

Episode Two - The Achievement of Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2020 at 12:04 PM

<https://soundcloud.com/user-509726839/the-lucretius-today-podcast-episode-two>

The second episode of the LucretiusToday podcast is now available for download. Lots of work went into preparing this episode, so please let us know your comments, suggestions, criticisms, etc.

If you have questions you would like us to cover in the next episode, please place them in a comment or send us an audio file and we will try to incorporate that into a future show. Ongoing future discussion of the episode will take place here: [Episode Two - The Lucretius Today Podcast](#)

This second program covers approximately lines 62-80 (from the 1743 Edition):

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.

Welcome to Episode two 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 - 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.

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.

Now let me introduce you to our panelists for this episode:

[Edit: In recording this episode we only made it through the first of these two paragraphs. The second will be transferred over for coverage in Episode three.]

This is the text that will be covered in Episode Two. The Latin version of Book One has this as approximately line 61 through 101.

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

[1743 Daniel Browne Version:](#) 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!

Munro Version: When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who showed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous aspect lowering upon mortals, a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face. Him neither story of gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven with threatening roar could quell: they only chafed the more the eager courage of his soul, filling him with desire to be the first to burst the fast bars of nature's portals. Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore religion is put underfoot and trampled upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven.

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: When the life of man lay foul to see and grovelling upon the earth, crushed by the weight of religion, which showed her face from the realms of heaven, lowering upon mortals with dreadful mien, 'twas a man of Greece who dared first to raise his mortal eyes to meet her, and first to stand forth to meet her: him neither the stories of the gods nor thunderbolts checked, nor the sky with its revengeful roar, but all the more spurred the eager daring of his mind to yearn to be the first to burst through the close-set bolts upon the doors of nature. And so it was that the lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole; whence in victory he brings us tidings what can come to be and what cannot, yea and in what way each thing has its power limited, and its deepset boundary-stone. And so religion in revenge is cast beneath men's feet and trampled, and victory raises us to heaven.

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.

Post by "Cassius" of January 11, 2020 at 12:20 PM

My general comments on this section, which I will edit here in this one post to avoid multiple posts:

1. It's interesting to me how we start right off stumbling over an idiom / expression that I think ought to be worth emphasizing. The first Latin words are HUMANA ANTE OCULUS, which presumably is an expression about what is going to be discussed about humanity is right before our eyes. But the 1743 version starts "INDEED" and Bailey has "When the life of man lay foul to see...", following Munro's "When human life to view..." Martin Ferguson

Smith probably does it best with "When all could see that human life lay..." Seems to me what follows is supposed to be blindingly obvious, not rocket science.

2. The Iphigenia story is very significant for how repulsive it shows religion to be. For us the Abraham / Isaac story is more well known. Are there others?

Post by "Cassius" of January 24, 2020 at 9:13 AM

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Post by "Elayne" of January 28, 2020 at 5:23 PM

Cassius, I just thought of the Van Allen belts today. Not "flaming", but certainly a high energy barrier. I searched for any mention of this in connection to Epicurus or Lucretius and didn't get

anything. But it's still pretty cool IMO.

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.spac...tion-belts.html>

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2020 at 5:25 PM

Yes indeed. I think we mentioned the "Northern Lights" but don't have any info as to whether the Greeks knew about that. Also I suppose there's just the "Milky Way" that might be relevant too.

Post by “Joshua” of January 28, 2020 at 8:02 PM

Quote

The Iphigenia story is very significant for how repulsive it shows religion to be. For us the Abraham / Isaac story is more well known. Are there others?

Well, there's a rather important one for Christians!

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2020 at 8:03 PM

LOL!!!!!! OF COURSE!!! 😊

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2020 at 8:05 PM

That's why we like you here Joshua -- sometimes the obvious is just too complex for me to figure out quickly enough!

What a compelling illustration of the repulsiveness of child sacrifice!!! 😊

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1364-episode-two-the-achievement-of-epicurus/>

Post by “Cassius” of January 28, 2020 at 8:06 PM

And we didn't mention it in this Episode 3 that is about to be released! THAT oversight will be corrected in the next episode!

(Of course there's a good reason that LUCRETIUS didn't mention it, but not for us to omit discussing the obvious parallel.)

Elayne and Julie would have never let that get past us but they couldn't make this episode.... sheesh....

Post by “Cassius” of January 29, 2020 at 8:33 AM

As for it being an obvious parallel, it's almost as if a certain segment of the Jewish leadership read Lucretius and said:

"So you don't like child sacrifice? WE'LL show YOU what a REAL child sacrifice looks like!" 😊

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 2:38 PM

I found it interesting to look up the Latin for exactly what is being condemned, variously translated as Superstition, or Religion. It is actually "religio" which Martin Furguson Smith annotates as:

"false religion," not "religion,"... The Epicureans were opposed not to religion, but to the traditional religion which taught that the gods govern the world."

