

Thoughts On What Lucretius Might Have Considered For The Ending of Book Six - A Comparison Chart of Thucydides and Lucretius

Post by "Cassius" of November 24, 2022 at 10:29 AM

As has been mentioned several places, Emily Austin speculates in Chapter 22 of "Living For Pleasure" that Lucretius might have intended to track the full story of the Plague of Athens, which ends in the original version with an additional paragraph to which there is no parallel in Lucretius. What jumps out when we review the last paragraph which is not in Lucretius is that this is where it is relayed that the confrontation with death caused the Athenians to turn away from worries about gods and the afterlife and "virtue" and instead turn to enjoying the life that they have in hand. This is a perfect Epicurean lesson and there's no way that this paragraph would not be relevant to the poem. In fact, it probably would serve as the most perfect bookend that the poem could have.

[Don has supplied us with this link to the Thucydides version](#) where the key extra paragraph is found.

The full argument is best expressed in Austin's book, but we have [brought this up in a prior thread](#) and I think this is ought to be explored further. Not only would the extended parallel be a striking way to end the poem, but we know from several sources that Epicurus identified the feeling of escape from great danger, or calamity, as indicative of a meaningful definition of "the good."

U423: **Plutarch, *That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible*, 7, p. 1091A:** Not only is the basis that they assume for the pleasurable life untrustworthy and insecure, it is quite trivial and paltry as well, inasmuch as their "thing delighted" – their good – is an escape from ills, and they say that they can conceive of no other, and indeed that our nature has no place at all in which to put its good except the place left when its evil is expelled. ... Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflection and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: "That which produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the nature of good, if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about {a jibe at the Peripatetics}, prating meaninglessly about the good."

***Ibid.*, 8, p. 1091E:** Thus Epicurus, and Metrodorus too, suppose {that the middle is the summit and the end} when they take the position that escape from ill is the reality and upper limit of the good.

Of course we also know that Lucretius makes a similar argument at the beginning of Book 2 (this from the Brown translation):

'Tis pleasant, when a tempest drives the waves in the wide sea, to view the sad distress of others from the land; not that the pleasure is so sweet that others suffer, but the joy is this, to look upon the ills from which yourself are free. It likewise gives delight to view the bloody conflicts of a war, in battle ranged all over the plains, without a share of danger to yourself: But nothing is more sweet than to attain the serene 'tho lofty heights of true philosophy, well fortified by learning of the wise, and thence look down on others, and behold mankind wandering and roving every way, to find a path to happiness; they strive for wit, contend for nobility, labor nights and days with anxious care for heaps of wealth, and to be ministers of state.

So it appears to me that one place to start would be to compare what we have from Thucydides to what we have in Lucretius and see if that might lead to clues on how to interpolate a more flourishing ending (the kind of ending that the enemies of Lucretius would have wanted to suppress even before the Judeo-Christian age). Here's an arrangement of the texts with a column for comments. Text from [Thucydides comes from the Richard Crawley translation here](#). Text from [Lucretius comes from the Brown edition here](#). This is just a first draft and I am sure this can be improved to break down the corresponding sections even more closely.

Thucydides

Lucretius

47 Such was the funeral that took place during this winter, with which the first year of the war came to an end. In the first days of summer the Lacedaemonians and their allies, with two-thirds of their forces as before, invaded Attica, under the command of Archidamus, son of Zeuxidamus, King of Lacedaemon, and sat down and laid waste the country. Not many days after their arrival in Attica the plague first began to show itself among the Athenians. It was said that it had broken out in many places previously in the neighbourhood of Lemnos and elsewhere; but a pestilence of such extent and mortality was nowhere remembered. Neither were the physicians at first of any service, ignorant as they were of the proper way to treat it, but they died themselves the most thickly, as they visited the sick most often; nor did any human art succeed any better. Supplications in the temples, divinations, and so forth were found equally futile, till the overwhelming nature of the disaster at last put a stop to them altogether. 48 It first began, it is said, in the parts of Ethiopia above Egypt, and thence descended into Egypt and Libya and into most of the King's country. Suddenly falling upon Athens, it first attacked the population in Piraeus--which was the occasion of their saying that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the reservoirs, there being as yet no wells there--and afterwards appeared in the upper city, when the deaths became much more frequent. All speculation as to its origin and its causes, if causes can be found adequate to produce so great a disturbance, I leave to other writers, whether lay or professional; for myself, I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again. This I can the better do, as I had the disease myself, and watched its operation in the case of others.

