

Venus and Mars - "Good" vs. "Evil"?

Post by "Cassius" of June 22, 2025 at 5:46 PM

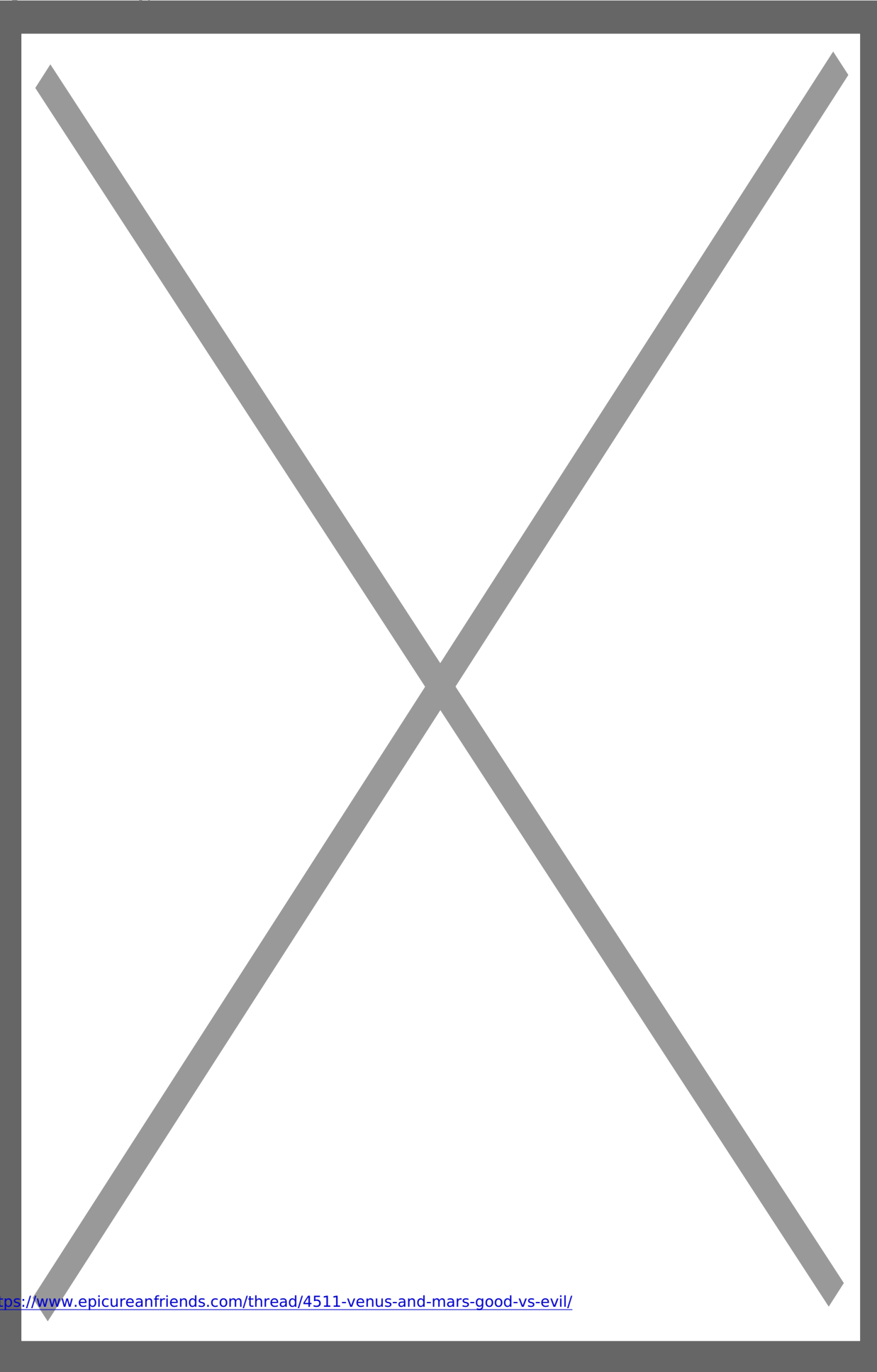
In regard to the opening of Lucretius referring to interaction between Mars and Venus, I know personally that I've always associated the allusion to mean something like "Venus - good / Mars - bad." However I now see that the original Greek mythology behind their relationship appears to be more subtle, with Venus being at one point in love with Mars, and that they were sometimes cooperative in ancient artwork.

