

# Episode Ninety-Five - Understanding The Paradoxical "Absence of Pain"

**Post by "Cassius" of November 5, 2021 at 9:35 PM**

Welcome to Episode Ninety-Five 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 Martin reading today's text:

XI. [37] But let what has been said on this occasion suffice concerning the brilliant and famous actions of illustrious men. We shall indeed find a fitting opportunity by and by for discoursing about the tendency of all the virtues towards pleasure. At present however I shall shew what is the essence and what are the characteristics of pleasure, so as to remove all confusion caused by ignorant people, and to make it clear how serious, how sober, how austere is that school which is esteemed to be pleasure-seeking, luxurious and effeminate. For the pleasure which we pursue is not that alone which excites the natural constitution itself by a kind of sweetness, and of which the sensual enjoyment is attended by a kind of agreeableness, but we look upon the greatest pleasure as that which is enjoyed when all pain is removed. Now inasmuch as whenever we are released from pain, we rejoice in the mere emancipation and freedom from all annoyance, and everything whereat we rejoice is equivalent to pleasure, just as everything whereat we are troubled is equivalent to pain, therefore the complete release from pain is rightly termed pleasure. For just as the mere removal of annoyance brings with it the realization of pleasure, whenever hunger and thirst have been banished by food and drink, so pain is removed. For just as the mere removal of annoyance brings with it the realization of pleasure, whenever hunger and thirst have been banished by food and drink, so in every case the banishment of pain ensures its replacement by pleasure.

[38] Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension.

[39] But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus, sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: *Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good.* My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics, but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been the supreme good. It would certainly feel no lack, and on this ground, that

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anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the state of pleasure.