

Episode Ninety-Four: Torquatus Explains Pleasure As the Goal of Life

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Welcome to Episode Ninety-Four of Lucretius Today.

This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who lived in the age of Julius Caesar, and who 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 we'll discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. 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.

At this point in our podcast we have completed our first line-by-line review of the poem, and we have temporarily turned to the presentation of Epicurean ethics found in Cicero's On Ends, as narrated by "Torquatus." But 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 the same as presented by many modern commentators. 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 philosophical or political issues in this podcast, and in fact we will stay as far away from them as possible. 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, a Marxist, or a modern politician of the left or right - and it is very unfair to Epicurus and to ourselves to try to force Epicurean philosophy into one of those modern boxes.

Third: Lucretius' poem is mainly concerned with the many details of Epicurean physics, but we'll always try to learn from those details what they mean for the best way to live our own lives. Lucretius will show that Epicurus was not obsessed with luxury, but neither did he teach minimalism or asceticism, as you often find written on the internet today. Epicurus taught that pleasure is the ultimate guide of life, not supernatural gods, not the abstractions of idealism, and not absolute notions of "virtue." Epicurus taught that there are no supernatural beings, no fate, and 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 discussion thread for each of our podcast episodes and many other topics.

Now let's join our panel for today's discussion, with Don reading today's text:

[32] X. But that I may make plain to you the source of all the mistakes made by those who inveigh against pleasure and eulogize pain, I will unfold the whole system and will set before you the very language held by that great discoverer of truth and that master-builder, if I may style him so, of the life of happiness. Surely no one recoils from or dislikes or avoids pleasure in itself because it is pleasure, but because great pains come upon those who do not know how to follow pleasure rationally. Nor again is there any one who loves or pursues or wishes to win pain on its own account, merely because it is pain, but rather because circumstances sometimes occur which compel him to seek some great pleasure at the cost of exertion and pain. To come down to petty details, who among us ever undertakes any toilsome bodily exercise, except in the hope of gaining some advantage from it? Who again would have any right to reproach either a man who desires to be surrounded by pleasure unaccompanied by any annoyance, or another man who shrinks from any pain which is not productive of pleasure?

[33] But in truth we do blame and deem most deserving of righteous hatred the men who, enervated and depraved by the fascination of momentary pleasures, do not foresee the pains and troubles which are sure to befall them, because they are blinded by desire, and in the same error are involved those who prove traitors to their duties through effeminacy of spirit, I mean because they shun exertions and trouble. Now it is easy and simple to mark the difference between these cases. For at our seasons of ease, when we have untrammelled freedom of choice, and when nothing debars us from the power of following the course that pleases us best, then pleasure is wholly a matter for our selection and pain for our rejection. On certain occasions however either through the inevitable call of duty or through stress of circumstances, it will often come to pass that we must put pleasures from us and must make no protest against annoyance. So in such cases the principle of selection adopted by the wise man is that he should either by refusing certain pleasures attain to other and greater pleasures or by enduring pains should ward off pains still more severe.

[34] Holding as I do this theory, what reason should I have for fearing that I may not be able to bring our Torquati into accord with it? You a little while ago shewed at once your copious memory and your friendly and kindly feeling for me by quoting their examples; yet you neither perverted me by eulogising my ancestors nor made me less vigorous in my reply. Now I ask, what interpretation do you put upon the actions of these men? Do you believe that they attacked the armed foe, or practised such cruelty towards their own children and their own flesh and blood, absolutely without giving a thought to their own interest or their own advantage? Why, even the beasts do not act so as to produce such a tumult and confusion that we cannot see the purpose of their movements and attacks; do you believe that men so

exceptional achieved such great exploits from no motive whatever?

[35] What the motive was, I shall examine presently; meanwhile I shall maintain this, that if they performed those actions, which are beyond question noble, from some motive, their motive was not virtue apart from all else. *He stripped the foe of his necklet.* Yes, and he donned it himself to save his own life. *But he faced a grave danger.* Yes, with the whole army looking on. *What did he gain by it?* Applause and affection, which are the strongest guarantees for passing life in freedom from fear. *He punished his son with death.* If purposelessly, I should be sorry to be descended from one so abominable and so cruel; but if he did it to enforce by his self-inflicted pain the law of military command, and by fear of punishment to control the army in the midst of a most critical war, then he had in view the preservation of his fellow-countrymen, which he knew to involve his own.

[36] And these principles have a wide application. There is one field in which the eloquence of your school has been wont especially to vaunt itself, and your own eloquence in particular, for you are an eager investigator of the past, I mean the stories of illustrious and heroic men and the applause of their actions viewed as looking not to any reward but to the inherent comeliness of morality. All such arguments are upset when once the principle of choice which I have just described has been established, whereby either pleasures are neglected for the purpose of obtaining pleasures still greater, or pains are incurred for the sake of escaping still greater pains.