

Episode Thirty-Eight: Start of Book Three - Epicurus Our Guide Who Dispels The Darkness of Error and Fear of Hell

Post by "Cassius" of September 26, 2020 at 10:23 AM

Welcome to Episode Thirty-Eight 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 1 - 93

Munro Notes:

1-30: he addresses Epicurus as his father and guide, who had dispelled the darkness of error, explained the whole nature of things, revealed the gods and their blest abodes, and destroyed the belief in Acheron.

31-93 I have now to explain the real nature of the soul and to dispel the terrors of hell which poison life: many boast they know all this, but when tried by adversity, they choose to suffer any misery rather than face death and its consequences: nay often men from this fear will commit any crime, in order to get wealth and honour, thinking that want and contempt destroy the security of life; hence civil war, hence hatred of relations; hence men often rush to death from fear of death: this fear in short is the source of all evils: and can be destroyed only by the true knowledge of nature.

Browne / 1743:

O Epicurus, who could first strike so clear a light from so great darkness, and direct us in the proper advantages of life! Thee, the glory of the Grecian name, I follow. Thy steps I closely trace with mine, not so much from a desire to rival thee, as from the love I bear, and the ardent passion I profess to imitate thee. For how can the swallow contend in singing with the swan? Or what can kids, with feeble limbs, perform in running with the noble horse's speed? Thou great Father, founder of philosophy! Thou with paternal precepts dost inspire thy sons, and from thy writings, most illustrious chief, as bees suck honey from the flowery fields, we feed upon thy golden sentences - golden, and fit eternally to live.

For when thy reason first began to prove that Nature was not formed by powers divine, the terrors of the mind all fled, the walls of this great world lie open, and I see how things are managed through the mighty void. The deity of the gods, their calm abodes appear, which neither winds disturb, nor clouds overflow with showers, nor the white-falling snow, congealed by sharpest frost, does spoil; but the unclouded air surrounds them always, and smiles on them fully with diffused light. Nature in every thing supplies their wants; nothing at any time destroys their peace. But the wide tracts of Hell are nowhere seen, nor does the interposing Earth prevent our sight, but we discover what beneath our feet is doing in the space below. In these pursuits a certain divine pleasure spreads round me, and I stand amazed, that by thy strength of mind, all nature every way lies naked to our view.

Since then I have taught what are the first seeds and principles of things, how they differ in their figures, and of themselves fly about, beaten by mutual strokes, and from them all beings are produced, the nature of the Mind and of the Soul comes next to be explained in these my lines, and all the terrors of infernal pains banished, and headlong driven quite away, that from the bottom so disturb the life of man, and cover all things with the gloom of death, and leave no place for pure and unmixed pleasure to possess. For what men vainly talk, that disease and an infamous life are more to be feared than the terrors of death, and they know that the soul consists wholly in the blood, and therefore they want no assistance from our philosophy. I would have you observe that those boasts are thrown out more for the sake of praise and

popular breath (if their vanity by chance leads that way) than that they believe any such thing; for let these very men be banished from their country, and driven into a desert far from human sight, stained with the guilt of the foulest crimes, yet they live on, afflicted as they are, with all sorts of misery, and wherever the wretches come, they fall a-sacrificing, and slay black cattle, and offer victims to the infernal gods, and in this deplorable state they, with more than common zeal, apply themselves to the offices of religion.

And therefore it is proper to view men rather under a doubtful fortune, and observe how they behave in circumstances of distress, for then they speak truth from the bottom of their hearts, the mask is pulled off, and the real man shows undisguised. Besides, covetousness and the blind desire of honors, which compel unhappy men to exceed the bounds of right, and urge on the partners and assistants of their crimes to strive day and night with the utmost pains to arrive at the height of wealth: these plagues of life are chiefly nourished by fear of death; for infamy, and contempt, and sharp want seem far removed from a sweet and pure state of life, and, as it were, hover about the gates of death. And wherefore will men, possessed by a false fear, labour to avoid, and stand at the remotest distance from them, they add to their heaps by civil war, and, insatiable as they are, double their riches, heaping one murder upon another. They laugh with cruel delight at the sad funeral of a brother, and hate and fear the entertainments of their nearest relations.

