

# **FACTS NOT FEAR. CLEAN HANDS. OPEN HEARTS.—AN EPICUREAN/LUCRETIAN MEDITATION ON HOW TO RESPOND TO THE ONGOING COVID-19 EPIDEMIC**

*Posted on March 8, 2020 by Andrew Brown*



Lucretius contemplating how nature works

**Introductory meditation (excluding the Lord's Prayer) adapted from 'An Epicurean Gathering' arranged by me, Lewis Connolly (until recently the minister of the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House) and Dean Reynolds:**

The Roman poet Lucretius wrote:

*In the murk of our darkness, you, Epicurus, raised your blazing lantern to show us the blessings of life. And we follow you, walking with confident footsteps the trails you have blazed, not to be your rival, but in admiration and love, and happy to have your example to guide us. [. . .]*

And so, we begin to follow Epicurus' thoughts, his arguments, and his reasons and, as we do, our mind's terrors abate, while the opaque walls of the world open wide to exhibit intricate actions and movements that go on all the time throughout the limitless void.

For Epicurus taught that all our fears and terrors, all the darkness of our mind, would be dispelled, 'not by the sun's light of its rays' shafts, but by careful observation and understanding of inner laws of how nature works' and that true piety is 'to live with a tranquil mind surveying whatever one sees with a steady, clear-eyed acceptance.'

[\[You can download a pdf of the Epicurean Gathering at this link\]](#)

And now, [mindful of the words and example of Thomas Jefferson, third president of the the United States, Unitarian and Epicurean](#) who, having acknowledged the importance of the laws given to us by Epicurus [and Epictetus] to help us govern ourselves, also acknowledged that the human Jesus gave us supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others, I invite all those who wish to join with me in saying the prayer Jesus taught us, 'The Lord's Prayer':

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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## READINGS

### **Introduction to The Epicurus Reader by D.S. Hutchinson (The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia, translated and edited by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, 1994, Hackett Publishing Company)**

Do you want to be happy? Of course you do! Then what's standing in your way? Your happiness is entirely up to you. This has been revealed to us by a man of divine serenity and wisdom who spent his life among us, and showed us, by his personal example and by his teaching, the path to redemption from unhappiness. His name was Epicurus.

*This is the sort of thing you might have heard an Epicurean preaching in the market square of an ancient city. If it sounds like a religious message, that is no coincidence; Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) was revered by his followers [like the later Roman poet Lucretius] as though divine, a sage who had answers to all the important questions of life. What attracted converts was the prospect of personal happiness, for which Epicurus offered clear philosophical advice.*

*The fundamental obstacle to happiness, says Epicurus, is anxiety. No matter how rich or famous you are, you won't be happy if you're anxious to be richer or more famous. No matter how good your health is, you won't be happy if you're anxious about getting sick. You can't be happy in this life if you're worried about the next life. You can't be happy as a human being if you're worried about being punished or victimized by powerful divine beings. But you can be happy if you believe in the four basic truths of Epicureanism: there are no divine beings which threaten us; there is no next life; what we actually need is easy to get; what makes us suffer is easy to put up with. This is the so-called 'four-part cure', the Epicurean remedy for the epidemic sickness of human anxiety; as a later Epicurean [Philodemus of Gadara] puts it, "Don't fear god, don't worry about death; what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure."*

### **Introduction to Lucretius: On the Nature of Things by M.F. Smith (Lucretius: On the Nature of Things, translated, with Introduction and Notes by Martin Ferguson Smith, 1969, Hackett Publishing Company)**

*Every Epicurean would have agreed with Katisha in the Mikado when she sings:*

But to him who's scientific

There's nothing that's terrific

In the falling of a flight of thunderbolts!

