

# Episode Ninety-Three: Torquatus Leads Us Forward Into Conflict Over Epicurean Ethics

**Post by “Cassius” of October 18, 2021 at 10:01 AM**

Welcome to Episode Ninety-Three of Lucretius Today.

As a forward to this episode, we've now come to a major milestone in the history of the podcast: we have completely gone through the entire poem, and from here we will be looking to take a new direction to assist in the study of Epicurus. I am reminded that over the last year we shortened the opening of the podcast so that regular listeners would not have to hear the same introduction over and over every episode, but now that we have finished the poem this is a good opportunity to remind everyone where we started and where we are still going. Here's a slightly updated version of our original introduction:

This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who lived in the age of Julius Caesar and wrote "On The Nature of Things," the only complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

I am your host Cassius, and together with our panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. Be aware that none of us are professional philosophers, and everyone here is a self-taught Epicurean. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

Before we start with today's episode, let me remind you of our three ground rules.

First: Our aim is to bring you an accurate presentation of [classical Epicurean philosophy](#) as the ancient Epicureans understood it, which is not necessarily the same as you will find that modern commentators interpret it as being. We're bringing you our own perspective on Epicurean philosophy, unfiltered through traditional academic viewpoints, and we hope that our fresh perspective will encourage you to rethink the meaning of Epicurean philosophy for yourself.

Second: We won't be talking about contemporary political issues in this podcast, and in fact we will stay as far away from them as possible. At the EpicureanFriends.com forum we term this approach as "Not Neo-Epicurean, But Epicurean." We want everyone to understand that Epicurus had a unique philosophy of his own. Epicurus was not a Stoic, a Humanist, a Buddhist, a Taoist, an Atheist, or a Marxist - and it is very unfair to Epicurus and to ourselves to try to force Epicurus into one of those modern boxes. Epicurus was unique and in many ways a rebel against the mainstream Greek philosophy that most of us have inherited in one form or another

today. Epicurus must be understood on his own terms, and not through the lens of any conventional modern morality or political viewpoint.

Third: Lucretius' poem is mainly concerned with the many details of the Epicurean view of the nature of the universe, but we'll always try to relate those details of physics to show how they were translated directly into conclusions about the best way to live. Lucretius will show that Epicurus was not obsessed with luxury, as many opponents have always alleged, but neither did he teach minimalism or asceticism, as many modern commentators allege. Epicurus taught that feeling - pleasure and pain - are the guides that Nature gave us by which to live, and what that means is that Epicurus taught us that we are not intended to shape our lives based on ideas about supernatural gods, or about idealist abstractions, or about absolute notions of "virtue" of any kind. More than anything else, Epicurus taught that the universe not run by supernatural gods or by fate, and that there's no life after death. That means that any happiness we will ever have must come in this life, which is why it is so important not to waste time in confusion.

If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive to you, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where you will find a thread for discussion of each of our LucretiusToday episodes.

NOW: Let's discuss where we are as we start our ninety-third episode of the podcast:

We have now completed our first reading of the poem, so where do we go now? Here's the plan for the way forward:

Think of yourself as just having been led through the forest of Nature by Lucretius, our faithful Epicurean guide. Lucretius has led us through virtually every aspect of Epicurean philosophy, from the nature of pleasure as the guide of life, to the formation and operation of the universe through the combinations of matter and void, to the issue of the inevitability of death and the end of life, to matters of how to determine what is true, and how to think about life in the rest of the universe.

Lucretius has led us in both the examination of the trees of the forest as well as of the forest in itself, showing us how to go back and forth between the big picture and the details, and how they relate to each other to form both a forest and individual trees. (The forest is not insulted or diminished because it is composed of many trees, nor are we as humans insulted or diminished to be composed of many atoms.)

Now that we have finished the poem, we have come to the edge of the forest. Ahead of us in the clearing we see a number of camps of philosophers, each with separate banners, but all carrying not only their own books but also swords and shields, which tell us that there is danger ahead that blocks our path forward.

Our previous guide Lucretius tells us that it is time for him to step aside. In his place he introduces us to someone new: Torquatus, the latest leader from an old Roman family of distinguished military background. Torquatus tells us that he, too, like Lucretius, is a follower of

Epicurus, and that he is now going to lead us forward through dangerous territory. Torquatus tells us that we must be prepared to encounter many philosophers who disagree with Epicurus' conclusions about the proper goal of life, and he tells us that a new method of exploration may be necessary as we encounter these opponents. He tells us, in fact, that in order to get past these enemies, it will be necessary for us to learn about weapons which Epicurus and Lucretius have already warned us against: weapons which goes by the name of "dialectical logic" and "virtue."