From the same cause and from the same fear, envy often becomes the tormentor of mankind; they complain that one is raised to power before their eyes, another to respect, a third distinguished by shining honors, whilst they lie buried in obscurity, and are trod upon like dirt, and so they pine themselves to death for the sake of statues and a name. And some men, from a fear of death, conceive so great a hatred for life, and the preservation of their being, that in a gloomy fit they become their own executioners; not considering that this fear of death is the source of all their cares. This breaks through all shame, dissolves the bonds of friendship, and in short overturns the foundations of all goodness; for some we see betray their country and their dear parents, striving by that means to deliver themselves from death, and the pains of Hell. For as boys tremble, and fear every thing in the dark night, so we, in open day, fear things as vain and little to be feared, as those that children quake at in the dark, and fancy advancing towards them. This terror of the mind, this darkness then, not the sun's beams, nor the bright rays of day can scatter, but the light of Nature and the rules of reason.

Munro:

THEE, who first was able amid such thick darkness to raise on high so bright a beacon and shed a light on the true interests of life, thee I follow, glory of the Greek race, and plant now my footsteps firmly fixed in thy imprinted marks, not so much from a desire to rival thee as that from the love I bear thee I yearn to imitate thee; for why need the swallow contend with swans, or what likeness is there between the feats of racing performed by kids with tottering limbs and by the powerful strength of the horse? Thou, father, art discoverer of things, thou furnishest us with fatherly precepts, and like as bees sip of all things in the flowery lawns, we, o glorious

being, in like manner feed from out thy pages upon all the golden maxims, golden I say, most worthy ever of endless life.

For soon as thy philosophy issuing from a godlike intellect has begun with loud voice to proclaim the nature of things, the terrors of the mind are dispelled, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things in operation throughout the whole void: the divinity of the gods is revealed and their tranquil abodes which neither winds do shake nor clouds drench with rains nor snow congealed by sharp frosts harms with hoary fall: an ever-cloudless ether overcanopies them, and they laugh with light shed largely round. Nature too supplies all their wants and nothing ever impairs their peace of mind. But on the other hand the Acherusian quarters are nowhere to be seen, though earth is no bar to all things being descried, which are in operation underneath our feet throughout the void. At all this a kind of godlike delight mixed with shuddering awe comes over me to think that nature by thy power is laid thus visibly open, is thus unveiled on every side.

And now since I have shown what-like the beginnings of all things are and how diverse with varied shapes as they fly spontaneously driven on in everlasting motion, and how all things can be severally produced out of these, next after these questions the nature of the mind and soul should methinks be cleared up by my verses and that dread of Acheron be driven headlong forth, troubling as it does the life of man from its inmost depths and over spreading all things with the blackness of death, allowing no pleasure to be pure and unalloyed. For as to what men often give out that diseases and a life of shame are more to be feared than Tartarus' place of death, and that they know the soul to be of blood or it maybe of wind, if haply their choice so direct, and that they have no need at all of our philosophy, you may perceive for the following reasons that all these boasts are thrown out more for glory's sake than because the thing is really believed. These very men, exiles from their country and banished far from the sight of men, live degraded by foul charge of guilt, sunk in a word in every kind of misery, and whithersoever the poor wretches are come, they yet do offer sacrifices to the dead and slaughter black sheep and make libations to the gods manes, and in times of distress turn their thoughts to religion much more earnestly.

Wherefore you can better test the man in doubts and dangers and mid adversity learn who he is; for then and not till then the words of truth are forced out from the bottom of his heart: the mask is torn off, the reality is left. Avarice again and blind lust of honors which constrain unhappy men to overstep the bounds of right and sometimes as partners and agents of crimes to strive night and day with surpassing effort to struggle up to the summit of power, these sores of life are in no small measure fostered by the dread of death. For foul scorn and pinching want in every case are seen to be far removed from a life of pleasure and security and to be a loitering so to say before the gates of death. And while men driven on by an unreal dread wish to escape far away from these and keep them far from them, they amass wealth by civil bloodshed and greedily double their riches piling up murder on murder; cruelly triumph in the sad death of a brother and hate and fear the tables of kinsfolk.