He further mentions that Lucretius regarded "religio" as "superstitio", but he was referring to the popular religion of his day.

From what I have read so far, it looks like Epicurus is often described as pious, kept votives in his home, and observed certain religious festivals and rites. Did he not, therefore; have a religion? (A system of faith?) If so, a better translation throughout might be "traditional religion" or "popular religion"?

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 3:25 PM

I'm wondering if some of the translations "didn't want to go there" in upsetting sensibilities of readers. If I remember, some of the older translations use "superstition" for religio. The Church and church-goers may have agreed with superstition but not religion being used there.

What about using "organized religion"? I respect and like your looking up the Latin 😊

Epicurus does seem to have advocated making the traditional sacrifices and taking part in the civic rites. [That thread on Epicurus's Polytheism](#) seems to bear this out. However, Lucretius's evocative depiction of Iphigenia's killing is clearly an indictment of *some kind* of cultural phenomenon: religion, superstition, etc. Good question on how best to relay that to a modern audience.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 3:33 PM

Yes, I am sure you are dead right about couching terms to be less offensive to the religion of readers or to the translators own religion! Don't know that “organized religion” would work either, though, since there was, after all, an organization around Epicurus' theology: The Garden! Organization is not the offence.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 3, 2020 at 4:17 PM

It's a fascinating and involved question as to what Epicurus thought of religion and the gods. There are some threads here addressing the "idealist" vs the "realist" viewpoints. These basically correspond to the view that Epicurus considered the gods to be a mental construct for contemplation vs the view that he considered the gods to be real. The thread that Don linked to above has an essay that presents a case for the realist interpretation, which I found thought provoking.

As mentioned in the essay, the prolepses are intricately intertwined with the conception of the gods, along with the idea that we know of the gods from extremely fine particles that they emit. These two subjects (gods and prolepses) just might be the least understood ideas in EP.

The issue of how we interpret these ideas today adds yet another layer of complexity. On recent threads we've discussed justice and truth as prolepses; are the gods a prolepsis as Epicurus apparently states? Today many (if not most) of us are indoctrinated from childhood into believing in a single god. Prolepses, however, are "pre-conceptual" and more primitive, and to the best of my limited knowledge, primitive societies believed in multiple gods (although not of the Epicurean kind). To me there seems to be a prolepsis of awe/wonder at the immensity of the universe, but does this translate to a prolepsis of gods? Didn't primitive gods function as explanations of the mysteries of existence? And didn't Epicurus, and subsequent science, dispel many of these mysteries?

But I'm rambling....

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2020 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Susan Hill](#)

The Garden! Organization is not the offence.

I agree that organization is not the offense, and I agree with the implication that aspects of the organization and/or rituals that the Epicureans probably developed would be hard to distinguish from a "religion."

It seems to me that Epicurus is clearly holding that "gods" of a certain type exist, and that it is important to have a correct understanding and attitude and approach toward them, so if someone wants to call that "understanding and attitude and approach" a "religion" then that might be understandable, the way we use the term "religion" today.

So i put this issue in the category of issues for which Epicurus is using a word in a way that we aren't familiar with today, so we just have to approach it carefully. I forget where the reference is but I recall that one of the Cicero texts documents that people complained about Epicurus doing that even in his own time (at least Cicero's time). Surely he's doing the same thing with "gods" and he's probably doing the same thing with "virtue," and most of all he seems to be doing the same thing with "pleasure" and even "pain" when he starts with his two categories of feelings that include all the individual types of feelings.

Since words are not held to be "magical" or connected to platonic ideal forms in Epicurean theory, and Epicurus was taking a different position on issues of the method of approaching "definitions" there's nothing "wrong" with Epicurus doing that, but it means we have to be very careful because we're used to using those words in different ways.

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 5:41 PM

So what words did Epicurus use? Did he refer to "religion" or just incorrect opinions about the gods? I need to read that full article that [Godfrey](#) posted!!

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 5:56 PM

I found some notes of mine in my Google Drive relating to positive psychology. PLEASE note, these were not for public consumption, but I thought the raw notes would give an idea where my head was at at the time:

Quote

Epicureanism is NOT pop "positive psychology" See <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/...gion-secularism> "Seligman's inclusion of material achievement in the components of happiness has also raised eyebrows. He has theorized that people who have not achieved some degree of mastery and success in the world can't be said to be flourishing. He once described a "thirty-two-year-old Harvard University summa in mathematics who is fluent in Russian and Japanese and runs her own hedge fund" as a "poster child for positive psychology." But this can make well-being seem exclusive and out of reach, since accomplishment of this kind is not possible to all, or even most."

