

# Episode 152 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 08 - The New Education 01

Post by "Cassius" of December 6, 2022 at 9:26 AM

Welcome to Episode One Hundred Fifty-Two of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we'll walk you through the ancient Epicurean texts, and we'll discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

We're now in the process of a series of podcasts intended to provide a general overview of Epicurean philosophy based on the organizational structure employed by Norman DeWitt in his book "Epicurus and His Philosophy."

This week we are going to speed through the early development of the school before we turn to detailed treatment of individual philosophical topics:

## Chapter VI - The New Education

- Intro -
  - Contrasts with Platonic education
  - New emphasis in rhetoric
  - Rejection of dialectic and mathematics
- The Heavenly Apocalypse
  - Flight of the mind through the universe
- The Tour of the Universe
  - the "journey" or "tour"
- The Use of The Epitome
- The New Textbooks

Quote from Norman DeWitt:

THE new school in Athens began to offer to the Greek world an integrated program of education consisting of the Canon, Physics, and Ethics. This was supported by specially prepared textbooks and eventually by graded texts. It was designed to rival the

Platonic program, which was then suffering a recession from the high peak of popularity to which it had risen spectacularly during the lifetime of its founder.

This Platonic program consisted of music and gymnastic, inherited from the Athenian past; of rhetoric, which had been introduced by the sophists; and of dialectic and mathematics, especially geometry, which were the addition of Plato himself.

Toward every component of this prevailing education the attitude of Epicurus was determined by the nature of the objective adopted for his own program. This objective was not the production of a good citizen but a happy and contented man. For practical purposes this happiness was defined as health of mind and health of body. The famous prayer for *mens Sana in corpore sano*, "a sound mind in a sound body," recommended by Juvenal, is genuine Epicureanism.

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### **Post by "Joshua" of December 8, 2022 at 6:34 AM**

I cannot recall the recent context when this came up, but here is that quote from *Confessions* of St. Augustine:

#### Quote

To Thee be praise, glory to Thee, Fountain of mercies. I was becoming more miserable, and Thou nearer. Thy right hand was continually ready to pluck me out of the mire, and to wash me thoroughly, and I knew it not; nor did anything call me back from a yet deeper gulf of carnal pleasures, but the fear of death, and of Thy judgment to come; which amid all my changes, never departed from my breast. And in my disputes with my friends Alypius and Nebridius of the nature of good and evil, I held that Epicurus had in my mind won the palm, had I not believed that after death there remained a life for the soul, and places of requital according to men's deserts, which Epicurus would not believe. And I asked, "were we immortal, and to live in perpetual bodily pleasure, without fear of losing it, why should we not be happy, or what else should we seek?" not knowing that great misery was involved in this very thing, that, being thus sunk and blinded, I could not discern that light of excellence and beauty, to be embraced for its own sake, which the eye of flesh cannot see, and is seen by the inner man. Nor did I, unhappy, consider from what source it sprung, that even on these things, foul as they

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were, I with pleasure discoursed with my friends, nor could I, even according to the notions I then had of happiness, be happy without friends, amid what abundance soever of carnal pleasures. And yet these friends I loved for themselves only, and I felt that I was beloved of them again for myself only.

O crooked paths! Woe to the audacious soul, which hoped, by forsaking Thee, to gain some better thing! Turned it hath, and turned again, upon back, sides, and belly, yet all was painful; and Thou alone rest. And behold, Thou art at hand, and deliverest us from our wretched wanderings, and placest us in Thy way, and dost comfort us, and say, "Run; I will carry you; yea I will bring you through; there also will I carry you."

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## Post by "Joshua" of December 8, 2022 at 6:39 AM

[The passage from Lucretius, Book 1 (regarding a chorale performance at Notre Dame, 2017)]

Quote

*Stefan Girardet*

*(referring to Epicurus:)*

*Therefore the vivid power of his mind prevailed,  
and forth he marched far beyond the flaming walls  
of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable  
universe in thought and imagination; whence  
victorious he returns, bearing his prize: the  
knowledge of what can come into being and what  
cannot: how each thing has its powers limited  
and its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore  
Superstition is now in turn cast down and  
trampled underfoot—a victory that exalts us  
to heaven.*

*—Lucretius, De rerum natura I: 172-75 —after Loeb Classical Library*

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Quote

Quote Therefore the lively power of his mind prevailed,

and forth he marched far beyond the flaming walls  
of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable  
universe in thought and imagination;  
whence victorious he returns bearing his prize, the  
knowledge what can come into being,  
what can not, in a word, how each thing has its powers limited  
and its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore  
Superstition is now in her turn cast down and  
trampled underfoot, whilst we by the victory are exalted  
high as heaven.