1138 Once such a plague as this, such deadly blasts, poisoned the coasts of Athens, founded by Cecrops. It raged through every street, unpeopled all the city, for coming from far (from Egypt, where it first began) and having passed through a long tract of air, and over the wide sea, it fixed at last upon the subjects of King Pandion. Men soon, by heaps, fell victim to the rage of death and the disease.

49 That year then is admitted to have been otherwise unprecedentedly free from sickness; and such few cases as occurred all determined in this. As a rule, however, there was no ostensible cause; but people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath. These symptoms were followed by sneezing and hoarseness, after which the pain soon reached the chest, and produced a hard cough. When it fixed in the stomach, it upset it; and discharges of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, accompanied by very great distress. In most cases also an ineffectual retching followed, producing violent spasms, which in some cases ceased soon after, in others much later.

[1145] The head was first attacked with furious heats, and then the eyes turned bloodshot and inflamed; the jaws within sweated with black bloods; the throat (the passage of the voice) was stopped by ulcers; the tongue (the interpreter of the mind) overflowed with gore, and, faltered with the disease, felt rough, and scarce could move. And when the poison, through the jaws, had filled the breast, and flowed into the miserable stomach, then all the springs of life began to fail; the breath sent out a filthy smell abroad, like the rank stench of rotten carcasses, the powers of all the soul and all the body flag and grow faint, as in the gates of death. To these innumerable evils followed close a sad distress and sinking of the mind, loud sighs with bitter moans, and frequent sobbings, all the day and night, twitched and convulsed the nerves and every limb, and loosened every joint, and sorely racked the wretches, tired out with pains before.

Externally the body was not very hot to the touch, nor pale in its appearance, but reddish, livid, and breaking out into small pustules and ulcers. But internally it burned so that the patient could not bear to have on him clothing or linen even of the very lightest description; or indeed to be otherwise than stark naked. What they would have liked best would have been to throw themselves into cold water; as indeed was done by some of the neglected sick, who plunged into the rain-tanks in their agonies of unquenchable thirst; though it made no difference whether they drank little or much.

[1163] Yet you could not perceive, by the touch, that the surface of the body was inflamed with any extraordinary heat; it felt only warm to the hand, and looked red all over with burning pustules, as when the sacred fire spreads over the limbs. But all within was in a flame that pierced the very bones; the heat raged in the stomach as in a furnace; no garment, ever so light or thin, could be endured upon their limbs; they rushed into the wind and cold, some plunging their bodies, scorched with the disease, in rivers, and naked threw themselves in chilling streams; some ran with open mouths and headlong leaped into deep wells; the parching thirst, insatiable, so burnt their bodies it made whole showers of water seem no more than a few drops.

Besides this, the miserable feeling of not being able to rest or sleep never ceased to torment them. The body meanwhile did not waste away so long as the distemper was at its height, but held out to a marvel against its ravages; so that when they succumbed, as in most cases, on the seventh or eighth day to the internal inflammation, they had still some strength in them.

1178] The pain was without intermission, without end; the body lay quite spent, stretched out, the burning eyes wide open and, without sleep for many a restless night, rolled dreadfully about. The physician muttered to himself in silent fear, and leaves the patient in despair, 1182] for many signs of coming death appeared. The mind distracted with death and horror; a stern brow; a countenance fierce and furious; the ears tormented with a buzzing noise; the breath thick, or deep and seldom drawn; a frothy sweat, flowing in abundance over the neck; the spittle thin and dry, and yellow as saffron, and the salt matter could scarce be brought up through the jaws by coughing; a contraction of the nerves in the hands, and a trembling over all the limbs, and a coldness creeping up gradually from the feet; the nostrils pinched in, as at the point of death; the nose sharp, the eyes sunk, the temples hollow, the skin cold and hard, a frightful distortion of the mouth, and the skin of the forehead stretched and shining. Nor did the wretches lie long under the cold hands of death, for they expired commonly upon the eighth, or at the farthest upon the ninth day.