*So the study of natural science is the necessary means whereby the ethical end is attained. And that is its only justification: Epicurus is not interested in scientific knowledge for its own sake, as is clear from his statement that "if we were not disturbed by our suspicions concerning celestial phenomena, and by our fear that death concerns us, and also by our failure to understand the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need of natural science" (Principal Doctrines 11). Lucretius' attitude is precisely the same as his master's: all the scientific information in his poem is presented with the aim of removing the disturbances, especially fear of death and fear of the gods, that prevent the attainment of tranquillity of mind. It is very important for the reader of 'On the Nature of Things' to bear this in mind all the time, particularly since the content of the work is predominantly scientific and no systematic exposition of Epicurean ethics is provided. Epicurus despised philosophers who do not make it their business to improve people's moral condition: "Vain is the word of a philosopher by whom no human suffering is cured. For just as medicine is of no use if it fails to banish the diseases of the body, so philosophy is of no use if it fails to banish the suffering of the mind" (Usener fr. 221).*

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## ADDRESS

***Facts not fear. Clean hands. Open hearts.***

***An Epicurean/Lucretian meditation on how to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic***

[This address has its proximate cause in a uplifting, chance watching of a snippet of an interview last week with the Liverpool Football Club manager, Jürgen Klopp, in which a journalist asked Klopp: 'Just asking, as a wider question about the coronavirus, are you worried as a team or as a club about the spread of it or how it might affect you?' Klopp replied magnificently as follows:](#)

*What I don't like in life is [the idea] that [when it comes to] a very serious thing, a football manager's opinion is important. I don't understand that. I really don't understand it. If I asked you, you are in exactly the same role as I am. So it's not important what famous people say. We have to speak about things in the right manner. Not people like me, with no knowledge like me talking about something. People with knowledge will talk about it and tell people to do this, do that and everything will be fine, or not. Not football managers, I don't understand that! Politics, coronavirus, why me? I wear a baseball cap and have a bad shave.*

I saw this clip shortly before watching [a magnificent press conference with the chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, and the chief scientific advisor, Sir Patrick Vallance](#), an event Jürgen Klopp would assuredly have cheered because here were two people speaking about things in absolutely the right manner.

Whitty and Sir Patrick came across as calm, clear, highly informed, balanced, appropriately cautious and humble about what we did or didn't know, could and couldn't, should or shouldn't be doing, and when and when not to be doing them. Even Boris Johnson, that notorious chancer and dissembler who was there to make his own usual general sub-Churchillian ramble statement and then chair the press conference — even he recognised that he simply had to defer to Whitty's and Sir Patrick's expert knowledge, listen to the science and to make Government policy on the basis of the science and not upon his own personal, preferred political whims and un-evidenced prejudices.

As I reflected on that press conference and the other public appearances of Whitty and Sir Patrick over the next few days, I realised that they had all struck me as having been events best described, not in neutral terms as simple exercises in accurate, information dissemination — though they certainly were that — but in moral/ethical terms as acts of true compassion. Now why do I say this of two scientists concerned to pass on what we are often minded to call morally/ethically neutral scientific fact?

Well, as most of you know, I am a passionate advocate of the ethical teachings third-century BCE Greek philosopher Epicurus and his later, first-century BCE Roman follower, the poet Lucretius. Indeed, some of you will know that [only four weeks ago at the start of this epidemic I gave an address called 'Learning from Lucretius in the shadow of coronavirus'](#). In it I reminded you that of Lucretius' Epicurean inspired teaching about how, because in times of stress people tend to revert to their earlier superstitions about the gods and death we, therefore, need always to be

taking care to keep ourselves, on the one hand, focussed on emulating the gods only in their poetic role as exemplary symbols of imperturbability and beauty and, on the other hand, upon ensuring that this life — the only one we will ever have — is as full as is possible of appropriate and modest pleasures by the cultivation of friendship and by belonging to a supportive, open-minded philosophical and scientifically literate community such as, I hope, our own.

Anyway, this week, the impressive public appearances of Whitty and Sir Patrick strongly reminded me of something written a few years ago for the Guardian newspaper by [Emma Woolerton](#), Assistant Professor (Teaching) in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Durham University. [In the first of a series of nine short introductory articles on Lucretius](#) she wrote:

*Lucretius tells us that Epicurus’s belief in the human need for science was rooted in compassion: he looked around and saw a world full of people cringing in fear and dread of the wrath of the gods, as expressed via random phenomena such as lightning and earthquakes, which he aimed to teach them were in fact purely natural disasters (the legal shorthand “act of god” would have had his hackles rising). It was to appease that soul-crushing fear that Epicurus turned the atomic theory of Democritus and Leucippus into a means to provide a physics-based rationale of the world around us: if we understand the physics, we will see that we have nothing to fear from the gods. Epicureans were not atheists, but believed that the gods had no interest in humanity or our world. Lucretius’ mission is to explain that physics in beautiful poetry, to make it more understandable and more palatable to his readership than its occasional philosophical obscurity might otherwise be.*