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(The un-amended Loeb text, for comparison)

This passage is one that will come up on next week's podcast, so it's actually good to get a chance to address a few points here. There are three key issues that complicate a simple reading of the text. We know from Thoreau's journal that he read the first hundred lines of Lucretius and then moved on--his only comment on the text or the poet is in reference to this passage, which he cites as a good description of Prometheus. This is probably *not* obtuseness on his part--it's exactly the kind of layered texture and metaphorical posture--allowing for open interpretation--that poetry is known for, which is presumably why Epicurus has so little time for it. But it's worth mentioning because of what comes next.

After Epicurus seizes a boon for mankind, Lucretius says that with this new knowledge "Superstition" (*religio*) is "cast down" and "trampled underfoot". The word foot is appropriate, because it is primarily in the footnotes that competing scholars have offered their opinions on that word *religio*. Superstition? Religion? *False* religion?

Quote

Lucretius seizes the opportunity of stating that men think things are done by divine power because they do not understand how they happen, whereas he will show how all things are done without the hand of the gods — a bold proposition truly, but one which, translated into modern language, means simply that natural phenomena are subject to definite laws, and are not unintelligible miracles. Lucretius fails to perceive that definite

physical laws are consistent with the work of God and the difficulty of reconciling the two ideas, unreal as it seems to us, has been felt by able men even now-a- days, when the conception of divine power is very different from any present to the mind of Lucretius. To most of us the very conception of a law suggests a lawgiver, while he, to prove the existence of laws, thought it necessary to deny the action of beings who could set those laws at nought.

-Fleeming Jenkin, The Atomic Theory of Lucretius, 1868

There is an undercurrent in the western approach to Lucretius to view his rejection of the myths and worship of the pagan gods as containing an important doctrinal Christian truth, but only part of it. In much the same way, certain Muslim apologists have noticed that the claim "there is no god" is simply the first part of the *Shahada*.

Then we have the final line: "we by the victory are exalted as high as heaven". This is where the largest shift takes place in the text above. The Notre Dame setting has it: "*a victory that exalts us to heaven.*" Instead of 'as high as heaven', this victory exalts us 'to heaven'.

### **TL;DR**

Maybe I'm splitting hairs here, but it would seem to be important to know how these passages can be so easily misread. If 1.) you leave out the preceding passage identifying Epicurus, and if 2.) you say that the problem is merely *superstition* or false religion, and if 3.) you further suggest that a victory over false religion exalts us "to" heaven, we're suddenly looking at a very different reading of a rather important passage.

Of course, I can have no idea what the actual thought process was at Notre Dame, and I have not listened to the piece itself.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of December 11, 2022 at 11:43 AM**

In this episode near the end Kalosyni asks a question about "wonder" - and here is the excerpt from Lucretius Book 2 that I quoted (this is Humphries translation, and I need to get the line number):

Direct your mind

To a true system. Here is something new

For ear and eye. Nothing is ever so easy

But what, at first, it is difficult to trust.  
Nothing is great and marvelous, but what  
All men, a little at a time, begin  
To mitigate their sense of awe. Look up,  
Look up at the pure bright color of the sky,  
The wheeling stars, the moon, the shining sun!  
If all these, all of a sudden, should arise  
For the first time before our mortal sight,  
What could be called more wonderful, more beyond  
The heights to which aspiring mind might dare?  
Nothing, I think. And yet, a sight like this,  
Marvelous as it is, now draws no man  
To lift his gaze to heaven's bright areas.  
We are a jaded lot. But even so  
Don't be too shocked by something new, too scared  
To use your reasoning sense, to weigh and balance,  
So that if in the end a thing seems true,  
You welcome it with open arms; if false,  
You do your very best to strike it down.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of December 11, 2022 at 2:33 PM**

#### Quote

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which

had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

And here's the quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson!

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### **Post by “Don” of December 11, 2022 at 8:14 PM**

Those are great quotations [Cassius](#) & [Joshua](#) !

Part of me still wants to believe that the prolepsis of the divine is at least in part the human capacity to feel wonder and awe in response to both natural (the night sky, Yosemite Valley, etc.) and man-made (inside a cathedral, huge statues of the gods, sweeping music, etc.) things.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of December 13, 2022 at 10:41 PM**

Episode 152 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we turn to Chapter 6 and begin discussion of "The New Education."

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/52181396>