I've collected several references, and I'm starting this thread to discuss whether there are subtleties in this relationship which would give us a deeper understanding of Lucretius' depiction of their relationship. I would especially appreciate comment by [Elli](#) or others who are more well-read on Greek mythology.

[Ares & Aphrodite - Ancient Greek Vase Painting](#)

<https://www.theoi.com/image/K9.1Ares.jpg>

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[Representation of Ares and Aphrodite, accompanied by loves playing with the weapons of the god. Fresco from the Villa de Mars and Venus in Pompei. 1st century AD. Archaeological Museum of Naples](#)

Representation of Ares and Aphrodite, accompanied by loves playing with the weapons of the god. Fresco from the Villa de Mars and Venus in Pompei. 1st century...

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[https://www.meisterdrucke.us/kunstwerke/1260px/Roman - Representation of Ares and Aphrodite accompanied by loves playing with the weapo - %28MeisterDrucke-946356%29.jpg](https://www.meisterdrucke.us/kunstwerke/1260px/Roman_-_Representation_of_Ares_and_Aphrodite_accompanied_by_loves_playing_with_the_weapo_-_%28MeisterDrucke-946356%29.jpg)

[This wikipedia article](#) in particular is helpful:

"Aphrodite The Warlike"

Aphrodite Areia ([Ancient Greek](#): Ἀφροδίτη Ἀρεία) or "Aphrodite the Warlike" was a cult [epithet](#) of the [Greek goddess Aphrodite](#), in which she was depicted in full [armor](#) like the war god [Ares](#).^[1] This representation was found in [Sparta](#) and [Taras](#) (modern [Taranto](#)). There were other, similarly martial interpretations of the goddess, such as at her [Sanctuary at Kythira](#), where she was worshiped under the epithet [Aphrodite Urania](#), who was also represented as being armed. The [epithet](#) "Areia", meaning "warlike", was applied to other gods in addition to Aphrodite, such as [Athena](#), [Zeus](#), and possibly [Hermes](#).^[1]

[Aphrodite Areia - Wikipedia](#)

[Votive relief to Ares and Aphrodite. Venice, National Archaeological Museum \(Venezia, Museo archeologico nazionale\)](#)

Votive relief to Ares and Aphrodite. Marble. Attic work of the second half of the 5th cent. BCE. Venice, National Archaeological Museum

ancientrome.ru

<https://ancientrome.ru/art/img/7/7684.jpg>

Post by “Cassius” of June 22, 2025 at 6:07 PM

Links to various Aphrodite myths, including "The Trojan War in which she supported her favourites Paris and Aeneas and was wounded in the fighting. <<[More](#)>> (which stikes me as particularly relevant to Lucretius given that the poem starts out referring to Venus as "mother of the Roman line":

<https://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Aphrodite.html>

"I. THE ILIAD : PERSUADES ARES TO SUPPORT THE TROJANS

At the outset of the Trojan War the gods took sides. Ares promised his mother Hera and Athena that he would side with them and support the Greeks, but Aphrodite persuaded him otherwise and he joined the Trojan faction."

Post by “Joshua” of June 22, 2025 at 8:50 PM

George Santayana discusses this question in his essay on Lucretius from [Three Philosophical Poets](#);

Quote

To a fortunate conjunction of atoms, a child owes his first being. To a propitious season and atmosphere, a poet owes his inspiration and his success. Conscious that his undertaking hangs upon these chance conjunctions, Lucretius begins by invoking the powers he is about to describe, that they may give him breath and genius enough to describe them. And at once these powers send him a happy inspiration, perhaps a happy reminiscence of Empedocles. There are two great perspectives which the moralist may distinguish in the universal drift of atoms,—a creative movement, producing what the moralist values, and a destructive movement, abolishing the same. Lucretius knows very well that this distinction is moral only, or as people now say, subjective. No one else has pointed out so often and so clearly as he that nothing arises in this world not helped to life by the death of some other thing; so that the destructive movement creates and the creative movement destroys. Yet from the point of view of any particular life or interest, the distinction between a creative force and a destructive force is real and all-important. To make it is not to deny the mechanical structure of nature, but only to show how this mechanical structure is fruitful morally, how the outlying parts of it are friendly or hostile to me or to you, its local and living products.

This double colouring of things is supremely interesting to the philosopher; so much so that before his physical science has reached the mechanical stage, he will doubtless regard the double aspect which things present to him as a dual principle in these things themselves. So Empedocles had spoken of Love and Strife as two forces which respectively gathered and disrupted the elements, so as to carry on between them the Penelope's labour of the world, the one perpetually weaving fresh forms of life, and the other perpetually undoing them.

