

Episode Sixty-Four - Due To His Accomplishments, Epicurus Should Be Thought Of As Godlike

Post by "Cassius" of March 25, 2021 at 8:18 PM

Welcome to Episode Sixty-Four 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. 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 this Episode 64 we begin our discussion of Book 5.

Now let's join Martin reading today's text:

Latin Lines 1-90 (Book 5)

Munro Notes

1-54: who, o Memmius, can adequately extol the man who discovered this system of true wisdom I not Ceres, not Liber, far less Hercules can be compared with him : they only gave to men physical comforts or freed them from physical dangers: he bestowed on us the blessings of right reason and freed us from the far worse terrors of superstition and of the passions: surely then he deserves to be ranked as a god, the more so that he first explained the true nature of the gods.

55-90: following in his steps I teach the inexorable laws by which all things are bound: having proved the soul to be mortal and shown how images in sleep cheat the mind, I go on to prove the world to be mortal and to have had a beginning, and to describe how all its parts were formed; what creatures sprang from the earth, what never existed; how fear of the gods fell upon men: the natural courses too of the heavenly bodies I will explain, that men may not fancy they are directed by the gods and be enslaved by religion.

Browne 1743

Who can, with all his soul inspired, compose fit numbers, worthy the majesty of so great things, of these discoveries? Or who, in words alone, can sing his praise, and equal his deserts, who from the labour of his mind has left such benefits, and bestowed rewards so glorious on mankind? No mortal man alive, as I conceive, for could I raise my verse to reach the dignity of things he knew - he was a god, my noble Memmius, a god he was, who first found out that rule of life which is now called true wisdom; and who this human life, so tossed with storms, and so overwhelmed in darkness, has been rendered by his art so calm, and placed in so clear a light. Compare the benefits long since found out by those who now are gods. Ceres, they say, discovered first the use of corn, and Bacchus gave to me the knowledge of the vine and its sweet juice. Yet men might still have lived without both these, as many nations, we are told, do now. But no true life could be, without the mind easy and free, and therefore with better right is he to us a god, whose gentle rules, received throughout the world, bestowed on men tranquility and peace.

If you should think the great exploits of Hercules exceeded his, you are carried far from truth. For how could the wide, gaping jaws of the Nemean Lion, or the terrible Arcadian Boar, affright us now? How could the bull of Crete, or Hydra, the Plague of Lerna, encompassed with his poisonous snakes? Or Geryon, with his triple face, and the collected strength of his three bodies? Or what can we now suffer from Diomedes' horses, from their nostrils breathing fire, dreadful to Thrace, the Bistonian Plains, and all about Mount Ismarus? Or what from the Arcadian birds of Stymphalus, feared for their crooked talons? Or that huge dragon, fierce and terrible in look, that, twining round the tree, guarded the gold fruit of the Hesperides? How could he hurt us here, removed far from us near the Atlantic shore, and the rough seas, where neither Roman nor barbarian dared to visit? And other monsters, which that hero slew, had they not been subdued, how could they hurt us now, were they alive? Not in the least, I think. For now the world abounds with frightful beasts, that fill with dreadful terror the forests, the high mountains and thick woods; yet these places commonly 'tis in our power to avoid.

But unless the mind be purged, what wars within, what dangers wretched mortals must endure? What piercing cares of fierce desire must tear the minds of men? And then, what anxious fears? What ruin flows from pride, from villany, from petulance? What from luxury and sloth? The man therefore that has subdued these monsters, and drove them from the mind by precept, not by force; should not this man be worthy to be numbered with the gods? Especially since of these immortal deities he has spoken nobly and at large, and by his writings has explained to us the laws of universal nature?

His steps I follow, and now pursue his rules, and by my verse I teach that things must needs subsist by the same laws by which they were first formed; nor can they break through the strong bonds that Nature has fixed to their being. Of this sort the soul, in the first place, I have proved to be originally derived from mortal seeds, nor can it remain eternally undissolved; and that images commonly deceive the mind in our dreams, when we fancy we see a person that has been long since dead.

Munro 1886

WHO is able with powerful genius to frame a poem worthy of the grandeur of the things and these discoveries? Or who is so great a master of words as to be able to devise praises equal to the deserts of him who left to us such prizes won and earned by his own genius? None, methinks, who is formed of mortal body. For if we must speak as the acknowledged grandeur of the things itself demands, a god he was, a god, most noble Memmius, who first found out that plan of life which is now termed wisdom, and who by trained skill rescued life from such great billows and such thick darkness and moored it in so perfect a calm and in so brilliant a light. Compare the godlike discoveries of others in old times: Ceres is famed to have pointed out to mortals corn, and Liber the vine-born juice of the grape; though life might well have subsisted without these things, as we are told some nations even now live without them. But a happy life was not possible without a clean breast; wherefore with more reason this man is deemed by us a god, from whom come those sweet solaces of existence which even now are distributed over great nations and gently soothe men's minds.

