

Episode Forty-Nine - The End of Book Three

Post by "Cassius" of December 11, 2020 at 10:09 PM

Welcome to Episode Forty-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.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please check back to [Episode One](#) for a discussion of our goals and our ground rules. If you have any question about that, please be sure to contact us at Epicureanfriends.com for more information.

In today's episode, we will cover Latin lines 1024 to 1094, the end of Book Three.

Munro Notes:

1024-1052: you may say too to yourself 'the best and greatest kings conquerors sages and poets, Epicurus himself, have died; why should I then seek to live, who dream away life amid cares and delusions?'

1053-1075: men feel a burden pressing on their minds; but if they knew why it weighs upon them, they would not live as they do, trying by constant change of place to escape from themselves: they would give up everything else to study the nature of things, since they have to learn what their condition is to be not for an hour, but for all eternity.

1076-1094: again why such a craving for life mid troubles and dangers? death cannot be shunned: no nor does length of life create any new pleasure; while the future may bring evil as well as good fortune; and live as long as we may, the eternity of death will ever be the same.

Browne 1743:

Besides, Cerberus and the Furies, and Hell void of light, belching flames from its jaws; there are no such things in nature, nor ever can be; but the fear of sore punishment in this life for distinguished crimes, and the rewards of villainy affright us. The prison, the terrible fall from the Tarpeian Rock, stripes, executioners, the gallows, melted pitch, saws, and suffocating smoke; and if there be none of these, yet the mind, conscious of guilt, is ever in dread of these tortures, it stings us to the heart, and lashes us with rods not to be endured. Nor has the wretch

a prospect of any end to the miseries he suffers, nor what can set limits to his punishment, and he fears lest these tortures should fall the heavier upon him in death, so that the fools live as deplorable a life as if they were really in Hell. Thus you may justly reason with yourself: The good King Ancus has long-since bid adieu to life, a better man by much than such a wretch as thou, and so have many kings and potentates of the earth who ruled over mighty nations. Consider, even He that He himself who formerly made a road over the wide sea, gave a passage to his legions to march over it, and taught them to walk upon the salt Deep; who despised and insulted the waves and the roarings of the ocean: This Xerxes, covered with darkness, has breathed his soul out of his body long ago. Scipio, that thunderbolt of war and dread of Carthage, has given up his bones to the Earth, as if he had been the meanest of slaves. Add to these the founders of Arts, and the inventers of Verse; and further the companions of the Muses, the mighty Homer, the sole sovereign of them all - he sleeps quietly in the same grave with the rest. Besides, when a ripe old age gave Democritus warning that the strength of his mind decayed, he met death half-way, and cheerfully obeyed the summons. Epicurus himself, who excelled the whole world in wisdom, and darkened all about him with his superior lustre, as far as the bright mid-day sun outshines the stars, is dead, and his light of life run out. Shalt thou then repine and grieve to die, whose life is little more than a scene of death whilst thou livest with thy eyes open? Who wearest the greater part of thy life away in sleep, who snoorest and art ever dreaming whilst thou art awake, and hast thy mind always tormented with empty fear, nor art able to find what is the malady that troubles thee, when thou reelest about, born down on all sides by the severest of misery, and wanderest in the uncertain mazes of doubt and error?

But if men would really consider, as they would be thought to do, that they are pressed down by the natural weight of their own minds, and find out the causes whence this proceeds, and whence so heavy a load of evils torment their breast, they would not spend their lives as we now see they do, not knowing their own desires, but every one striving to change his situation, as if that was the way to ease him of his burden. One, tired at home, leaves his noble seat, and goes often abroad, but returns suddenly again; for he finds no relief by shifting his place. Another hurries and drives full-speed to his country house, as if was all on fire and he came to extinguish it; he no sooner sets his foot within the doors but he presently begins to yawn, or falls heavily to sleep, and strives to forget himself, or else posts as hard back and returns to town again. Thus he tries all ways to fly himself, but that self it is, as it must be, out of his power to escape; he sticks close to him against his will, and sorely torments him. The restless fool does not know the cause of his disease; if he thoroughly did, every one would give up all other pursuits and apply chiefly to search into the nature of things; I do not mean to trouble himself about the events of the present hour, but inquire into the doubtful state of eternity after death, which is everyone's concern, and which must be the lot of all mankind.

Lastly, how many evils does a fond desire of life oblige us so much to apprehend though they may never happen? But there is a boundary fixed to the age of man; we cannot avoid the stroke of death; die we must. Besides, we are ever running on in a circle of the same actions,

and ever pursuing them; nor does living on afford us any new delight. The pleasure we covet eagerly exceeds everything we enjoyed before, as long as it is absent; but when we have it in possession, we long passionately for another, and the same thirst of life hangs upon us, still gaping for more; and yet we know nothing what the time to come may produce, what chance may happen to us, and how the scene will end. Nor can we, by living forward, take off a moment from the length of death; it will always show as if we had been dead ever so long. Though you live ever so many ages, the state of death will be still eternal, and he that died today is to all purposes as long dead as he that died a thousand years ago.