It needed but a slight concession to traditional rhetoric in order to exchange these names, Love and Strife, which designated divine powers in Empedocles, into the names of Venus and Mars, which designated the same influences in Roman mythology. **The Mars and Venus of Lucretius are not moral forces, incompatible with the mechanism of atoms; they are this mechanism itself, in so far as it now produces and now destroys life, or any precious enterprise, like this of Lucretius in composing his saving poem. Mars and Venus, linked in each other's arms, rule the universe together; nothing arises save by the death of some other thing.** Yet when what arises is happier in itself, or more congenial to us, than what is destroyed, the poet says that Venus prevails, that she woos her captive lover to suspend his unprofitable raging. At such times it is spring on earth; the storms recede (I paraphrase the opening passage),^[5] the fields are covered with flowers, the sunshine floods the serene sky, and all the tribes of animals feel the mighty impulse of Venus in their hearts.

The corn ripens in the plains, and even the sea bears in safety the fleets that traverse it.

Not least, however, of these works of Venus is the Roman people. Never was the formative power of nature better illustrated than in the vitality of this race, which conquered so many other races, or than in its assimilative power, which civilized and pacified them. Legend had made Venus the mother of Aeneas, and Aeneas the progenitor of the Romans. Lucretius seizes on this happy accident and identifies the Venus of fable with the true Venus, the propitious power in all nature, of which Rome was indeed a crowning work. But the poet's work, also, if it is to be accomplished worthily, must look to the same propitious movement for its happy issue and for its power to persuade. Venus must be the patron of his art and philosophy. She must keep Memmius from the wars, that he may read, and be weaned from frivolous ambitions; and she must stop the tumult of constant sedition, that Lucretius may lend his undivided mind to the precepts of Epicurus, and his whole heart to a sublime friendship, which prompts him to devote to intense study all the watches of the starry night, plotting the course of each invisible atom, and mounting almost to the seat of the gods.^[6]

This impersonation in the figure of Venus of whatever makes for life would not be legitimate—it would really contradict a mechanical view of nature—if it were not balanced by a figure representing the opposite tendency, the no less universal tendency towards death.

The Mars of the opening passage, subdued for a moment by the blandishments of love, is raging in all the rest of the poem in his irrepressible fury. These are the two sides of every transmutation, that in creating, one thing destroys another; and this transmutation being perpetual,—nothing being durable except the void, the atoms, and their motion,—it follows that the tendency towards death is, for any particular thing, the final and victorious tendency. The names of Venus and Mars, not being essential to the poet's thought, are allowed to drop out, and the actual processes they stand for are described nakedly; yet, if the poem had ever been finished, and Lucretius had wished to make the end chime with the beginning, and represent, as it were, one great cycle of the world, it is conceivable that he might have placed at the close a mythical passage to match that at the beginning; and we might have seen Mars aroused from his luxurious lethargy, reasserting his immortal nature, and rushing, firebrand in hand, from the palace of love to spread destruction throughout the universe, till all things should burn fiercely, and be consumed together. Yet not quite all; for the goddess herself would remain, more divine and desirable than ever in her averted beauty. Instinctively into her bosom the God of War would sink again, when weary and drunk with slaughter; and a new world would arise from the scattered atoms of the old.

Display More

And Stephen Greenblatt in *The Swerve* argues a similar case;

Quote

Human beings, Lucretius thought, must not drink in the poisonous belief that their souls are only part of the world temporarily and that they are heading somewhere else. That belief will only spawn in them a destructive relation to the environment in which they live the only lives that they have. These lives, like all other existing forms in the universe, are contingent and vulnerable; all things, including the earth itself, will eventually disintegrate and return to the constituent atoms from which they were composed and out of which other things will form in the perpetual dance of matter. But while we are alive, we should be filled with the deepest pleasure, for we are a small part of a vast process of world-making that Lucretius celebrated as essentially erotic.

Hence it is that, as a poet, a maker of metaphors, Lucretius could do something very strange, something that appears to violate his conviction that the gods are deaf to human petitions.

