

Episode 220 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 27 - Cicero Attacks Epicurus' End-Of-Life Decisionmaking

Post by “Cassius” of March 22, 2024 at 1:31 PM

Welcome to Episode 220 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](#).

Last week we focused on Cicero's allegations that Epicurus' views on pain and death were insufficient and contradictory. This week we pick up at the start of Section XXXI - REID EDITION

XXXI. You and your friends, Torquatus, may twist yourselves this way and that; but you will find nothing in this noble letter from the hand of Epicurus, which harmonizes or accords with his dogmas. So he is refuted out of his own mouth, and his writings are put to shame by his own honesty and character. For from that commission about the children, from the remembrance of and tender feeling for friendship, from the observance of most important duties when at the last gasp, we learn that disinterested honesty was inbred in the man, and was not bribed into existence by pleasures, nor called forth by the wages of rewards. What stronger evidence do we want to prove that morality and uprightness are in themselves desirable, when we see such goodness displayed at the moment of death? But while I regard as creditable the letter which I have just translated almost word for word, though it was by no means in accord with the spirit of his philosophy, yet I am of opinion that this same philosopher's will is at variance not only with the seriousness becoming a true philosopher, but even with his own opinions. He wrote both many times in detail, and also shortly and clearly in the book I have just mentioned, that death is of no importance to us; for anything which has decayed is destitute of feeling; and what is destitute of feeling is of no importance whatever to us. This maxim itself might have been more neatly put and better. For when he puts it thus: what has decayed is without feeling,

his statement does not explain sufficiently what it is that has decayed. Still I understand what he means. However, as all feeling is quenched by decay, by which he means death, and as nothing whatever remains which is of any importance to us, I ask how it is that he provides and lays down with such care and minuteness that his heirs, Aynomachus and Timocrates, should, with the sanction of Hermarchus, give a sum 'sufficient for the celebration of his birthday every year in the month Gamelion, and also money to provide each month, on the twentieth day after the new moon, a banquet for all those who studied philosophy along with him, that so the memory of himself and of Metrodorus may be revered. I am not able to deny that these directions shew us a man as nice and as kindly as you please, but to assume that any man has a birth-day is utterly unworthy of a philosopher, more particularly a natural philosopher (for by this name he desires himself to be called). Why, can the very day that has once been come round again and again? Assuredly it cannot. Or a day just like it? That is not possible either, unless after many thousands of years have intervened, so that there comes to pass a return of all the stars simultaneously to the point from which they set out. No one therefore has a birthday. But it is customary. And I did not know it, I suppose! But if it be, is the custom to be observed even after death? And is provision to be made for it in his will by the man who has uttered to us his almost oracular speech that nothing after death is of any importance to us? Such things do not recall the man who had traversed in thought countless universes and boundless tracts, without shore and without end. Did Democritus ever do anything of the kind? Passing by others, I appeal to the man whom he followed more than all the rest. But if a day was to be signalled, why the day on which he was born, rather than that on which he became a wise man? You will tell me he could not have become a wise man, had he not been born, Nor yet if his grandmother had never been born, if you come to that. The whole notion, Torquatus, of desiring that the recollection of one's name should be kept fresh after death by a banquet, is entirely for unlearned men. Now I say nothing about the way in which you celebrate such festivals, or the amount of pleasantry you have to face from the wits; there is no need for us to quarrel; I only say thus much, that it was more pardonable for you to observe the birthday of Epicurus than for him to provide by will that it should be observed.

XXXII. But to return to our theme (for we were speaking about pain when we drifted into the consideration of this letter) we may now thus sum up the whole matter: he who is subject to the greatest possible evil is not happy so long as he remains subject to it, whereas the wise man always is happy, though he is at times subject to pain; pain therefore is not the greatest possible evil. Now what kind of statement is this, that past blessings do not fade from the wise man's memory, but still that he ought not to remember his misfortunes? First, have we power over our recollections? I know that Themistocles, when Simonides, or it may be some one else, offered to teach him the art of remembering, said: Z would rather learn the art of forgetting ; for I remember even the things I do not wish to remember, while I cannot forget what I wish to forget. He had great gifts; but the truth is really this, that it is too domineering for a philosopher to interdict us from remembering things. Take care that your commands be not those of a Manlius or even stronger; I mean when you lay a command on me which I cannot possibly execute. What if the recollection of past misfortunes is actually agreeable? Some proverbs will thus be truer than your doctrines. It is a common saying: Fast toils are agreeable; and not badly

did Euripides say (I shall put it into Latin if I can; you all know the line in Greek): Sweet is the memory of toils that are past. But let us return to the subject of past blessings. If you spoke of such blessings as enabled Gaius Marius, though exiled, starving, and immersed in a swamp, to lighten his pain by recalling to mind his triumphs, I would listen to you and give you my entire approval. Indeed the happiness of the wise man - can never be perfected, or reach its goal, if his good thoughts and deeds are to be successively effaced by his own forgetfulness,

But in your view life is rendered happy by the remembrance of pleasures already enjoyed, and moreover those enjoyed by the body. For if there are any other pleasures, then it is not true that all mental pleasures are dependent on association with the body. Now if bodily pleasure, even when past, gives satisfaction, I do not see why Aristotle should so utterly ridicule the inscription of Sardanapallus, in which that king of Syria boasts that he has carried away with him all the lustful pleasures. For, says Aristotle, how could he retain after death a thing which, even when he was alive, he could only feel just so long as he actually enjoyed it? Bodily pleasures therefore ebb and fly away one after another, and more often leave behind them reason for regret than for remembrance. Happier then is Africanus when he thus converses with his country : Cease, Rome, thy enemies to fear, with the noble sequel: For my toils have established for thee thy bulwarks. He takes delight in his past toils; you bid him delight in his past pleasures; he turns his thoughts once more to achievements, not one of which he ever connected with the body; you wholly cling to the body.