

# LEARNING FROM LUCRETIUS IN THE SHADOW OF CORONAVIRUS

Posted on February 9, 2020 by Andrew Brown

## READING:

[Lines 78-58 from Book VI of the \*De Rerum Natura \(The Nature of Things\)\* by Lucretius trans. by David R. Slavitt \(University of California Press, 2008, pp. 253-254\)](#)

*... But people / tend to revert under stress to their earlier superstitions and imagine cruel taskmasters, omnipotent beings we wretches / ought to fear and appease, even though clear logic / sets forth those things that can be and those that cannot and shows us / the boundaries of the different domains that not even the gods / are able to cross. But faulty thinking leads men astray. / What you have to do is spew out all those absurd ideas / and get them far behind, unworthy as they are / of the gods whom they unwittingly insult in a description / that fails to account for the lofty peace of divine beings. / It is not that the gods will care or punish you for your thoughts, / but you will take upon yourself that job of correction tormenting yourself and telling yourself that you act for them, / feeling terrible guilt every time you approach a shrine, / and depriving yourself of the tranquil vision the gods offer / of the beauty that they embody and that men's minds should treasure.*

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## ADDRESS

### Learning from Lucretius in the shadow of coronavirus

As most of you will be aware [the news is filled with items about the spread of coronavirus](#) which reminded me that humankind always has been, and almost certainly always will be, susceptible

to deadly mass infections.

Fortunately, when I was at studying for my [‘O’ levels](#), I was made fully aware of this by learning about the catastrophic effects of the [Black Death](#) in the mid-fourteenth century and of the [Spanish flu pandemic of 1918](#). At the same time ([thanks to reading the poems of A. E. Housman](#)) I also discovered Lucretius’ magnificent first-century BCE poem ‘On the Nature of Things’ and so learnt about another deadly pandemic, namely [that which struck Athens \(430 BCE\)](#) during the second year of the [Peloponnesian War against Sparta \(431-404 BC\)](#).

My reflections this week on these historical events also necessarily reminded me that there always remains the need to be as prepared as best we can for the inevitable, next pandemic which may, or may not, be the coronavirus.

Of course, like every person in the world, when any outbreak occurs I have no choice but to live in hope that our governments and their various agencies (especially, in this case, medical ones) have taken care to make sensible preparations that can help mitigate against its worst effects.

But aside from these kinds of preparations, over which we have little influence, there are important preparations that, as individuals and small communities, we ourselves can, and always should, be making. The ones which fall under my purview are, of course, those to do with how well we ourselves have been able to examine and review, not only the religious and philosophical **dangers** that face us in these kinds of situations, but also the positive religious and philosophical **resources** available to us which may serve to help us get through any such a pandemic in the calmest, most effective, and humane way possible.

Now, when pandemics strike, in most cultures two major dangers often quickly rear their ugly and destructive heads: firstly, a return of superstition about the gods and, secondly, a fear of death.

The final book of [Lucretius’](#) epic poem ([De Rerum Natura Book VI](#)) contains and concludes with a gruesome account of the plague in Athens and it is no accident that the same book begins in the fashion you heard in our reading.



In that passage Lucretius reminds us that people tend to revert under stress to their earlier superstitions and fears about the gods. When this occurs it only ever serves to add more hurt, suffering and anxiety to the considerable ones already being caused by the effects of the pandemic. As [Father Ted and Dougal once put it](#), I think that in an Enlightenment inspired church tradition such as our own we have a duty gently and non-confrontationally to protest and say ‘Down with this sort of thing’ and ‘Careful now’ ([S1 Ep3 — The Passion of Saint Tibulus](#)).

But, you may be tempted to say to me, ‘Andrew, surely as a society we have by now all moved well beyond supernaturalist, superstitious religious beliefs and so your concern here is exaggerated and unfounded’.

All I can say to such a question is please do not underestimate the possibility that, in extremis, this sort of thing can and does occur more often than you would think and even to the most apparently rational of us.

I could tell you a dozen cautionary tales to illustrate this but, today, I’ll stick to just one concerning a friend of mine’s memorable experience. He was born in the late 1950s to parents who were firm, atheistic humanists. He, in turn, became a fine professional philosopher of similar persuasion. One day his father died and, understandably, his mother was beset with grief. At the same time as this she began to have a few health scares of her own which also coincided with one or two other unconnected misfortunes. One evening when my friend was sharing dinner with his mother she suddenly broke down and wept, saying, ‘What have I done to deserve this?’ This was, of course, a classic example of reversion to an ancient, superstitious belief that there was some supernatural entity ‘out there’ who, by inflicting upon her the [Job-like](#)

[punishments](#) she was currently experiencing, was cruelly punishing her for her wrongs. My friend was truly shocked because throughout her whole life his mother had taken great care to teach him that such thinking was, not only utterly flawed, but also highly distressing and damaging to the people who succumbed to it. The remainder of the evening was spent gently rehearsing with his mother the self-same arguments she had once rehearsed with him that there are no supernatural, interventionist gods 'out there' dispensing to anyone either gifts or punishments.

It is important additionally to note that returns to such superstitious belief in gods who punish the bad and save the good can, all-too quickly, begin to create an wider environment in which those who are suffering and ill are instantly turned into bad people, sinners whom god is punishing and who must be shunned by us. In our own case, because this current flu virus seems to have begun in China, these irrational superstitious beliefs can all too easily get re-attached to old racist tropes so that anyone who even looks 'a bit oriental' becomes, by default, a person who must be shunned. [Yang Tian, a Chinese journalist working for the Guardian in Australia writes that:](#)

*While some Australian headlines denounced the “China virus”, demanding that “China kids stay home”, France issued a “Yellow Alert” and resurrected the spectre of the “Yellow Peril”, amplifying the narrative of tainted and disease-ridden east Asian bodies threatening to smother the west. . . . Face masks worn by anyone of Asian descent now serve as scarlet letters that stain our identities and mark our otherness.*

But this religious and philosophical danger is, in Lucretius' mind, also tightly bound up with an important religious and philosophical **resource**.