But if they passed this stage, and the disease descended further into the bowels, inducing a violent ulceration there accompanied by severe diarrhoea, this brought on a weakness which was generally fatal. For the disorder first settled in the head, ran its course from thence through the whole of the body, and, even where it did not prove mortal, it still left its mark on the extremities; for it settled in the privy parts, the fingers and the toes, and many escaped with the loss of these, some too with that of their eyes. Others again were seized with an entire loss of memory on their first recovery, and did not know either themselves or their friends.

50 But while the nature of the distemper was such as to baffle all description, and its attacks almost too grievous for human nature to endure, it was still in the following circumstance that its difference from all ordinary disorders was most clearly shown. All the birds and beasts that prey upon human bodies, either abstained from touching them (though there were many lying unburied), or died after tasting them. In proof of this, it was noticed that birds of this kind actually disappeared; they were not about the bodies, or indeed to be seen at all. But of course the effects which I have mentioned could best be studied in a domestic animal like the dog.

[1199] But if any of the infected, as some did, escaped with life, either the filthy ulcers breaking, or by a most offensive looseness, they fell at last into a consumption, and then died; or streams of corrupted blood, with grievous headache, flowed from his stuffed nostrils, and thus his strength and life ran out, and the wretch bled to death. Such as escaped a sharp flux of filthy blood at the nose, the poison pierced into their nerves and limbs, and seized upon their very genitals; and some were so terrified at the approach of death that they suffered the virile member to be cut off to preserve life. Some remained alive without hands and feet, and some lost their eyes, so terrible was the fear of death to these miserable wretches. Some were seized with an entire forgetfulness of every thing; they did not so much as know themselves.

1215 When heaps of bodies lay one upon another, unburied, upon the ground, yet the birds of prey, and the wild beasts, either kept at a distance to avoid the noisome stench, or if they tasted they soon died. At that time no birds appeared abroad in the day, nor did the wild beasts leave the woods by night; many of them were infected with the disease, and fell down dead; the faithful dogs especially lay gaping out their infected breath in every street, for the poison drove out life from every limb.

51 Such then, if we pass over the varieties of particular cases which were many and peculiar, were the general features of the distemper. Meanwhile the town enjoyed an immunity from all the ordinary disorders; or if any case occurred, it ended in this. Some died in neglect, others in the midst of every attention. No remedy was found that could be used as a specific; for what did good in one case, did harm in another. Strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away, although dieted with the utmost precaution.

By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when any one felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance, and left them a much easier prey to the disorder; besides which, there was the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep, through having caught the infection in nursing each other. This caused the greatest mortality. On the one hand, if they were afraid to visit each other, they perished from neglect; indeed many houses were emptied of their inmates for want of a nurse: on the other, if they ventured to do so, death was the consequence. This was especially the case with such as made any pretensions to goodness: honour made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends' houses, where even the members of the family were at last worn out by the moans of the dying, and succumbed to the force of the disaster. Yet it was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. These knew what it was from experience, and had now no fear for themselves; for the same man was never attacked twice--never at least fatally. And such persons not only received the congratulations of others, but themselves also, in the elation of the moment, half entertained the vain hope that they were for the future safe from any disease whatsoever.

[1225] The many funerals of the dead were hurried away without order, and unattended. Nor was there any certain remedy to be applied; for what was of service to some, and relieved the patient, and preserved life, was fatal and brought death to others.

