

Episode 215 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 22 - The Epicurean View Of Happiness

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Welcome to Episode 215 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we 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.

This week we continue our discussion of Book Two of Cicero's On Ends, which is largely devoted Cicero's attack on Epicurean Philosophy. Going through this book gives us the opportunity to review those attacks, take them apart, and respond to them as an ancient Epicurean might have done, and much more fully than Cicero allowed Torquatus, his Epicurean spokesman, to do.

Follow along with us here: [Cicero's On Ends - Complete Reid Edition](#). Check any typos or other questions against the original PDF which can be found [here](#).

This week before we go forward we are going to go back over the question of whether Epicurus held that the wise man can always be happy.

Here are some relevant excerpts from Diogenes Laertius, starting around line 117

[117] As regards the principles of living and the grounds on which we ought to choose some things and avoid others, he writes the following letter.

But before considering it let us explain what he and his followers think about the wise man. Injuries are done by men either through hate or through envy or through contempt, all of which the wise man overcomes by reasoning. When once a man has attained wisdom, he no longer has any tendency contrary to it or willingly pretends that he has. He will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom. A man cannot become wise with every kind of physical constitution, nor in every nation.

[118] And even if the wise man be put on the rack, he is happy. Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament. The wise man will not have intercourse with any woman with whom the law forbids it, as Diogenes says in his summary of Epicurus' moral teaching. Nor will he punish his slaves, but will rather pity them and forgive any that are deserving. They do not think that the wise man will fall in love, or care about his burial.

They hold that love is not sent from heaven, as Diogenes says in his . . . book, nor should the wise man make elegant speeches.

Sexual intercourse, they say, has never done a man good, and he is lucky if it has not harmed him.

[119] Moreover, the wise man will marry and have children, as Epicurus says in the *Problems* and in the work *On Nature*. But he will marry according to the circumstances of his life. He will feel shame in the presence of some persons, and certainly will not insult them in his cups, so Epicurus says in the *Symposium*. Nor will he take part in public life, as he says in the first book *On Lives*. Nor will he act the tyrant, or live like the Cynics, as he writes in the second book *On Lives*. Nor will he beg. Moreover, even if he is deprived of his eyesight, he will not end his whole life, as he says in the same work.

Also, the wise man will feel grief, as Diogenes says in the fifth book of the *Miscellanies*.

[120] He will engage in lawsuits and will leave writings behind him, but will not deliver speeches on public occasions. He will be careful of his possessions and will provide for the future. He will be fond of the country. He will face fortune and never desert a friend. He will be careful of his reputation in so far as to prevent himself from being despised. He will care more than other men for public spectacles.

[121] He will erect statues of others, but whether he had one himself or not, he would be indifferent. Only the Wise man could discourse rightly on music and poetry, but in practice he would not compose poems. One wise man is not wiser than another. He will be ready to make money, but only when he is in straits and by means of his philosophy. He will pay court to a king, if occasion demands. He will rejoice at another's misfortunes, but only for his correction. And he will gather together a school, but never so as to become a popular leader. He will give lectures in public, but never unless asked; he will give definite teaching and not profess doubt. In his sleep he will be as he is awake, and on occasion he will even die for a friend.

[122] They hold that faults are not all of equal gravity, that health is a blessing to some, but indifferent to others, that courage does not come by nature, but by a calculation of advantage. That friendship too has practical needs as its motive: one must indeed lay its foundations (for we sow the ground too for the sake of crops), but it is formed and maintained by means of community of life among those who have reached the fullness of pleasure. They say also that there are two ideas of happiness, complete happiness, such as belongs to a god, which admits of no increase, and the happiness which is concerned with the addition and subtraction of pleasures. Now we must proceed to the letter.

OTHER FRAGMENTS

LETTERS TO INDIVIDUALS.

To Anaxarchus.

23. But I summon you to continuous pleasures and not to vain and empty virtues which have but disturbing hopes of results.O

Then we move further into Section XXV:

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XXVII. But we dwell too long upon very simple matters. When we have once concluded and demonstrated that if everything is judged by the standard of pleasure, no room is left for either virtues or friendships, there is nothing besides on which we need greatly insist. And yet, lest it should be thought that any passage is left without reply, I will now also say a few words in answer to the remainder of your speech. Well then, whereas the whole importance of philosophy lies in its bearing on happiness, and it is from a desire for happiness alone that men have devoted themselves to this pursuit, and whereas some place happiness in one thing, some in another, while you place it in pleasure, and similarly on the other side all wretchedness you place in pain, let us first examine the nature of happiness as you conceive it.

Now you will grant me this, I suppose, that happiness, if only it exists at all, ought to lie entirely within the wise man's own control. For if the life of happiness may cease to be so, then it cannot be really happy. Who indeed has any faith that a thing which is perishable and fleeting will in his own case always continue solid and strong? But he who feels no confidence in the permanence of the blessings he possesses, must needs apprehend that he will some time or other be wretched, if he loses them. Now no one can be happy while in alarm about his most important possessions; no one then can possibly be happy. For happiness is usually spoken of not with reference to some period of time, but to permanence, nor do we talk of the life of happiness at all, unless that life be rounded off and complete, nor can a man be happy at one time, and wretched at another; since any man who judges that he can become wretched will never be happy. For when happiness has been once entered on, it is as durable as wisdom herself, who is the creator of the life of happiness, nor does it await the last days of life, as Herodotus writes that Solon enjoined upon Croesus. But I shall be reminded (as you said yourself) that Epicurus will not admit that continuance of time contributes anything to happiness, or that less pleasure is realized in a short period of time than if the pleasure were eternal.

