

On Covid19 And Ruthlessly Taking The Measure Of Our Values (New York Times Article by Stephen Greenblatt)

Post by "Cassius" of March 17, 2020 at 8:17 AM



Every time I see an article mentioning Lucretius in most outrageous of misinterpretations. However here is a new article that surprised me - especially as to the implications of Lucretius closing the poem with the plague of Athens - the writer notes that plagues **ruthlessly take the measure of our values**. Over the next couple of weeks as we have more time to think about what is really important in life, this is a very good time to consider taking Epicurus to heart:

"But our current struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic casts the poem's ending in a different light. A plague, after all, tests us in unique ways. It ruthlessly takes the measure of our values, calls into question our familiar assumptions, shines a pitiless light on our social and political and religious order. As I sit here in my "voluntary self-isolation"—for I have only recently returned to the United States from Italy—I wonder if the poem's closing focus on epidemic disease might, in fact, have been fully intended. This is precisely the existential challenge, Lucretius thought, that any society worth inhabiting and any philosophy worth embracing must address. When everything is going well, it is easy enough to contemplate our place in the material world. But what if everything is not going well—if mutations in the seeds of things bring disease and death? Only if you can face the invisible bullets all around us, and still keep calm, remain rational, and somehow find it possible to take pleasure in life, have you learned the lesson that the poem set out to teach.

To judge from the news, most of us seem very far from this Epicurean achievement. But the recent reports from Italy, which detail many of Lucretius' quarantined countrymen standing out on their balconies and singing in the midst of the plague, give me hope. They remind us that, alongside science, the other realm in which human resilience and inventiveness are at their height is art. In Lucretius, the two are joined: his philosophical disquisition on atoms, pleasure, and the plague takes the form of a poem, a song to be sung."

The writer? Stephen Greenblatt, author of **The Swerve**.

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