[1230] But the most wretched and deplorable thing of all, at this time, was that when once a person found himself infected with the disease, as if a sentence of death had passed upon him, his spirits failed him, he fell into melancholy and despair, thought of nothing but death, and so gave up the ghost. And funerals were heaped one upon another, because the fierce contagion of the disease incessantly raged, and carried on the infection. And if any one, too fond of life, and fearing to die, avoided to visit the miserable sick, the same want of help was soon his own punishment; he died in a filthy and deplorable manner, abandoned, and without assistance, and perished by neglect, like the wretched beasts of the field. And those who were compelled by shame, and by the moving cries and piteous moans of their friends, to attend them in their distress, were seized by the infection, and died by the disease and the fatigue. Indeed the most pious among them lost their lives in this manner:

[1247] And when they had endeavored to bury the bodies of whole families of their friends, among those of the friends of others, they returned, wearied with grief and weeping, and most of them took to their beds for sorrow. And there was not one to be found who, in this calamitous time, had not grievously suffered, either by the disease, or by death, or by the most bitter pain and anguish of mind. [1252] Besides, the shepherds and the herdsmen, and the lusty ploughman pined away with the infection; their bodies lay miserably stretched out in their close narrow huts, and died of poverty and the disease. You might frequently see the dead parents lying over their dead children, and again, the children expiring upon the bodies of their wretched mothers and fathers.

52 An aggravation of the existing calamity was the influx from the country into the city, and this was especially felt by the new arrivals. As there were no houses to receive them, they had to be lodged at the hot season of the year in stifling cabins, where the mortality raged without restraint. The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water.

[1259] Nor was it a small addition to this plague that was brought from the country to the city; for the infected peasants flocked higher in multitudes from all parts, and carried the sickness along with them. They filled all the houses, and all places; and as they were pent up close together, death had the greater power to slay them in heaps. Many bodies lay along in the streets, gasping for thirst; and, rolling to the public conduits, they drank insatiably and were suffocated with water. Others you might see in the highways and common places, languishing, with their bodies half dead, horrible with filth, covered with rags, and rotting with the corruption of the limbs; there was nothing but skin upon the bones, and that putrefied with eating ulcers, and buried in nastiness.

The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane. All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many from want of the proper appliances, through so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless sepultures: sometimes getting the start of those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger's pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off.

[1272] And lastly, death had filled all the temples of the gods with dead bodies, all the shrines of the celestial deities were loaded everywhere with carcasses. The priests furnished these places with such wretched guests. Nor was there any reverence paid to the gods; their divinities were no more regarded; for the present calamity overcame everything. Nor did the people any longer observe that custom of sepulture they had ever followed, which was to bury their dead in the city. They were all distracted and amazed, and every one buried his wretched friend as the exigency of things would permit. And sudden rage, and dreadful poverty, drove men into many outrageous actions: They would place their relations, with violent outcries, upon the funeral piles that were raised for others, and light the fire; and often quarrel, with much loss of blood, rather than forsake the bodies of their friends.

53 Nor was this the only form of lawless extravagance which owed its origin to the plague. Men now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day. Perseverance in what men called honour was popular with none, it was so uncertain whether they would be spared to attain the object; but it ? ? ? ? ? ? was settled that present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was both honourable and useful. Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them. As for the first, they judged it to be just the same whether they worshipped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing; and for the last, no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offences, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung ever over their heads, and before this fell it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little.

Post by “Cassius” of November 24, 2022 at 10:52 AM

I'm not going to push anybody. (I would *never* do that would I [Joshua](#) or any of our other poets here?)

However we have some very creative minds in this group who are very good with poetry and imagery and even if we came up with a hundred different versions, none of which would compare to Lucretius, the exercise I think would be very enjoyable and educational.