Although Lucretius did not believe in the existence of any supernatural, interventionist gods he did accept the gods had a practical, social, poetic and ethical role to play if and when they were understood as being distant, somewhat mysterious and elusive, but still this-worldly, material, natural entities of some sort. In Lucretius' mind (following his philosophical hero [Epicurus](#)) the chief characteristic of such gods was their wholly imperturbable and beautiful nature, a nature that meant they had absolutely no interest in interfering in human affairs (or, indeed, anyway to interfere). Consequently, the gods' only possible influence upon us was as **exemplars** of imperturbability and beauty. This means our everyday, poetic, religio-ethical duty would be simply to imitate this in our own daily lives as best we can. As Epicurus put it, if and when we do

this then we have a real chance of living ‘like a god among human kind, because one whose life is fortified by immortal blessings in no way resembles a mortal being’ ([Letter to Menoecus](#)).

Living in this way doesn’t, of course, instantly solve every practical problem that comes with any pandemic, but I hope you can see that by being imperturbable and desirous only of expressing beauty in all our actions, we are likely to have a much chance of coping appropriately and humanely with the situation than were we to be running around in a scared and ugly state of mind believing we and/or others are being punished for our sins by supernatural beings.

Now, the second major religious and philosophical danger in the face of any pandemic is, of course, fear of death. Please be clear that here I am not talking about the wholly reasonable fears we may, from time to time, have about the **manner** our death — i.e. about being in pain or not — but about fear of death itself.

In his own age — as in our own — Lucretius encountered many people who believed that after death there was an afterlife to be spent in Hades, hopefully on the Isles of the Blessed, the Elysian Plain or perhaps the more downmarket meadows of Asphodel but, possibly, in the dark, deep abyss of Tartarus. (For Christians, of course, this is framed in terms of heaven and hell.) Uncertainties about what the next life was to be like were, and still are, the cause of great anxiety to countless millions of people, and this fear has always seriously mitigated against the possibility of leading an imperturbable, satisfying and beautiful life in this world.

But Lucretius had an antidote to this fear. His study of the natural world led him to the, then, radical conclusion — [one that was itself a radical modification of Epicurus’ thinking](#) — that everything (including the gods) was made of the flows, folds and fields of matter in constant motion. This meant that at our death, who ‘we are’, is simply and naturally folded back and dissolved into the same continuous material flows, folds and fields out of which we are made. Another way of putting this is to say that the matter (*materia*) of us is folded back into our mother (*mater*). [Remember that, for Lucretius, Venus, the primary symbolic form of](#)

*... the mother of all creation is herself made of the same matter that she creates. Her materiality is the same materiality of the world. The mother of matter is the matter of the mother. Her creation is, therefore, the process of matter’s own process of materialization. Maternalization is materialization* ([Thomas Nail, \*Lucretius 1\*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 24](#)).

Given this, Lucretius realised that our own individual death cannot result in us feeling fear and pain because when we die ‘we’ are no longer there to feel it. True enough, our family and friends may mourn and feel significant pain at our death but **we** will not be able to, and that should be a (or at least, some) comfort to us all.

Once again this religious and philosophical danger — the fear of death — is, in Lucretius’ mind, tightly bound up with a related religious and philosophical resource.

Once we understand death like Lucretius we can better and more truly begin to focus on the ways by which we can ensure that **this** life is lived in a fashion that is imperturbable and beautiful, one as full as is possible of appropriate and modest pleasures. For Lucretius, as for all Epicureans, the possibility of this centred on the cultivation of friendship and of belonging to a supportive, open-minded philosophical community.

With regard to friendship, Epicurus memorably said:

*Of all the things that wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole person, by far the most important is the acquisition of friendship (LD, 27).*

And, on another occasion, Epicurus exclaimed that:

*Friendship dances around the world, summoning every one of us to awaken to the gospel of the happy life (VC 52).*

With regard to community, it is said that above the entrance to Epicurus’ own garden academy in Athens were written these words:

*Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure. The caretaker of [this] abode, a kindly host, will be ready for you; he will welcome you with bread, and serve you water in abundance, with these words: ‘Have you not been well entertained? This garden does not whet your appetite, but quenches it’ (Seneca, Epistulae morales ad Lucilium, Epistle XXI).*

So, to conclude. I have hopes that, amongst friends in philosophically inclined communities like

this, at least some of us can practise following the example of the imperturbable and beautiful Epicurean/Lucretian gods so that, even in a time of pandemic, we will continue to embody virtues which are the very “salt of existence”, namely:

*love, affection, tenderness, sweetness, thoughtfulness, delicateness, forbearance, magnanimity, politeness, amenity, kindness, civility, attentiveness, attention, courtesy, clemency, devotedness, and all the words carrying a connotation of goodness* ([Michel Onfray, \*A Hedonist Manifesto: The Power to Exist\*, Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 49](#)).

Believe you me, these always vital virtues are never more vital to embody than in the middle of a pandemic, and their continued existence among humankind in good or difficult times is, or so I feel, best ensured by ridding ourselves of our fears about supernatural gods and death and learning to love and imitate, ever more deeply, the ways of being of the mother of matter who is the matter of the mother.