Munro:

Then to be ever feeding the thankless nature of the mind, and never to fill it full and sate it with good things, as the seasons of the year do for us, when they come round and bring their fruits and varied delights, though after all we are never filled with the enjoyments of life, this methinks is to do what is told of the maidens in the flower of their age, to keep pouring water into a perforated vessel which in spite of all can never be filled full. Moreover, Cerberus and the furies and yon privation of light [are idle tales, as well as all the rest, Ixion's wheel and black] Tartarus belching forth hideous fires from his throat: things which nowhere are nor, sooth to say, can be. But there is in life a dread of punishment for evil deeds, signal as the deeds are signal, and for atonement of guilt, the prison and the frightful hurling down from the rock, scourgings, executioners, the dungeon of the doomed, the pitch, the metal plate, torches; and even though these are wanting, yet the conscience-stricken mind through boding fears applies to itself goads and frightens itself with whips, and sees not meanwhile what end there can be of ills or what limit at last is to be set to punishments, and fears lest these very evils be enhanced after death. The life of fools at length becomes a hell here on earth. This too you may sometimes say to yourself, "Even worthy Ancus has quitted the light with his eyes, who was far far better than thou, unconscionable man." And since then many other king and kesars have been laid low, who lorded it over mighty nations. He too, even he who erst paved a way over the great sea and made a path for his legions to march over the deep and taught them to pass on foot over the salt pools and set at naught the roarings of the sea, trampling on them with his horses, had the light taken from him and shed forth his soul from his dying body. The son of the Scipios, thunderbolt of war, terror of Carthage, yielded his bones to earth just as if he were the lowest menial. Think, too, of the inventors of all sciences and graceful arts, think of the companions of the Heliconian maids; among whom Homer bore the scepter without a peer, and he now sleeps the same sleep as others. Then there is Democritus who, when a ripe old age had warned him that the memory-waking motions of his mind were waning, by his own spontaneous act offered up his head to death. Even Epicurus passed away when his light of life had run its course, he who surpassed in intellect the race of man and quenched the light of all, as the ethereal sun arisen quenches the stars. Wilt thou then hesitate and think it a hardship to die? Thou for whom life is well nigh dead whilst yet thou livest and seest the light, who spendest the greater part of thy time in sleep and snoorest wide awake and ceasest not to see visions and hast a mind troubled with groundless terror and canst not discover often what it is

that ails thee, when besotted man thou art sore pressed on all sides with full many cares and goest astray tumbling about in the wayward wanderings of thy mind.

If, just as they are seen to feel that a load is on their mind which wears them out with its pressure, men might apprehend from what causes too it is produced and whence such a pile, if I may say so, of ill lies on their breast, they would not spend their life as we see them now for the most part do, not knowing any one of them what he means and wanting ever change of place as though he might lay his burden down. The man who is sick of home often issues forth from his large mansion, and as suddenly comes back to it, finding as he does that he is no better off abroad. He races to his country-house, driving his jennets in headlong haste, as if hurrying to bring help to a house on fire: he yawns the moment he has reached the door of his house, or sinks heavily into sleep and seeks forgetfulness, or even in haste goes ba

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ck again to town. In this way each man flies from himself, (but self from whom, as you may be sure is commonly the case, he cannot escape, clings to him in his own despite) hates too himself, because he is sick and knows not the cause of the malady. For if he could rightly see into this, relinquishing all else, each man would study to learn the nature of things, since the point at stake is the condition for eternity, not for one hour, in which mortals have to pass all the time which remains for them to expect after death.

Once more, what evil lust of life is this which constrains us with such force to be so mightily troubled in doubts and dangers? A sure term of life, is fixed for mortals, and death cannot be shunned, but meet it we must. Moreover, we are ever engaged, ever involved in the same pursuits, and no new pleasure is struck out by living on; but whilst what we crave is wanting, it seems to transcend all the rest; then, when it has been gotten, we crave something else, and ever does the same thirst of life possess us, as we gape for it open-mouthed. Quite doubtful it is what fortune the future will carry with it or what chance will bring us or what end is at hand. Nor by prolonging life do we take one tittle from the time past in death nor can we fret anything away, whereby we may haply be a less long time in the condition of the dead. Therefore you may complete as many generations as you please during your life; none the less however will that everlasting death await you; and for no less long a time will he be no more in being, who beginning with today has ended his life, than the man who has died many months and years ago.