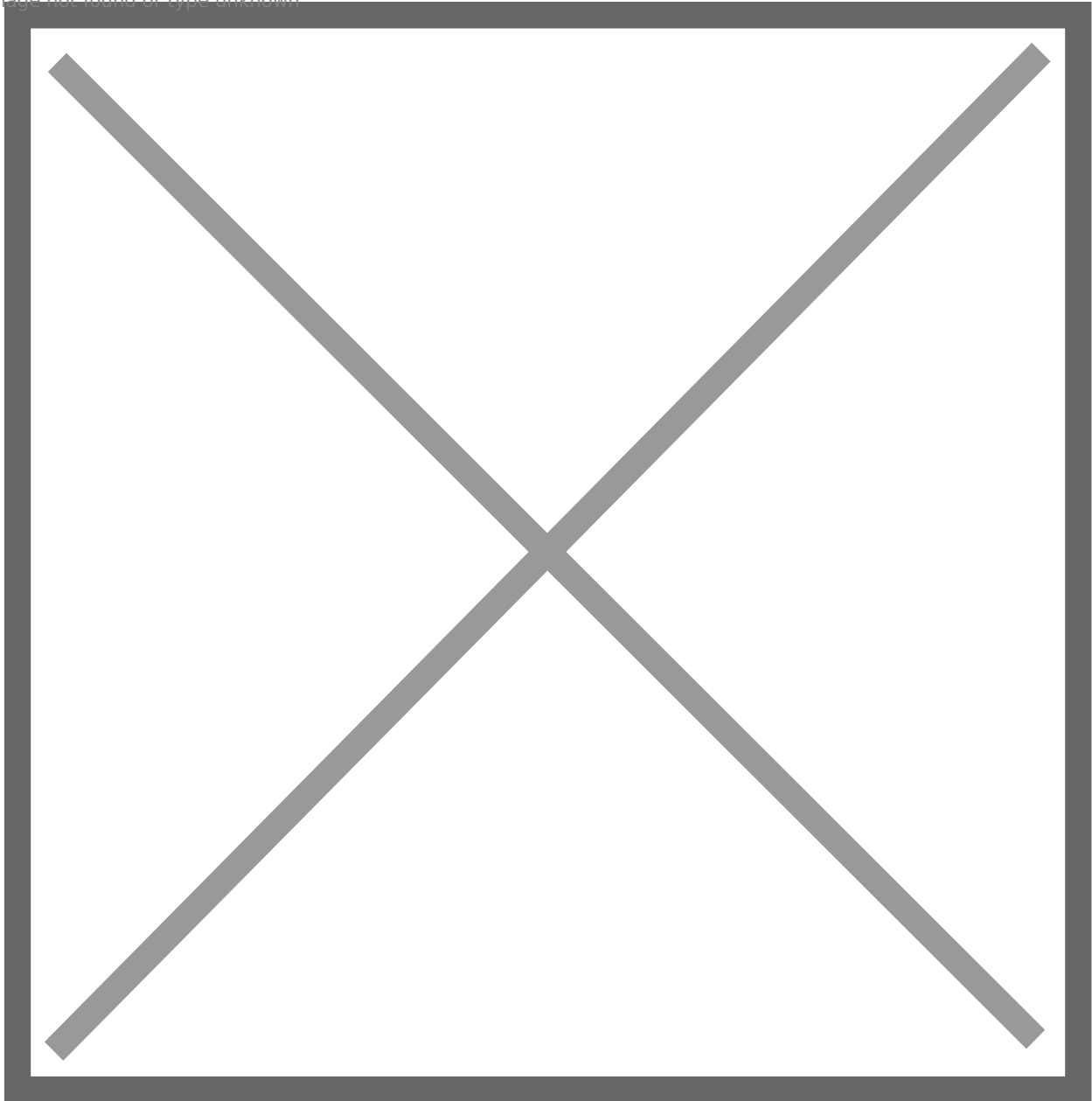
So it ought to be possible to combine some of the flourishes that we have in the Vatican Sayings, and it strikes me the Torquatus narrative as well, to come up with something that would really put a point on how there is nothing like confronting our mortality to inspire us to live life to its fullest while we have it.

Post by “kochiekoch” of November 30, 2022 at 4:58 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2758-thoughts-on-what-lucretius-might-have-considered-for-the-ending-of-book-six-a-co/>

I've seen the hedonistic response in other places in history. Here's one example I dug up.

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[The Plague in Paris: Hedonism, Resignation, and the First Scientific Response](#)

By Dorsey Armstrong, Ph.D., Purdue University The outbreak of the plague in Paris occurred relatively late, especially considering its early arrival in...

