

Episode Twenty-Nine - The Earth As Allegorical Mother of All

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Welcome to Episode Twenty-Nine of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you 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 start, here are three ground rules.

First: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, which may or may not agree with what you here about Epicurus at other places today.

Second: We aren't talking about Lucretius with the goal of promoting any modern political perspective. Epicurus must be understood on his own, and not in terms of competitive schools which may seem similar to Epicurus, but are fundamentally different and incompatible, such as Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Taoism, Atheism, and Marxism.

Third: The essential base of Epicurean philosophy is a fundamental view of the nature of the universe. When you read the words of Lucretius you will find that Epicurus did not teach the pursuit of virtue or of luxury or of simple living. or science, as ends in themselves, but rather the pursuit of pleasure. From this perspective it is **feeling** which is the guide to life, and not supernatural gods, idealism, or virtue ethics. And as important as anything else, Epicurus taught that there is no life after death, and that any happiness we will ever have must come in THIS life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

Now let's join the discussion with today's text:

Latin text location: Approximately [lines 581 - 660](#)

Munro Summary: [Notes on the text](#)

581—599: this you must carefully bear in mind: the more powers and properties anything possesses, the greater variety of elements it contains: thus the earth has elements out of which seas and fountains and fires, out of which crops and trees, rivers and pastures are supplied; it is therefore called mother of gods, men and beasts alike. 581 *obis-*

600—660: her the old Greeks have personified as the great mother: she rides in a chariot drawn by lions; wears a mural crown, has Phrygian attendants, is accompanied with noisy music, receives on all hands alms; her followers represent the Curetes who saved the young Jupiter from his father: all which things are an allegory with some moral significance; but beautiful as they are, they are mere fancies; the blessed and immortal gods trouble themselves not about men: as you call the sea Neptune and the like, call the earth mother of the gods, if you please; but remember at the same time that it is senseless matter, only containing the elements of many things. 601 Aen. iii 113 *Et iuncti currus*

[\(For an Outline of where we have been so far in past discussions, click here.\)](#)

[Daniel Browne:](#)

'Tis proper likewise that in this place you fix it as an established truth, and impress it deeply upon your mind, that there is no being to be found in nature that consists altogether of principles of one kind, nor is there any thing that is not made up of mingled seeds; and the more powers and faculties any being is endued with, the more it appears to be formed of various sorts of seeds that differ in figure among themselves.

And first, the Earth contains within herself first principles, from whence the fountains, flowing with their streams, do constantly supply the mighty Sea. She holds likewise within her womb the seeds of fire. We see in many places how she burns, how Aetna rages with distinguished flames. She likewise has the seeds from whence she forms sweet fruits, and pleasant trees for men; from whence she does afford the tender shrubs and verdant grass to savage beasts that wander on the hills.

Therefore this Earth alone is called great Mother of the Gods, parent of beasts, and of the human race. Of her the learned Grecian bards of old have feigned that in her chariot she rides aloft, she drives a pair of lions harnessed; to teach that in the spacious air hangs the vast mass of Earth, without a lower Earth to prop it up. These beasts they yoked, to show that youth, although by nature wild, yet, softened by the parents tender care, grows tame. Her head they compass with a mural crown, because, in places strongly fortified, she bears up cities, and in this pomp adored, the image of this sacred mother is born with dread solemnity throughout the world. Her, after the ancient use of holy rites, the different nations call Mother of Mount Ida, and give her for attendants a train of Phrygian dames, because in Phrygia corn was first raised, and thence was scattered over all the Earth. They serve her by eunuch priests, to show that those who violate the sacred character of their mother, or are found undutiful to their parents from whence they sprung, should be thought unworthy to raise a living offspring to succeed them. With their hands they beat loudly upon drums well-braced; the hollow symbols all about, and horns with their hoarse noise threaten dreadfully around her; the pipe, with Phrygian airs, mads their very souls; and they carry arms, the signs of their distracted rage, to terrify the stubborn minds and impious hearts of the vulgar, with a fear and reverence of this great deity.

