appeared, and how his eyes began to flow with briny tears, as in immortal verse he sung of Nature and her secret laws.

Wherefore, I shall not only accurately write of things above, as how the Sun and Moon their courses run, and by what power beings in Earth and Heaven are formed, but chiefly search with nicest care into the soul and what her Nature is. What 'tis that meets our wakeful eyes, and frights the mind; and how, by sickness or by sleep oppressed, we think we see, or hear the voice of those who died long since, whose mould'ring bones rot in the cold embraces of the grave.

Munro:

You yourself some time or other overcome by the terror-speaking tales of the seers will seek to fall away from us. Ay indeed for how many dreams may they now imagine for you, enough to upset the calculations of life and trouble all your fortunes with fear! And with good cause; for if men saw that there was a fixed limit to their woes, they would be able in some way to withstand the religious scruples and threatenings of the seers. As it is, there is noway, no means of resisting, since they must fear after death everlasting pains.

For they cannot tell what is the nature of the soul, whether it be born or on the contrary find its way into men at their birth, and whether it perish together with us when severed from us by death or visit the gloom of Orcus and wasteful pools or by divine decree find its way into brutes in our stead, as sang our Ennius who first brought down from delightful Helicon a crown of unfading leaf, destined to bright renown throughout Italian clans of men. And yet with all this Ennius sets forth that there are Acherusian quarters, publishing it in immortal verses; though in our passage thither neither our souls nor bodies hold together, but only certain idols pale in wondrous wise. From these places he tells us the ghost of everliving Homer uprose before him and began to shed salt tears and to unfold in words the nature of things.

Wherefore we must well grasp the principle of things above, the principle by which the courses of the sun and moon go on, the force by which every thing on earth proceeds, but above all we must find out by keen reason what the soul and the nature of the mind consist of, and what thing it is-which meets us when awake and frightens our minds, if we are under the influence of disease; meets and frightens us too when we are buried in sleep; so that we seem to 'see and hear speaking to us face to face them who are dead, whose bones earth holds in its embrace.

Bailey:

You yourself sometime vanquished by the fearsome threats of the seer's sayings, will seek to desert from us. Nay indeed, how many a dream may they even now conjure up before you, which might avail to overthrow your schemes of life, and confound in fear all your fortunes. And justly so: for if men could see that there is a fixed limit to their sorrows, then with some reason they might have the strength to stand against the scruples of religion, and the threats of seers. As it is there is no means, no power to withstand, since everlasting is the punishment they must fear in death.

For they know not what is the nature of the soul, whether it is born or else finds its way into them at their birth, and again whether it is torn apart by death and perishes with us, or goes to see the shades of Orcus and his waste pools, or by the gods' will implants itself in other breasts, as our own Ennius sang, who first bore down from pleasant Helicon the wreath of deathless leaves, to win bright fame among the tribes of Italian peoples. And yet despite this, Ennius sets forth in the discourse of his immortal verse that there is besides a realm of Acheron, where neither our souls nor bodies endure, but as it were images pale in wondrous wise; and thence he tells that the form of Homer, ever green and fresh, rose to him, and began to shed salt tears, and in converse to reveal the nature of things.

Therefore we must both give good account of the things on high, in what way the courses of sun and moon come to be, and by what force all things are governed on earth, and also before all else we must see by keen reasoning, whence comes the soul and the nature of the mind, and what thing it is that meets us and affrights our minds in waking life, when we are touched with disease, or again when buried in sleep, so that we seem to see and hear hard by us those who have met death, and whose bones are held in the embrace of earth.