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Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2023 at 7:10 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2758-thoughts-on-what-lucretius-might-have-considered-for-the-ending-of-book-six-a-co/>

Joshua has me thinking about this subject again due to his post about the plague. Rather than put this note in that thread and disrupt the chain of thought, I will add this here:

If in fact the point of the ending is related to the point that the citizens of Athens who lived through the Plague were thereby freed from their religious superstitions (as Emily Austin suggests), it strikes me that the famous lines from Virgil might actually fit at the very end of the poem too.

Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas

Atque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum

Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari

Which translates to something like:

Happy was he who was able to learn the causes of things,
and who set under his feet all fear of unrelenting fate,

and the noise of greedy Acheron.

[Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas - Wikipedia](#)

Wouldn't it be interesting if Virgil was thinking of the end of Lucretius' poem when he inserted that line into verse 490 of Book 2 of the "[Georgics](#)" (29 BC)?

Post by "Don" of January 15, 2023 at 7:23 PM

That would be a nice counterpoint to:

Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.

Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas

Atque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum

Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari

Correct me if I'm misremembering, but Lucretius's poem was considered unfinished even in the ancient world, right?

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2023 at 7:24 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Correct me if I'm misremembering, but Lucretius's poem was considered unfinished even in the ancient world, right?

Very good question but if so I am not aware of anything to establish that. Isn't one of the only ancient comments someone (a church father?) making the comment about Cicero "emending" it?

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2023 at 7:28 PM

You know that line from Virgil really does kind of sum up the whole poem, doesn't it? But it would still need the kind of transition from Thucydides that Emily Austin suggests to get from what is now actually the last line to Virgil's kind of finale / flourish of a statement.

Also:

Probably interesting to not also that the sentiments of VS47 could also fit for what a person of Epicurean attitude among those people would have been thinking as well. Some type of connection might also explain the otherwise weird phrasing, and I don't gather we know the date when the Vatican sayings were compiled or their source:

VS47. I have anticipated thee, Fortune, and I have closed off every one of your devious entrances. And we will not give ourselves up as captives, to thee or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who cling to it maundering, we will leave from life singing aloud a glorious triumph-song on how nicely we lived.

Post by “Don” of January 15, 2023 at 7:47 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

[Quote from Don](#)

Correct me if I'm misremembering, but Lucretius's poem was considered unfinished even in the ancient world, right?

Very good question but if so I am not aware of anything to establish that. Isn't one of the only ancient comments someone (a church father?) making the comment about Cicero "emending" it?

Ah! That's what I believe what I was thinking of. The whole Cicero thing. Thanks!

Post by “Joshua” of January 15, 2023 at 8:49 PM

That passage from Virgil is clearly in reference to Lucretius, as most commentators agree, and is important for another reason; if Lucretius really had killed himself, do we think his greatest admirer would have written those lines *In Memoriam*? It would have been rather callous to write about his "happiness" in that case. That quote is one of two main lines of argument against the suicide claim.

Post by “Joshua” of January 15, 2023 at 9:01 PM

Quote from Cassius

Very good question but if so I am not aware of anything to establish that. Isn't one of the only ancient comments someone (a church father?) making the comment about Cicero "emending" it?

This comes from St. Jerome (died 420 AD) perhaps quoting Eusebius (died 339 AD), reporting on Lucretius (died c. 55 BC). So we're dealing with a gap of 450 years.

That would be akin to a hostile source making a claim about Shakespeare yesterday with no corroborating evidence, and in contravention of known circumstantial evidence. Cicero's letter to his brother does not mention any emending of Lucretius, and he doesn't indicate that he was in any way acquainted with Lucretius as a person.

Post by “Joshua” of January 15, 2023 at 9:17 PM

Quote from Me

Cicero's letter to his brother does not mention any emending of Lucretius, and he doesn't indicate that he was in any way acquainted with Lucretius as a person.

One thing I should say for the record is that Cicero did write to Memmius, so there could have been some connection between Cicero and Lucretius. But if anyone is emending the text it ought to have been an Epicurean like Atticus, or a sympathetic poet like Virgil, Ovid, etc. Now we're firmly in the realm of conjecture!