I’m pretty certain that, in their respective public roles as chief medical officer and chief scientific advisor, Whitty and Sir Patrick were not standing up and speaking with an explicit desire to remove from us any fear and dread we may still have concerning the wrath of supernatural gods or our fear of death, but it did seem to me that, à la Epicurus and Lucretius, by keeping us focussed firmly on the science they were deliberately speaking in a fashion designed to remove from us as much anxiety as was possible. They did this, not by pretending that everything was, or will be, tickety-boo — in fact far from it — but they did make it clear that the natural sciences made available to us humane and compassionate, evidenced-based ways to negotiate the crisis which would offer us the best chance of getting through it together in the best way possible. They inspired, in me anyway, that much absent thing in our current public life — genuine trust.

Whitty and Sir Patrick both seemed to me to be acting in compassionate ways wholly consonant

with Epicurus' and Lucretius' conviction that the greatest pleasure available to any human being was simply to be free from mental distress. Whitty and Sir Patrick were also acting in a fashion which concurs with Lucretius when he wrote that the terror and darkness of the human mind was never going to be dispersed only by the rays of the sun, or the clear shafts of the day — i.e. by the everyday lights under which our world is usually seen and understood — but only by the external appearance (species) and inner law of nature (ratio)' — this is Lucretius's famous '*naturae species ratioque*'. Thomas Nail has recently suggested that this phrase might best be translated for us as 'the material conditions for nature as it appears.'

To keep close to our current situation, thanks to the complex overlapping disciplines of the natural sciences and computer modelling of human patterns of behaviour, Whitty and Sir Patrick, knowing something real about the material conditions of nature as it appears in the SARS-CoV-2 virus itself, as well as the material conditions required for its spread amongst creatures like us in the form of the disease COVID-19, have been able to suggest ways by which we proceed in the most appropriate and most compassionate ways possible.

Given all this, to return for a moment to Jürgen Klopp, what none of us must do is listen to people with no knowledge telling you what or what we should, or shouldn't be doing in the next few months but only to listen to the science and people like Whitty and Sir Patrick. In other words, do not listen to any football managers, ministers of religion, politicians, newspapers, television/radio stations, social-media streams whose utterances cannot be traced by you, as best you can, back to actual, peer-reviewed, scientific evidence and advice.

[\[Link to the appropriate Government webpage\]](#)

As [Dr Abdu Sharkawy](#), an Internal Medicine and Infectious Diseases Consultant from the University Health Network of Toronto City Hospitals, [wisely reminds us](#):

*The fact is the virus itself will not likely do much harm when it arrives. But our own behaviors and 'fight for yourself above all else' attitude could prove disastrous.*

Given [this Sharkawy concludes his short but powerful piece](#) by saying in a very Epicurean/Lucretian key:



*I implore you all. Temper fear with reason, panic with patience and uncertainty with education. We have an opportunity to learn a great deal about health hygiene and limiting the spread of innumerable transmissible diseases in our society. Let's meet this challenge together in the best spirit of compassion for others, patience, and above all, an unflinching effort to seek truth, facts and knowledge as opposed to conjecture, speculation and catastrophizing. Facts not fear. Clean hands. Open hearts. Our children will thank us for it.*

So, this afternoon and every day from now on, inspired by Epicurus and Lucretius, having cleaned our minds with the science (*naturae species ratioque*), cleaned our hands with hot water and soap and made a cup of tea with which to toast compassionate and knowledgeable doctors and scientists like Chris Whitty, Sir Patrick Vallance and Abdu Sharkawy, may I encourage you to open your hearts so as better to emulate the Epicurean gods in their beauty of repose and imperturbability and, then mindful of the need for friends and wider communities, if the scientific advice continues to suggest you safely can, plan to visit one or some of them or, failing that, simply drop them a line by email, Skype or phone. We'll all thank each other for that now or, indeed, at any time.

Facts not fear.

Clean hands.

Open hearts.