

Episode Four - Recap of Opening Sections of Book One

Post by "Cassius" of January 26, 2020 at 8:53 AM

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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.

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!

Post by "Cassius" of January 30, 2020 at 9:16 AM

As we prepare for episode four we need to remember the comments made by Elayne after listening to Episode three, starting with this post: [Episode Three - The Lucretius Today Podcast](#) Let's continue the discussion here, but leave those posts in place since they do refer to Episode Three:

Quote

I admit to issues with my auditory attention span. I have major trouble not taking off with a thought from the discussion and then I miss bits of it. When I'm actually participating it's not an issue, but I've always had this problem with podcasts.

I say this because you may have discussed what I had planned to contribute re Iphianassa and maybe I zoned out. I didn't hear it, either way.

My point if I had been able to be on the call was to remind people to ask how they recognize what was done to Iphianassa was terrible. It's presented as an assumption that religion led to this dreadful thing, but there's no discussion in that part of the poem about how we recognize it as awful.

I think this is a critical place to bring the whole philosophy into interpretation. We don't say "oh, that's terrible" because of any set absolute definition of terrible.

We say it bc as humans with typical empathy, the story causes us pain even to imagine killing a daughter, and even more so because we know it was for naught.

The action fails the immediate, intuitive sense of right and wrong because it is painful to us. Then it fails the hedonic calculus because there's no beneficial effect from the imaginary gods.

It would be incomplete of me not to say there could have been social benefit, social pleasure, to Agamemnon for putting his people's lives before his daughter's. Same for Abraham. But that social pleasure depends on an illusion. Clearly, removing the false belief in supernatural gods would result in the greatest pleasure for Agamemnon, Abraham, and all in similar situations.

Even today, we have parents disowning and abandoning teens who fall away from religious teaching. There are homeless gay teens kicked out because of religion.

Without supernatural religion, there would be more total pleasure for those parents. They could have social pleasure from their community support and family pleasure with their kids. Nobody getting sacrificed. Definitely, the kids are getting more pleasure in that non religious scenario-- it's clear what Iphianassa would prefer! I've always wondered if Jacob ever went hiking with his dad again ☹️, or turned his back. I sure wouldn't have.

Display More

Cassius:

Yes - and that reminds me too that we should compare this with the story of Torquatus' ancestor, who had his son executed for disobeying orders in a war, and how that compares / differs from the Iphanessa story

Post by “Joshua” of February 3, 2020 at 1:36 PM

Quote

Yes - and that reminds me too that we should compare this with the story of Torquatus' ancestor, who had his son executed for disobeying orders in a war, and how that compares / differs from the Iphanessa story

On a probably unrelated note, I turned up something the other day in my reading. It was Frontinus' *Aqueducts of Rome* (Frontinus being a military and civil engineer who was put in charge of the system), and he made mention of the Torquatian Gardens, or maybe Gardens of Torquatus. No other extant Latin text mentions them. It was a large family in Rome though, there's probably no connection. But it did strike me as a feature of interest.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2020 at 2:00 PM

Thanks Joshua I had never heard of that. Probably if I could go back in my life and become an expert in a subject the study of ancient Rome (which connects with Greece too) would be one of the things I would have to consider as a focus. It's really fascinating - almost like life on another planet.

Post by “Cassius” of February 7, 2020 at 11:57 AM

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/22497261>

Post by “Godfrey” of February 8, 2020 at 6:01 PM

Just finished listening to the podcast; kudos once again for an enjoyable discussion!

In light of the discussion regarding no absolute morality, and also of the importance of the feelings, it might be interesting to talk about the prolepsis of justice and how the feelings interact with it. I would describe it as a rudimentary, intuitive sketch of the idea of justice which is refined over time by what one experiences through the sensations and feelings. This seems necessary to bridge the gap between no absolutes and the feelings, especially for those who are uncomfortable trusting pleasure and pain as the guide to living well.