This all sounds very Aristotelian or Peripatetic! Epicurus wanted eudaimonia to be accessible to EVERYONE! ----- BUT I was listening to a TED Radio Hour today 12/3/2019 about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs... and realized it seemed VERY Epicurean: KD 29: Among desires, some are natural and necessary, some are natural and unnecessary, and some are unnatural and unnecessary (arising instead from groundless opinion). The necessary desires are at the bottom. To not be hungry, etc. The need for security is the social contract Epicurus talks about. Love and friendship is next. It gets a little more fuzzy with self-esteem and self-actualization but I think the similarities remain and are worth exploring!

Post by “Godfrey” of October 3, 2020 at 5:56 PM

Here's the pdf from the expired link above.

Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2020 at 6:24 PM

Don I am thinking we are talking mainly about the famous line from Lucretius book 1, where the latin is clearly "religio."

Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 6:45 PM

Right. One of my favorite lines from DRN 😊

But that's Lucretius. I'm curious if Epicurus used anything parallel to *religio*.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 8:56 PM

Sounds like Epicureanism needs its own glossary! Is there a good dictionary of Greek and Latin philosophical terms that makes this comparison between schools of thought? (I have one for Sanskrit..) I know there is a reference section for terms here. I will check that out too.

By the way, being the newbie here, I know I must be asking questions that have been thoroughly addressed in other threads or readings. I take no offence in simply being redirected to those sources if I have missed them. I'm grateful for your patience. 😊

I am particularly interested the Epicurean theology, so I will be reading up on that.

Post by “Joshua” of October 3, 2020 at 8:57 PM

Quote

I found it interesting to look up the Latin for exactly what is being condemned, variously translated as Superstition, or Religion. It is actually "religio" which Martin Furguson Smith annotates as:

"false religion," not "religion,"... The Epicureans were opposed not to religion, but to the traditional religion which taught that the gods govern the world."

I believe that's from the Loeb edition?

I think there is strong tendency to put the cart before the horse with that word. Whether *religio* should be translated as *religion* or *superstition* is of secondary concern. What Lucretius meant for us, his readers, to actually **understand** by *religio*, he laid out for us in the surrounding lines and with the story of Iphigenia.

Religio is believing that:

- Humans are hemmed in, above and below,
- In a specially created world
- By supernatural, intervening gods,
- (And their oracles and priests),
- Whose natures are threatening and capricious, and
- Whose ultimate power is to torment us beyond the grave.

To follow Epicurus is to believe that:

- We are free agents,
- In one natural world among innumerable worlds
- (Where the gods, if they exist, do not create or intervene),
- who ignore the priests, choosing instead the philosopher
- whose foundation is material nature and whose end is pleasure,
- and for whom death is nothing.

I probably could have made that a little smoother, but I was aiming for symmetry.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 9:05 PM

Yes, excellent, Joshua. Thank you for your precision! And it is the Loeb edition. Help me with this! It says it is a translation by Rouse but revised by Smith. When people speak of the Martin Ferguson Smith translation, are they talking about this one or a translation that was wholly done by Smith??

Post by “Joshua” of October 3, 2020 at 9:13 PM

That's an excellent question, Susan! He is a translator in his own right, as well as the most recent editor of Rouse's translation.

Here is his translation available on Amazon;

<https://www.amazon.com/Nature-Things-Lucretius/dp/0872205878>

It was published in 1969, and Professor Smith is still alive. So the text is not in the public domain—unless he's made arrangements that I wouldn't know about.

Post by “Joshua” of October 3, 2020 at 9:15 PM

But probably people are referring to the Loeb edition, which *ought* to be the gold standard. I'm probably guilty of misnaming it myself.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 3, 2020 at 9:26 PM

Oh good, I made a good choice, then. (I wanted that Latin on the facing page.)

Post by “Don” of October 3, 2020 at 9:55 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1364-episode-two-the-achievement-of-epicurus/>

You've done it again, [Joshua](#) ! You are a consummate wordsmith, and I so enjoy reading your posts! Pure pleasure!

You are correct! Getting caught up in the weeds of vocabulary can be a distraction from what is conveyed by the words. "You're asking what kinds of evils can *religio* do? What *religio* is?" Lucretius asks. "Didn't I just tell you the story of Iphigenia? That's what I'm talking about!"

Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2020 at 10:10 PM

I have the Loeb edition too, as it is great to have the facing page Latin. But it is my understanding (i hate to say, if Susan just bought the Loeb) that the Hacket edition (the black cover, at the Amazon link) is the most recently-updated version of Martin Ferguson Smith's work. I may be wrong, but I am gathering that the Hacket version is a revised and updated version of his work on the Loeb.

Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2020 at 10:20 PM

Oh this reminds me too, that in my checking it always seemed to me that there ought to be a PDF version of a public domain version of the Loeb Lucretius, as I think several (at least two) editions have been published. But unlike many of the other older Loeb editions, I have not been able to find a PDF of it. Munro and Bailey are easy to find (links here: <http://www.newepicurean.com/library>) but not the Loeb.