

Episode 223 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 29 - Are Epicureans Undertaking The Exertions Of Life For Nothing More Than A Drop Of Honey?

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Welcome to Episode 223 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.

Last week when Joshua was away we discussed with Don some of the most important high-level conclusions we can learn about Epicurus based on Cicero's attacks against it. We will continue to apply those as we proceed to the end of Book two, but when we were last in Cicero's text we were dealing with Cicero's claim that the Epicurean happy man model will not only not be constantly happy, because he will sometimes be wretched; but that Epicurean philosophy can never prove its point so long as it connects everything with pleasure and pain. This week we pick up with Cicero saying that as a result, Epicureans like Torquatus should "abandon pleasure to the beasts."

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XXXIII ... Hence, Torquatus, we must discover some other form of the highest good for man; let us abandon pleasure to the beasts, whom you are accustomed to summon as witnesses about the supreme good. What if even beasts very often, under the guidance of the peculiar constitution of each, shew some of them kindness, even at the cost of toil, so that when they bear and rear their young it is very patent that they aim at something different from pleasure? Others again, rejoice in wanderings and in journeys; others in their assemblages imitate in a certain way the meetings of burgesses; in some kinds of birds we see certain signs of affection, as well as knowledge and memory; in many also we see regrets; shall we admit then that in beasts there are certain shadows of human virtues, unconnected with pleasure, while in men them- selves virtue cannot exist unless with a view-to pleasure? And shall we say that man, who far excels all other creatures, has received no peculiar gifts from nature?

XXXIV. We in fact, if everything depends upon pleasure, are very far inferior to the beasts, for whom the earth unbidden, without toil of theirs, pours forth from her breast varied and copious food, while we with difficulty or hardly even with difficulty supply ourselves with ours, winning it by heavy toil. Yet I cannot on any account believe that the supreme good is the same for animals and for man. Pray what use is there in such elaborate preparations for acquiring the best accomplishments, or in such a crowd of the most noble occupations, or in such a train of virtues, if all these things are sought after for no other end but that of pleasure? Just as, supposing Xerxes, with his vast fleets and vast forces of cavalry and infantry, after bridging the Hellespont and piercing Athos, after marching over seas, and sailing over the land, then, when he had attacked Greece with such vehemence, had been asked by some one about the reason for such vast forces and so great a war, and had answered that he wanted to carry off some honey from Hymettus, surely such enormous exertions would have seemed purposeless; so precisely if we say that the wise man, endowed and equipped with the most numerous and important accomplishments and excellences, not traversing seas on foot, like the king, or mountains with fleets, but embracing in his thoughts all the heaven, and the whole earth with the entire sea, is in search of pleasure, then we shall be in effect saying that these vast efforts are for the sake of a drop of honey.

Believe me, Torquatus, we are born to a loftier and grander destiny; and this is proved not merely by the endowments of our minds, which possess power to recollect countless experiences (in your case power unlimited) and an insight into the future not far removed from prophecy, and honor the governor of passion, and justice the loyal guardian of human fellowship, and a staunch and unwavering disregard of pain and death when there are toils to be endured or dangers to be faced - well, these are the endowments of our minds; I beg you now also to think even of our limbs and our senses, which will appear to you, like the other divisions of our body, not merely to accompany the virtues, but even to do them service. Now if in the body itself there are many things to be preferred to pleasure, strength for example, health, swiftness, beauty, what I ask do you suppose is the case with our minds? Those most learned men of old thought that mind contained a certain heavenly and godlike element. But if pleasure were equivalent to the supreme good, as you assert, it would be an enviable thing to live day and night without intermission in a state of extreme pleasure, all the senses being agitated by, and so to say, steeped in sweetness of every kind. Now who is there deserving the name of man, that would choose to continue for one whole day in pleasure of such a kind?

The Cyrenaics I admit are not averse to it; your friends treat these matters with greater decency; they perhaps with greater consistency. But let us survey in our thoughts not these very important arts, lacking which some men were called inert by our ancestors; what I ask is whether you suppose, I do not say Homer, Archilochus, or Pindar, but Phidias, Polyclitus, or Zeuxis, to have regulated their arts by pleasure. Will then an artist aim higher in order to secure beauty of form than a preeminent citizen in the hope to achieve beauty of action? Now what other reason is there for so serious a misconception, spread far and wide as it is, but that the philosopher who pronounces pleasure to be the supreme good takes counsel, not with that part of his mind in which thought and reflection reside, but with his passions, that is to say, with

the most frivolous part of his soul? If gods exist, as even your school supposes, I ask you how they can be happy, when they cannot realize pleasure with their bodily faculties, or if they are happy without that kind of pleasure, why you refuse to allow that wise man can have similar intellectual enjoyment?

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