Then if you shall suppose that the deeds of Hercules surpass his, you will be carried still farther away from true reason. For what would yon great gaping maw of Nemean lion now harm us and the bristled Arcadian boar? Ay or what could the bull of Crete do and the hydra plague of Lerna, fenced round with its envenomed snakes? Or how could the triple-breasted might of threefold Geryon, [how could the birds with brazen arrowy feathers] that dwelt in the Stymphalian swamps do us such mighty injury, and the horses of Thracian Diomed breathing fire from their nostrils along the Bistonian borders and Ismara? And the serpent which guards the bright golden apples of the Hesperides, fierce, dangerous of aspect, girding the tree's stem with his enormous body, what harm pray could he do us beside the Atlantic shore and its sounding main, which none of us goes near and no barbarian ventures to approach? And all other monsters of the kind which have been destroyed, if they had not been vanquished, what harm could they do, I ask, though now alive? None methinks: the earth even now so abounds to repletion in wild beasts and is filled with troublous terror throughout woods and great mountains and deep forests; places which we have it for the most part in our own power to shun.

But unless the breast is cleared, what battles and dangers must then find their way into us in our own despite! What poignant cares inspired by lust then rend the distressful man, and then also what mighty fears! And pride, filthy lust and wantonness? What disasters they occasion! And luxury and all sorts of sloth? He therefore who shall have subdued all these and banished them from the mind by words, not arms, shall he not have a just title to be ranked among the gods? And all the more so that he was wont to deliver many precepts in beautiful and god-like phrase about the immortal gods themselves and to open up by his teachings all the nature of things.

While walking in his footsteps I follow out his reasonings and teach by my verses, by what law all things are made, what necessity there is then for them to continue in that law, and how

impotent they are to annul the binding statutes of time: foremost in which class of things the nature of the mind has been proved to be formed of a body that had birth and to be unable to endure unscathed through great time, mere idols being wont to mock the mind in sleep, when we seem to see him whom life has abandoned.

Bailey 1921

WHO can avail by might of mind to build a poem worthy to match the majesty of truth and these discoveries? Or who has such skill in speech, that he can fashion praises to match his deserts, who has left us such prizes, conceived and sought out by his own mind? There will be no one, I trow, born of mortal body. For if we must speak as befits the majesty of the truth now known to us, then he was a god, yea a god, noble Memmius, who first found out that principle of life, which now is called wisdom, and who by his skill saved our life from high seas and thick darkness, and enclosed it in calm waters and bright light. For set against this the heaven-sent discoveries of others in the days of old. Ceres is fabled to have taught to men the growing of corn, and Liber the liquid of the vine-born juice; and yet life could have gone on without these things, as tales tell us that some races live even now. But a good life could not be without a clean heart; wherefore more rightly is he counted a god by us, thanks to whom now sweet solaces for life soothe the mind, spread even far and wide among great peoples.

But if you think that the deeds of Hercules excel this, you will be carried still further adrift from true reasoning. For what harm to us now were the great gaping jaws of the old Nemean lion and the bristling boar of Arcadia? Or what could the bull of Crete do, or the curse of Lerna, the hydra with its pallisade of poisonous snakes? what the triple-breasted might of threefold Geryon? [How could those birds] have done us such great hurt, who dwelt in the Stymphalian [fen], or the horses of Diomedes the Thracian, breathing fire from their nostrils near the coasts of the Bistones and Ismara? Or the guardian of the glowing golden apples of Hesperus's daughters, the dragon, fierce, with fiery glance, with his vast body twined around the tree-trunk, yea, what harm could he have done beside the Atlantic shore and the grim tracts of ocean, where none of us draws near nor barbarian dares to venture? And all other monsters of this sort which were destroyed, had they not been vanquished, what hurt, pray, could they have done alive? Not a jot, I trow: the earth even now teems in such abundance with wild beasts, and is filled with trembling terrors throughout forests and mighty mountains and deep woods; but for the most part we have power to shun those spots.

But unless the heart is cleansed, what battles and perils must we then enter into despite our will? What sharp pangs of passion then rend the troubled man, yea and what fears besides? what of pride, filthiness and wantonness? what havoc they work? what of luxury and sloth? He then who has subdued all these and driven them from the mind by speech, not arms, shall this man not rightly be found worthy to rank among the gods? Above all, since 'twas his wont to speak many sayings in good and godlike words about the immortal gods themselves, and in his discourse to reveal the whole nature of things.

In his footsteps I tread, and while I follow his reasonings and set out in my discourse, by what law all things are created, and how they must needs abide by it, nor can they break through the firm ordinances of their being, even as first of all the nature of the mind has been found to be formed and created above other things with a body that has birth, and to be unable to endure unharmed through the long ages, but it is images that are wont in sleep to deceive the mind, when we seem to behold one whom life has left....

Post by “Cassius” of March 30, 2021 at 9:10 PM

Episode 64 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. In today's episode, we begin the discussion of Book 5, with an assessment of the significance of Epicurus' achievements. As always, please let us know if you have comments or questions in the thread below.

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