* * *

Neither creation nor destruction ever has the upper hand; the sum total of matter remains the same, and the balance between the living and the dead is always restored:

- And so the destructive motions cannot hold sway eternally and bury existence forever; nor again can the motions that cause life and growth preserve created things eternally. Thus, in this war that has been waged from time everlasting, the contest between the elements is an equal one: now here, now there, the vital forces conquer and, in turn, are conquered; with the funeral dirge mingles the wail that babies raise when they reach the shores of light; no night has followed day, and no dawn has followed night, which has not heard mingled with those woeful wails the lamentations that accompany death and the black funeral. ([DRN 2.569-80](#) [Side-by-Side])

The Spanish-born Harvard philosopher George Santayana called this idea —the ceaseless mutation of forms composed of indestructible substances —“the greatest thought that mankind has ever hit upon.”

Post by “Joshua” of June 22, 2025 at 9:30 PM

Summary of the above:

- Lucretius poetically adopted for his own poem the Empedoclean struggle between the moral forces of [Love and Strife](#) [wikipedia]
 - However, in an atomistic understanding of Nature these forces are *not* moral. Through an endless process of combination and dissolution, the atoms form and reform all compound bodies.
 - Venus and Mars are complex figures in the poem.
 - Venus represents:
 - the formation of complex systems like our world.
 - the promise that pleasure is attainable even in a cosmos where 'destruction' nips at the heels of 'creation' - though of course matter is never actually created or destroyed
 - the mythical mother of the line of Aeneas, and therefore of the Roman people
 - the poet's Muse - a patron goddess appropriate for an Epicurean writing a philosophical poem

- I'm thinking out loud here, so take this with a grain of salt: In Greek mythology, Aphrodite is a much more primordial being than the nine Muses - more ancient even than Zeus himself. She was born of the union between sea-foam and the discarded genitals of Ouranos - a daughter of the first order of divine beings. The Muses are the daughters of the second order (the Titans) on their mother's [Mnemosyne] side, and the third order (the Olympians) on their father's [Zeus himself]. She quite literally fell from heaven; 'Ouranos' is still the Greek word for 'sky' to this day.
- Mars, less complex, represents:
 - Whole world systems hurtling into ruin
 - Death, pain, strife, war, disease (like the plague with which Lucretius ends his poem), and so on

I ought to have included John Tyndall's [Belfast Address](#) in the quoted passages above. Here it is;

Quote

Is there not a temptation to close to some extent with Lucretius, when he affirms that 'nature is seen to do all things spontaneously of herself without the meddling of the gods?' or with Bruno, when he declares that **Matter is not 'that mere empty capacity which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother who wrings forth all things as the fruit of her own womb?'** Believing as I do in the continuity of Nature, I cannot stop abruptly where our microscopes cease to be of use. Here the vision of the mind authoritatively supplements the vision of the eye. By an intellectual necessity I cross the boundary of the experimental evidence, and discern in that Matter which we, in our ignorance of its latent powers, and notwithstanding our professed reverence for its Creator, have hitherto covered with opprobrium, the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life.

Post by “Cassius” of June 23, 2025 at 6:41 AM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Mars, less complex, represents:

Whole world systems hurtling into ruin

Death, pain, strife, war, disease (like the plague with which Lucretius ends his poem),
and so on

As to Mars, that's the type of conclusion I am questioning. The tendency now is to see Mars as wholly negative, whereas it does not appear that he was viewed in such a wholly negative way in Greco-Roman mythology. Are these conclusions about Mars what we are reading into Lucretius because of our current views, or did Lucretius view Mars exactly the same way we do? Is Mars something always to be feared and hated, or something to be accepted and viewed as natural, and channeled into productive ways when possible, as Venus apparently sometimes worked with Mars in mythology?

Post by "Don" of June 23, 2025 at 7:08 AM

You can't have Venus without Mars. Old things must be destroyed, must die, for new things to be created. Otherwise, nothing would change; everything would be static.

Post by "Cassius" of June 23, 2025 at 8:24 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

You can't have Venus without Mars. Old things must be destroyed, must die, for new things to be created. Otherwise, nothing would change; everything would be static.

Yes I am thinking in that direction. The depictions I am seeing in Greek and Roman art show Mars as a warrior but not necessarily an "ogre" or "ugly" or "horrible" as we might do today in portraying some kind of monster. Along the lines of death not being something to fear, then we might also see Mars as what you are saying - a necessary part of nature whose presence we need to understand more subtly, rather than something that is acting "maliciously" toward us.