When therefore she is carried in procession, through the great towns, and, dumb as she is, silently bestows health upon her votaries, they scatter brass and silver in all the way she passes, enriching her with profuse oblations; they shower down the flowers of roses, and so

cover the great mother, and the whole train of her attendants. Her an armed Troop (the Greeks call them the Phrygian Curates) leap about, with a chain through their hands, and wanton in the blood they have drawn, dance to exact time, and, full of the Goddess, shake their dreadful crests upon their heads. They represent the Dictean Curetes, who are said formerly to have drowned the infant cries of Jupiter in Crete; when the young priests, all armed, struck their Brazen Bucklers together, as they danced nimbly round the boy, lest Saturn should seize upon him, and devour him, and, by that means, wound his mother to the heart, with a grief never to be Forgotten. For this reason, an armed train accompany the great mother; or else the goddess signifies that they should preserve their native country by their arms and Valor, and be a protection and honor to their parents. Such fancies, though well and wittily contrived, yet are far removed from truth and right reason. 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 naught of ours can want; is neither pleased with good, nor vexed with ill.

The Earth is indeed at all times void of real sense, but it contains within itself the first seeds of many things, it produces them into being after various manners. So, if anyone here resolves to call the Sea by the name of Neptune, and corn by the title of Ceres, and chooses rather to abuse the name of Bacchus, than to speak the proper appellation of wine, such a one, we allow, may style this globe of Earth the mother of the gods, when really she is no such thing.

Munro:

And herein it is proper you should keep under seal, and guard, there consigned, in faithful memory this truth, that there is nothing whose nature is apparent to sense which consists of one kind of first-beginnings; nothing which is not formed by a mixing of seed. And whenever a thing possesses in itself in larger measure many powers and properties, in that measure it shows that there are in it the greatest number of different kinds and varied shapes of first-beginnings. First of all the earth has in her first bodies out of which springs rolling coolness along replenish without fail the boundless sea, she has bodies out of which fires rise up; for in many spots the earth's crust is on fire and burns, though headstrong Aetna rages with fire of surpassing force. Then too she has bodies out of which she can raise for mankind goodly crops and joyous trees, out of which too she can supply to the mountain-ranging race of wild beasts rivers leaves and glad pastures.

Wherefore she has alone been named great mother of gods and mother of beasts and parent of our body. Of her the old and learned poets of the Greeks have sung, that [borne aloft on high-raised] seat in a chariot she drives a pair of lions, teaching that the great earth hangs in the expanse of air and that earth cannot rest on earth. To her chariot they have yoked wild beasts, because a brood however savage ought to be tamed and softened by the kind offices of parents. They have encircled the top of her head with a mural crown, because fortified in choice positions she sustains towns; adorned with which emblem the image of the divine mother is

carried now-a-days through wide lands in awe-inspiring state. Her different nations after old-established ritual term Idaean mother, and give for escort Phrygian bands, because they tell that from those lands corn first began to be produced throughout the world. They assign her galli, because they would show by this type that they who have done violence to the divinity of the mother and have proved ungrateful to their parents are to be deemed unworthy to bring a living offspring into the borders of light. Tight-stretched tambourines and hollow cymbals resound all round to the stroke of their open hands, and horns menace with hoarse-sounding music, and the hollow pipe stirs their minds in Phrygian mood. They carry weapons before them, emblems of furious rage, meet to fill the thankless souls and godless breasts of the rabble with terror for the divinity of the goddess.

Therefore when first borne in procession through great cities she mutely enriches mortals with a blessing not expressed in words, they straw all her path with brass and silver presenting her with bounteous alms, and scatter over her a snow-shower of roses, overshadowing the mother and her troops of attendants. Here an armed band to which the Greeks give the name of Phrygian Curetes, in that it haply joins in the game of arms and springs up in measure all dripping with blood, shaking with its nodding the frightful crests upon the head, represents the Dictaeon Curetes who, as the story is, erst drowned in Crete that infant cry of Jove, when the young band about the young babe in rapid dance arms in hand to measured tread beat brass on brass, that Saturn might not get him to consign to his devouring jaws and stab the mother to the heart with a never-healing wound. For these reasons they escort in arms the great mother, or else because they mean by this sign that the goddess preaches to men to be willing with arms and valor to defend their country and be ready to be a safeguard and an ornament to their parents.