Often likewise from the same fear envy causes them to pine: they make moan that before their very eye she is powerful, he attracts attention, who walks arrayed in gorgeous dignity, while they are wallowing in darkness and dirt. Some wear themselves to death for the sake of statues and a name. And often to such a degree through dread of death does hate of life and of the sight of daylight seize upon mortals, that they commit self-murder with a sorrowing heart, quite forgetting that this fear is the source of their cares, [this fear which urges men to every sin] prompts this one to put all shame to route, another to burst asunder the bonds of friendship, and in fine to overturn duty from its very base; since often ere now men have betrayed country and dear parents in seeking to shun the Acherusian quarters. For even as children are flurried and dread all things in the thick darkness, thus we in the daylight fear at times things not a whit more to be dreaded than what children shudder at in the dark and fancy sure to be. This terror therefore and darkness of mind must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun and glittering shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature.

Bailey:

THOU, who out of deep darkness didst first avail to raise a torch so clear, shedding light upon the true joys of life, 'tis thee I follow, bright star of the Greek race, and in thy deepset prints firmly now I plant my footsteps, not in eager emulation, but rather because for love I long to copy thee; for how could a swallow rival swans, or what might kids with trembling limbs accomplish in a race to compare with the stout strength of a horse? Thou art our father, thou discoverer of truth, thou dost vouchsafe to us a father's precepts, and from thy pages, our hero, even as bees in flowery glades sip every plant, we in like manner browse on all thy sayings of gold, yea, of gold, and always most worthy of life for evermore.

For as soon as thy philosophy, springing from thy godlike soul, begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind fly away, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things moving on through all the void. The majesty of the gods is revealed, and their peaceful abodes, which neither the winds shake nor clouds soak with showers, nor does the snow congealed with biting frost besmirch them with its white fall, but an ever cloudless sky vaults them over, and smiles with light bounteously spread abroad. Moreover, nature supplies all they need, nor does anything gnaw at their peace of mind at any time. But on the other hand, the quarters of Acheron are nowhere to be seen, nor yet is earth a barrier to prevent all things being descried, which are carried on underneath through the void below our feet. At these things, as it were, some godlike pleasure and a thrill of awe seizes on me, to think that thus by thy power nature is made so clear and manifest, laid bare to sight on every side.

And since I have shown of what kind are the beginnings of all things, with what diverse shapes they differ, and how of their own accord they fly on, impelled by everlasting motion, and in what manner each several thing can be created out of them; next after this it seems that the nature of the mind and the soul must now be displayed in my verses, and the old fear of Acheron driven headlong away, which utterly confounds the life of men from the very root, clouding all things with the blackness of death, and suffering no pleasure to be pure and

unalloyed. For, although men often declare that disease and a life of disgrace are more to be feared than the lower realm of death, and that they know that the soul's nature is of blood, or else of wind, if by chance their whim so wills it, and that so they have no need at all of our philosophy, you may be sure by this that all is idly vaunted to win praise, and not because the truth is itself accepted. These same men, exiled from their country and banished far from the sight of men, stained with some foul crime, beset with every kind of care, live on all the same, and, spite of all, to whatever place they come in their misery, they make sacrifice to the dead, and slaughter black cattle and despatch offerings to the gods of the dead, and in their bitter plight far more keenly turn their hearts to religion.

Wherefore it is more fitting to watch a man in doubt and danger, and to learn of what manner he is in adversity; for then at last a real cry is wrung from the bottom of his heart: the mask is torn off, and the truth remains behind. Moreover, avarice and the blind craving for honours, which constrain wretched men to overleap the boundaries of right, and sometimes as comrades or accomplices in crime to struggle night and day with surpassing toil to rise up to the height of power—these sores in life are fostered in no small degree by the fear of death. For most often scorned disgrace and biting poverty are seen to be far removed from pleasant settled life, and are, as it were, a present dallying before the gates of death; and while men, spurred by a false fear, desire to flee far from them, and to drive them far away, they amass substance by civil bloodshed and greedily multiply their riches, heaping slaughter on slaughter. Hardening their heart they revel in a brother's bitter death, and hate and fear their kinsmen's board.