Bailey:

Then to feed for ever the ungrateful nature of the mind, to fill it full with good things, yet never satisfy it, as the seasons of the year do for us, when they come round again, and bring their fruits and their diverse delights, though we are never filled full with the joys of life, this, I trow, is the story of the maidens in the flower of youth, who pile the water into the vessel full of

holes, which yet can in no way be filled full. Cerberus and the furies, moreover, and the lack of light, Tartarus, belching forth awful vapours from his jaws, This too you might say to yourself from time to time: 'Even Ancus the good closed his eyes on the light of day, he who was a thousand times thy better, thou knave. And since him many other kings and rulers of empires have fallen, who held sway over mighty nations. Even he himself, who once paved a way over the great sea, and made a path for his legions to pass across the deep, and taught them on foot to pass over the salt pools, and made naught of the roarings of ocean, prancing upon it with his horses, yet lost the light of day, and breathed out his soul from his dying body. The son of the Scipios, thunderbolt of war, terror of Carthage, gave his bones to earth, even as though he had been the meanest house-slave. Yes, and the inventors of sciences and delightful arts, yes and the comrades of the sisters of Helicon: among whom Homer, who sat alone, holding his sceptre, has fallen into the same sleep as the rest. Again, after a ripe old age warned Democritus that the mindful motions of his memory were waning, of his own will he met death and offered her up his head. Epicurus himself died, when he had run his course in the light of life, Epicurus, who surpassed the race of men in understanding and quenched the light of all, even as the sun rising in the sky quenches the stars. Wilt thou then hesitate and chafe to meet thy doom? thou, whose life is well-nigh dead while thou still livest and lookest on the light, who dost waste in sleep the greater part of thy years, and snore when wide awake, nor ever cease to see dream-visions, who hast a mind harassed with empty fear, nor canst discover often what is amiss with thee, when like a sot thou art beset, poor wretch, with countless cares on every side, and dost wander drifting on the shifting currents of thy mind.'

If only men, even as they clearly feel a weight in their mind, which wears them out with its heaviness, could learn too from what causes that comes to be, and whence so great a mass, as it were, of ill lies upon their breast, they would not pass their lives, as now for the most part we see them; knowing not each one of them what he wants, and longing ever for change of place, as though he could thus lay aside the burden. The man who is tired of staying at home, often goes out abroad from his great mansion, and of a sudden returns again, for indeed abroad he feels no better. He races to his country home, furiously driving his ponies, as though he were hurrying to bring help to a burning house; he yawns at once, when he has set foot on the threshold of the villa, or sinks into a heavy sleep and seeks forgetfulness, or even in hot haste makes for town, eager to be back. In this way each man struggles to escape himself: yet, despite his will he clings to the self, which, we may be sure, in fact he cannot shun, and hates himself, because in his sickness he knows not the cause of his malady; but if he saw it clearly, every man would leave all else, and study first to learn the nature of things, since it is his state for all eternity, and not for a single hour, that is in question, the state in which mortals must expect all their being, that is to come after their death.

Again, what evil craving for life is this which constrains, us with such force to live so restlessly in doubt and danger? Verily, a sure end of life is ordained for mortals, nor can we avoid death, but we must meet it. Moreover, we move ever, we spend our time amid the same things, nor by length of life is any new pleasure hammered out. But so long as we have not what we crave, it seems to surpass all else; afterward, when that is ours, we crave something else, and the same

thirst for life besets us ever, open-mouthed. It is uncertain too what fortune time to come may carry to us, or what chance may bring us, or what issue is at hand. Nor in truth by prolonging life do we take away a jot from the time of death, nor can we subtract anything whereby we may be perchance less long dead. Therefore you may live on to close as many generations as you will: yet no whit the less that everlasting death will await you, nor will he for a less long time be no more, who has made an end of life with today's light, than he who perished many months or years ago.

Post by "Cassius" of December 21, 2020 at 3:59 PM

Episode Forty-Nine of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. In today's episode, we complete book three and have final thoughts on Death. As always we invite your comments and suggestions.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/42600907>

Post by "Don" of December 22, 2020 at 12:39 PM

One argument against eternal life being preferable vis a vis pleasure that I read recently was from a Philodemus quote in Tsouna's *The Ethics of Philodemus*.

As I remember it (didn't look up but remembering), the argument ran:

An infinite life would allow us to be always looking forward and not paying attention to (or appreciating) pleasures *actually* occurring to us in the present. We could "get away with" not pursuing pleasure in the present but to be always planning for future desires.

I found that intriguing and hadn't read that before.

Post by "Cassius" of December 22, 2020 at 4:38 PM

Yes that is an interesting perspective. There are definitely many subtleties to this issue and I doubt we've really begun to appreciate them. The interplay of "more" vs "better" is hard to get

a fix on, but I think its fairly intuitive that a larger (infinite?) Amount of low-grade pleasure can never really measure up to certain "higher grade" pleasures that we want even if of shorter duration.

Post by “Don” of December 22, 2020 at 4:56 PM

Agreed.

Plus it's not necessarily a more vs better, it is a future vs present. It brings to mind VS35: *Don't ruin the things you have by wanting what you don't have, but realize that they too are things you once did wish for.*