All which, well and beautifully as it is set forth and told, is yet widely removed from true reason. For the nature of gods must ever in itself of necessity enjoy immortality together with supreme of repose, far removed and withdrawn from our concerns; since exempt from every pain, exempt from all dangers, strong in its own resources, not wanting aught of us, it is neither gained by favors nor moved by anger. And here if any one thinks proper to call the sea Neptune and corn Ceres and chooses rather to misuse the name of Bacchus than to utter the term that belongs to that liquor, let us allow him to declare that the earth is mother of the gods, if he only forbear in earnest to stain his mind with foul religion.

Bailey

Herein it is right to have this truth also surely sealed and to keep it stored in your remembering mind, that there is not one of all the things, whose nature is seen before our face, which is built of one kind of first-beginnings, nor anything which is not created of well-mingled seed; and whatever possesses within it more forces and powers, it thus shows that there are in it most kinds of first-beginnings and diverse shapes. First of all the earth holds within it the first-bodies, by which the springs welling out coldness ever and anon renew the measureless sea, it holds those whence fires are born. For in many places the surface of the earth is kindled and blazes, but the outburst of Aetna rages with fire from its lowest depths. Then further, it holds those

whence it can raise for the races of men the smiling crops and glad trees, whence too it can furnish to the tribe of wild beasts, which ranges the mountains, streams, leaves and glad pastures.

Wherefore earth alone has been called the Great Mother of the gods, and the mother of the wild beasts, and the parent of our body. Of her in days of old the learned poets of the Greeks sang that [borne on from her sacred] shrine in her car she drove a yoke of lions, teaching thereby that the great earth hangs in the space of air nor can earth rest on earth. To the car they yoked wild beasts, because, however wild the brood, it ought to be conquered and softened by the loving care of parents. The top of her head they wreathed with a battlemented crown, because embattled on glorious heights she sustains towns; and dowered with this emblem even now the image of the divine mother is carried in awesome state through lands far and wide. On her the diverse nations in the ancient rite of worship call as the Mother of Ida, and they give her Phrygian bands to bear her company, because from those lands first they say corn began to be produced throughout the whole world. The mutilated priests they assign to her, because they wish to show forth that those who have offended the godhead of the Mother, and have been found ungrateful to their parents, must be thought to be unworthy to bring offspring alive into the coasts of light. Taut timbrels thunder in their hands, and hollow cymbals all around, and horns menace with harsh-sounding bray, and the hollow pipe goads their minds in the Phrygian mode, and they carry weapons before them, the symbols of their dangerous frenzy, that they may be able to fill with fear of the goddess's power the thankless minds and unhallowed hearts of the multitude.

And so as soon as she rides on through great cities, and silently blesses mortals with unspoken salutation, with bronze and silver they strew all the path of her journey, enriching her with bounteous alms, and snow rose-blossoms over her, overshadowing the Mother and the troops of her escort. Then comes an armed band, whom the Greeks call by name the Curetes of Phrygia, and because now and again they join in mock conflict of arms and leap in rhythmic movement, gladdened at the sight of blood and shaking as they nod the awesome crests upon their heads, they recall the Curetes of Dicte, who are said once in Crete to have drowned the wailing of the infant Jove, while, a band of boys around the baby boy, in hurrying dance all armed, they beat in measured rhythm brass upon brass, that Saturn might not seize and commit him to his jaws, and plant an everlasting wound deep in the Mother's heart. For this cause in arms they escort the Great Mother, or else because they show forth that the goddess preaches that they should resolve with arms and valour to defend their native land and prepare to be a guard and ornament to their parents.

Yet all this, albeit well and nobly set forth and told, is nevertheless far removed from true reasoning. For it must needs be that all the nature of the gods enjoys life everlasting in perfect peace, sundered and separated far away from our world. For free from all grief, free from danger, mighty in its own resources, never lacking aught of us, it is not won by virtuous service nor touched by wrath. Verily, the earth is without feeling throughout all time, and 'tis because it has possession of the first-beginnings of many things, that it brings forth many in many ways into the light of the sun. Herein, if any one is resolved to call the sea Neptune and corn Ceres,

and likes rather to misuse the title of Bacchus than to utter the true name of the vine-juice, let us grant that he may proclaim that the world is the Mother of the gods, if only in very truth he forbear to stain his own mind with shameful religious awe.