This whole line of thought is fairly specialized and not of immediate significance to me, but over in the Facebook group a user wrote:

Quote

"But as an Epicurean, I see it plainly: war is the collapse of reason and the triumph of unnecessary desire."

While I would think in many cases that statement is probably true, I am thinking it is probably overbroad, as it would be overbroad (I think) to characterize Mars as a wholly negative figure. To some extent Mars might be analogizable to a "gun" -- something very dangerous and to be handled carefully but sometimes having beneficial uses. No doubt the circumstances are going to override everything else, but in the it is only pain that is in itself always undesirable (even though we sometimes choose it) and a "god of war" might be also in the same category.

Post by “Kalosyni” of June 23, 2025 at 10:01 AM

Venus is complex with many varying aspects/forms, and she comes about due to the earlier Aphrodite (also many aspects/forms).

Wikipedia article: [Venus \(mythology\)](#)

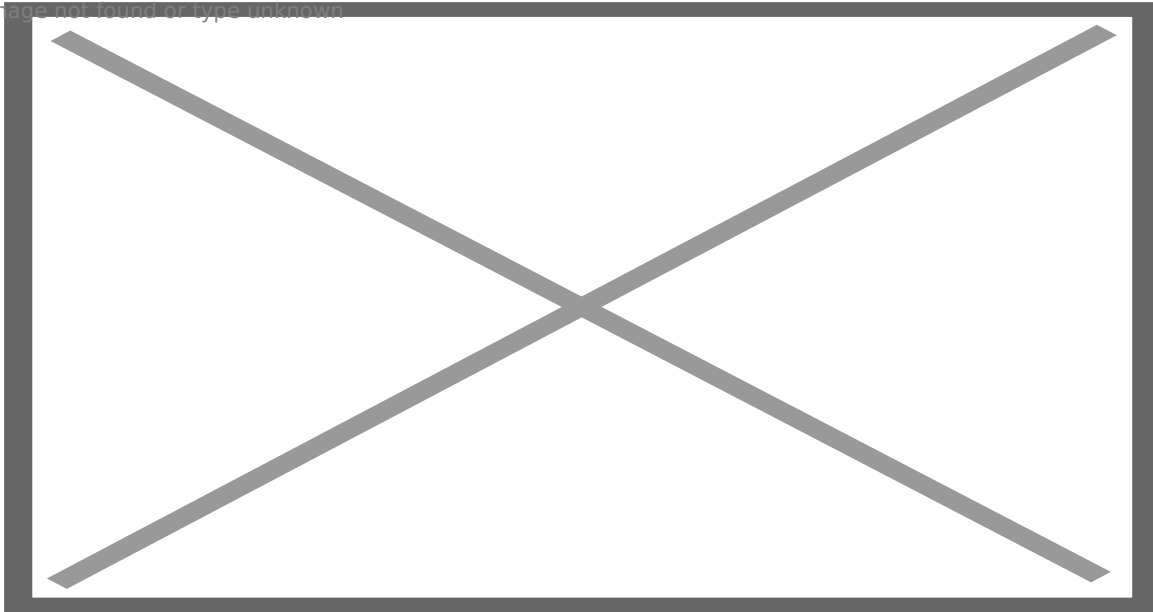
Here is a journal article: "Venus and Lucretius"

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/641366>

Post by “Don” of June 23, 2025 at 2:44 PM

FYI

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[ARES - Greek God of War & Battlelust](#)

Ares was the ancient Greek god of war, battlelust, courage and civil order. In art he was depicted as either a mature, bearded warrior armed for battle, or a...

www.theoi.com

Post by "Cassius" of June 23, 2025 at 3:27 PM

Quote

During the course of the Trojan War, Ares, who had sided with the Trojans, was wounded by the Greek hero Diomedes who drove a spear into his side, sending him flying back to Olympus bellowing in pain. <<[More](#)>>

I don't think I was aware that Mars sided with the Trojans. I presume that would be a major point in his favor in the eyes of the Romans (and therefore Lucretius and Memmius).

That web site has a ton of interesting material. I don't get the idea that Mars was viewed as demonic in any way, as Abrahamists might view "Satan." He certainly appears to be as subject to doing weird things as are the other Greek gods, but I also don't get the idea that he was any more "irrational" than they were either.

I think I'm mainly looking at this in perspective of the recent material we've discussed in the podcast as to whether pain is "evil," and/or whether a "god of war" would be viewed as "evil" vs Venus being viewed as "good." I gather from these anecdotes that Venus was far from being [Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes](#) herself.