Paradoxically, Torquatus tells us that these weapons can bring great good to us when used properly, but that they can also destroy us if used improperly, and that therefore we must understand how they operate before we can use them ourselves without being destroyed.

With that as background, over the next several weeks our guide will in fact be "Torquatus" - a character in Cicero's Book "De Finibus" whose full title means something to the effect of "On Good and Evil Ends."

This first episode you are about to hear is considerably longer than our past episodes, but in this introduction we will lay the groundwork for those that follow, as we examine the most contentious and yet most important issues surrounding Epicurean Ethics and how to live.

Now let's join our panel with today's discussion, with today's text read by Joshua.

[13] V. To begin with the easiest opinions, let the theory of Epicurus first enter the arena. It is to most people thoroughly familiar, and you will perceive that I have set it forth with an exactness which is not commonly surpassed even by the adherents of the school themselves; for my desire is to find truth and not to confound as it were some opponent. Now the tenets of Epicurus concerning pleasure were once carefully advocated by Lucius Torquatus, a gentleman trained in every department of learning, and I replied to him, while Gains Triarius, a particularly serious and well instructed youth, was present at the debate.

[14] Well, both of them having come to me in my villa at Cumae to pay their respects, we had at first a little conversation about literary matters, in which both took the greatest interest....

[28] Then said Torquatus: 'I am quite of your opinion; without adverse criticism there can indeed be no debate, nor is proper debate compatible with passion or obstinacy. But, if you do not object, I have a reply I should like to make to what you have said.' 'Do you imagine,' I answered, 'that I should have said what I did, were I not anxious to hear you?' 'Do you prefer then that we should run over the whole system of Epicurus, or should confine the inquiry to the one subject of pleasure, on which the whole dispute turns?' 'Well,' said I, 'that must be as you decide.' 'This is what I will do, then,' said he; 'I will expound a single topic, and that the most important; natural science I shall leave for another occasion, when certainly I will demonstrate to you not only our philosopher's doctrine of the swerving of the atoms and of the sun's size, but will shew that very many blunders of Democritus have been criticised and set right by Epicurus; at present I shall speak concerning pleasure, though of course I have nothing new to say; still I am sure you will yourself yield to my arguments such as they are.' 'You may be sure,'

said I, 'that I shall not be obstinate, and if you convince me of your propositions I will freely give them my assent.' 'I shall demonstrate them,' he replied, 'if only you exhibit that impartiality which you promise ; but I would rather deliver an uninterrupted speech than put or answer questions.' 'As you please,' said I. Then he began to speak.

[29] IX. 'First, then,' said he, 'I shall plead my case on the lines laid down by the founder of our school himself: I shall define the essence and features of the problem before us, not because I imagine you to be unacquainted with them, but with a view to the methodical progress of my speech. The problem before us then is, what is the climax and standard of things good, and this in the opinion of all philosophers must needs be such that we are bound to test all things by it, but the standard itself by nothing. Epicurus places this standard in pleasure, which he lays down to be the supreme good, while pain is the supreme evil; and he founds his proof of this on the following considerations.

[30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and honey sweet, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to draw attention to the fact; and there is a difference between proof and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and direction of the attention on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to pronounce upon patent and evident facts. Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?

[31] There are however some of our own school, who want to state these principles with greater refinement, and who say that it is not enough to leave the question of good or evil to the decision of sense, but that thought and reasoning also enable us to understand both that pleasure in itself is matter for desire and that pain is in itself matter for aversion. So they say that there lies in our minds a kind of natural and inbred conception leading us to feel that the one thing is better for us to seek, the other to reject. Others again, with whom I agree, finding that many arguments are alleged by philosophers to prove that pleasure is not to be reckoned among things good nor pain among things evil, judge that we ought not to be too confident about our case, and think that we should lead proof and argue carefully and carry on the debate about pleasure and pain by using the most elaborate reasonings.

You can find a related thread on that text here: [Torquatus' Statement of the Epicurean View Of The Ultimate Good In "On Ends"](#)

Rather than use the Rackham text which is found in most places on the internet, we are planning to use the text by Reid, which appears somewhat more literal. That text is here: [Cicero's "Torquatus" Presentation of Epicurean Ethics - from "On Ends"](#)

We will do this over several episodes, with each episode having a reading of a short portion, but a full-length version by Joshua being made as well.