These statements are most inconsistent ; for while he places his supreme good in pleasure, he refuses to allow that pleasure can reach a greater height in a life of boundless extent, than in one limited and moderate in length. He who places good entirely in virtue can say that happiness is consummated by the consummation of virtue, since he denies that time brings additions to his supreme good; but when a man supposes that happiness is caused by pleasure, how are his doctrines to be reconciled, if he means to affirm that pleasure is not heightened by duration? In that case, neither is pain. Or, though all the most enduring pains are also the most wretched, does length of time not render pleasure more enviable? What reason then has Epicurus for calling a god, as he does, both happy and eternal? If you take away his eternity,

Jupiter will be not a whit happier than Epicurus, since both of them are in the enjoyment of the supreme good, which is pleasure. Oh, but our philosopher is subject to pain as well. Yes, but he sets it at nought; for he says that, if he were being roasted, he would call out how sweet this is! In what respect then is he inferior to the god, if not in respect of eternity? And what good does eternity bring but the highest form of pleasure, and that prolonged for ever? What boots it then to use high sounding language unless your language be consistent? On bodily pleasure (I will add mental, if you like, on the understanding that it also springs, as you believe, from the body) depends the life of happiness. Well, who can guarantee the wise man that this pleasure will be permanent? For the circumstances that give rise to pleasures are not within the control of the wise man, since your happiness is not dependent on wisdom herself, but on the objects which wisdom procures with a view to pleasure. Now all such objects are external to us, and what is external is in the power of chance. Thus fortune becomes lady paramount over happiness, though Epicurus says she to a small extent only crosses the path of the wise man.

XXVIII. Come, you will say to me, these are small matters. The wise man is enriched by nature herself, whose wealth, as Epicurus has taught us, is easily procured. His statements are good, and I do not attack them, but they are inconsistent with each other. He declares that no less pleasure is derived from the poorest sustenance, or rather from the most despicable kinds of food and drink, than from the most recherché dishes of the banquet. If he declared that it made no difference to happiness what kind of food he lived on, I should yield him the point and even applaud him; for he would be asserting the strict truth, and I listen when Socrates, who holds pleasure in no esteem, affirms that hunger is the proper seasoning for food, and thirst for drink. But to one who, judging of everything by pleasure, lives like Gallonius, but talks like the old Piso Frugi, I do not listen, nor do I believe that he says what he thinks. He announced that nature's wealth is easily procurable, because nature is satisfied with little. This would be true, if you did not value pleasure so highly. The pleasure, he says, that is obtained from the cheapest things is not inferior to that which is got from the most costly. To say this is to be destitute not merely of intelligence, but even of a palate. Truly those who disregard pleasure itself are free to say that they do not prefer a sturgeon to a sprat; but he who places his supreme good in pleasure must judge of everything by sense and not by reason, and must say that those things are best which are most tasty. But let that pass; let us suppose he acquires the intensest pleasures not merely at small cost, but at no cost at all, so far as I am concerned; let the pleasure given by the cress which the Persians used to eat, as Xenophon writes, be no less than that afforded by the banquets of Syracuse, which are severely blamed by Plato; let the acquisition of pleasure be as easy, I say, as you make it out to be; still what are we to say about pain? Its agonies are so great that a life surrounded by them cannot be happy, if only pain is the greatest of evils. Why, Metrodorus himself, who is almost a second Epicurus, sketches happiness almost in these words; a well regulated condition of body, accompanied by the assurance that it will continue so. Can any one possibly be assured as to the state of this body of his, I do not say in a year's time, but by the time evening comes? Pain then, that is to say the greatest of evils, will always be an object of dread, even though it be not present, for it may present itself at any moment. How then can the dread of the greatest possible evil consort with the life of happiness? Someone tells me: Epicurus imparts to us a scheme which will enable us to pay no heed to

pain. To begin with, the thing is in itself ridiculous, that no attention should be given to the greatest of evils. But pray what is his scheme? The greatest pain, he says, is short. First, what do you mean by short? Next, what by the greatest pain? May the greatest pain not continue for some days? Look to it, that it may not continue some months even! Unless possibly you refer to the kind of pain which is fatal as soon as it seizes any one. Who dreads such pain as that? I wish rather you would alleviate that other sort, under which I saw that most excellent and most cultivated gentleman, my friend Gnaeus Octavius, son of Marcus, wasting away, and not on one occasion only or for a short time, but often and over quite a long period. What tortures did he endure, ye eternal gods, when all his limbs seemed on fire! Yet for all that we did not regard him as wretched, but only as distressed, for pain was not to him the greatest of evils. But he would have been wretched, if he had been immersed in pleasures, while his life was scandalous and wicked.

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