In like manner, often through the same fear, they waste with envy that he is powerful, he is regarded, who walks clothed with bright renown; while they complain that they themselves are wrapped in darkness and the mire. Some of them come to ruin to win statues and a name; and often through fear of death so deeply does the hatred of life and the sight of the light possess men, that with sorrowing heart they compass their own death, forgetting that it is this fear which is the source of their woes, which assails their honour, which bursts the bonds of friendship, and overturns affection from its lofty throne. For often ere now men have betrayed country and beloved parents, seeking to shun the realms of Acheron. For even as children tremble and fear everything in blinding darkness, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are no whit more to be feared than what children shudder at in the dark, and imagine will come to pass. This terror then, this darkness of the mind, must needs be scattered, not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the outer view and the inner law of nature.

Post by “Cassius” of September 27, 2020 at 1:09 PM

Episode 38 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. With today's episode we begin Book Three, with a discussion of how Epicurus is our guide who dispels the darkness of error and the fear of hell. As with the beginning of each book, this is general discussion of Epicurus and the implications of his philosophy, so this episode is a particularly good one to listen to if you've missed some of the past shows and want to hear one of our more general and animated discussions. As always let us know if you have any comments, and feel free to subscribe to the podcast on iTunes and other podcast services.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/41161698>

Post by “Susan Hill” of September 27, 2020 at 1:33 PM

Got it - thanks. I'll have a listen tonight. 😊

Post by “Joshua” of September 29, 2020 at 2:12 AM

Cassius, I think you are right—this was a strong episode. Thanks to all who participated!

I particularly enjoyed the discussion of Epicurus as leader, teacher and so forth. I'm sure that I'm as guilty as anyone of investing too much attachment into the figure himself; you can see it in some of my poems. Elayne's cautions are well taken, and she is a valuable voice.

I might add a few points to flesh out my own thinking; and to redeem, in a way, Lucretius and Lucian and others who have covered him with honor.

The first thing I would say is that we are shielded by the philosophy itself against the worst forms of hagiography. It will never be asserted—it couldn't be taken seriously if it were—that Epicurus was set apart in significance from other mortals. We will not, cannot, fall into the demeaning trap of thinking him heralded, prophesied, chosen, or marked by signs and portents. He performed no miracles; he was born to no god; he ascended into no paradise.

He was a mammal—like other mammals, born of a natural sexual union (how absurd that we have to say that out loud!), and kin to the beasts of the field, and did not disgrace himself by claiming otherwise. What little there was of nobility in his painful, animalistic and ignoble death, was nobility of mind and philosophy. He claimed no other.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1703-episode-thirty-eight-start-of-book-three-epicurus-our-guide-who-dispels-the-dark/>

Nor did he claim to heal; but taught us only, perhaps, how we might find health ourselves. He could not make the deaf to hear or the blind see. He gave no voice to the mute—the voice he gave was to pleasure itself, in a world that did not want to hear it.

Of his temperament even some of his enemies could speak well. In his school, Diogenes Laertius tells us that he declined the perils of communal property—for he foresaw that greed and mistrust were bitter poison to wholesome fellowship. His easy grace, his mild manner and simple bearing showed how ill-fitted was the bacchanalian mask that his slanderers put upon him.

Elayne is right; what could be more obvious than that pleasure is the proper end of life? It was a pearl richer than all the rest of ancient philosophy—so much muck. And yet it took an Epicurus to pry out that pearl, and bring it up into sunlight.

If I believed that a job done once was done forever, and that so worthy a truth as this would stand *itself* apparent for all coming time, then we could leave off honoring him.

But the *agora* of ideas isn't getting less absurd and obscure; it's growing muckier by the day! And for as long as we are confronted with an endless parade of charlatans, we shall have need of Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of September 29, 2020 at 6:13 AM

That's poetry itself Joshua - thanks for taking the time to write that.

Post by “Paquin” of September 1, 2021 at 2:00 AM

I also enjoyed the discussions regarding what Epicurus and his philosophy meant to different people. I'm glad to be starting book three and still enjoying working my way through the podcasts.

Post by “Cassius” of September 1, 2021 at 4:34 AM

Very good! Thank you and keep us posted on your comments!

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