Post by “Cassius” of February 8, 2020 at 6:23 PM

Yes I agree that is definitely something to explore, and what immediately comes to mind are some of the sections in DeWitt where he refers to "human nature" as what is learning over time. For example:

Another aspect of this priority of Nature over reason is manifest in the beginnings of human institutions. Since the sole cause of growth and change in the universe is the ceaseless motion of the atoms and this activity is nonpurposive, it follows that actions invariably precede thought. On this point the judgment of Epicurus is explicit: "Moreover, it must be assumed also that **human nature** by sheer force of circumstances was taught a multitude of lessons of all sorts and compelled to put them into practice, though reason subsequently contributed refinements and additions to these recommendations of hers, in some fields more rapidly, in others more slowly." ²⁶ Lucretius in his fifth book enlarged liberally upon this theme: human beings wore skins before they manufactured garments; they lived in caves before they built huts; they employed clubs before they made weapons; they lived dispersed before they organized governments and built cities.²⁷

How the new terrestrial order of nature and the older celestial order operate as points of departure for inferential truth may be illustrated simply in the case of **justice**. For Epicurus the Feelings are the criterion. Injustice hurts and justice promotes happiness. Therefore human beings make a covenant with one another "not to injure or be injured." Justice is this covenant. It is of Nature. No dialectic is necessary to discover the fact; it is a matter of observation. The sense of justice is innate; it is an Anticipation or Prolepsis existing in advance of experience and anticipating experience. Even certain animals possess it; elephants, for example, the bulls excepted, do not injure one another and they marshal the herd to protect one another against injury from outside.

Post by "Godfrey" of February 8, 2020 at 7:26 PM

Exactly.

Also I think it needs to be emphasized that an individual is an integrated biological system, of which the feelings are a part. The Canon is the most useful means to describe that system (at least that I'm aware of). A person is not a brain in a vat, as might be inferred from idealized reason.

Post by “Paquin” of July 20, 2021 at 4:21 AM

I am working my way through the 'Lucretius Today' podcasts and I have just finished no. 4. I am enjoying the discussion that goes with the text and translations. I would like to respond to an interesting point that Elayne made about

Quote

how they recognize what was done to Iphianassa was terrible

It struck me that Lucretius is not only inviting us the readers to share in the emotion of the tragic events, but also to recognise that this form of sacrifice is a defilement of Diana's altar i.e. to accept the existence of Diana as the virgin goddess and to see that this form of sacrifice would not be acceptable to her in any way.

I read that the animal sacrifices in Ancient Greece had water poured on their heads at the altar which produced a kind of bow that was interpreted as acceptance by the animal of its participation in the ritual. This makes Iphianassa's distress and trembling terror all the more disturbing. Also Diana the huntress was the only god where it was acceptable to sacrifice wild animals at her altar.

It seems to me that this is not an atheist position, it is not a position that rejects the gods as delined in Ancient Greek/Roman society, indeed both Venus and Diana have been referenced in the poem in ways that suggest that we all take their existence as given, but it is a position which rejects the human interpretation of the gods' behaviour and rejects the manipulation of human desire through justifications that rely on appeasing the divine.

Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2021 at 7:40 AM

Yes this acceptance of some aspects of religious practice and rejection of others is highly interesting.

It seems to me they were working had toward a coherent and consistent system that would have totally reformed religion but grounded it in the benefit that comes from venerating the sage (VS43 on the veneration helping the generator) and having a goal to work toward (the lifestyle of the gods) while also making sure that it was not seen as a totally fictional "platonic noble lie" by linking them to our expectations of higher and lower life in other parts of the universe.

It's definitely not "atheism" as people generally define the word today, bit it is strictly non-supernatural.

I too can see the benefits of such an approach, especially in combatting the nihilism that is so damaging to so many people. I see this as much more effective than Nietzsche's eternal recurrence.

Post by “Don” of July 20, 2021 at 8:42 AM

[Paquin](#) : You've hit on one of the most complex, confusing, intriguing, and fascinating issues in Epicurus's philosophy: the nature of the gods and our proper attitude toward "them." If you're interested in diving into the deep end, you might be interested in the discussion we had on Philodemus's work, On Piety: [Philodemus On Piety](#)

Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2021 at 9:19 AM

Yes indeed there are many threads on that topic, including one of our most-discussed: [Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy](#)

They should all now be in this forum or one of its subsections: [Epicurean Gods and Life Elsewhere In the Universe](#)

Post by “Paquin” of July 20, 2021 at 10:01 AM

Thank you for your helpful responses! I will definitely take a look at these links and discussions. Personally, I am drawn to the complexity of the thinking in this area and the idea of trying to salvage something from religious practice while rejecting the abusive, since it seems to reflect

something of my own evolving thoughts on religion.