

Episode Ninety-Six - The Proof That Pleasure (And Not Virtue) Is the Supreme Good

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Welcome to Episode Ninety-Six 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.

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.

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. Today we continue with that material starting with section twelve.

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

[40] XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance.

[41] When in addition we suppose that such a man is in no awe of the influence of the gods, and does not allow his past pleasures to slip away, but takes delight in constantly recalling them, what circumstance is it possible to add to these, to make his condition better? Imagine on the other hand a man worn by the greatest mental and bodily pains which can befall a human being, with no hope before him that his lot will ever be lighter, and moreover destitute of pleasure either actual or probable; what more pitiable object can be mentioned or imagined?

But if a life replete with pains is above all things to be shunned, then assuredly the supreme evil is life accompanied by pain; and from this view it is a consistent inference that the climax of things good is life accompanied by pleasure. Nor indeed can our mind find any other ground whereon to take its stand as though already at the goal; and all its fears and sorrows are comprised under the term pain, nor is there any other thing besides which is able merely by its own character to cause us vexation or pangs. In addition to this the germs of desire and aversion and generally of action originate either in pleasure or in pain.

[42] This being so, it is plain that all right and praiseworthy action has the life of pleasure for its aim. Now inasmuch as the climax or goal or limit of things good (which the Greeks term *telos*) is that object which is not a means to the attainment of any thing else, while all other things are a means to its attainment, we must allow that the climax of things good is to live agreeably.

XIII. Those who find this good in virtue and virtue only, and dazzled by the glory of her name, fail to perceive what it is that nature craves, will be emancipated from heresy of the deepest dye, if they will deign to lend ear to Epicurus. For unless your grand and beautiful virtues were productive of pleasure, who would suppose them to be either meritorious or desirable? Yes, just as we regard with favour the physician's skill not for his art's sake merely but because we prize sound health, and just as the pilot's art is praised on utilitarian and not on artistic grounds, because it supplies the principles of good navigation, so wisdom, which we must hold to be the art of living, would be no object of desire, if it were productive of no advantage; but it is in fact desired, because it is to us as an architect that plans and accomplishes pleasure.

[43] (You are now aware what kind of pleasure I mean, so the odium of the term must not shake the foundation of my argument.) For seeing that the life of men is most of all troubled by ignorance about the goodness and badness of things, and on account of this blindness men are often robbed of the intensest pleasures and also are racked by the severest mental pains, we must summon to our aid wisdom, that she may remove from us all alarms and passions, and stripping us of our heedless confidence in all false imaginations, may offer herself as our surest guide to pleasure. Wisdom indeed is alone able to drive sadness from our minds, and to prevent us from quaking with fear, and if we sit at her feet we may live in perfect calm, when once the heat of every passion has been cooled. Verily the passions are unconscionable, and overthrow not merely individual men, but whole families, and often shake the foundations of the entire commonwealth.

[44] From passions spring enmities, divisions, strifes, rebellions and wars. Nor do the passions only air their pride abroad; they do not merely attack others than ourselves in their blind onset; but even when imprisoned within our own breasts they are at variance and strife one with another; and the inevitable result of this is life of the bitterest kind, so that the wise man alone, who has cut back and pruned away all vanity and delusion, can live contentedly within the bounds prescribed by nature, emancipated from all sorrow and from all fear.

[45] I ask what classification is either more profitable or more suited to the life of happiness than that adopted by Epicurus? He affirmed that there is one class of passions which are both

natural and needful; another class which are natural without being needful ; a third class which are neither natural nor needful; and such are the conditions of these passions that the needful class are satisfied without much trouble or expenditure ; nor is it much that the natural passions crave, since nature herself makes such wealth as will satisfy her both easy of access and moderate in amount; and it is not possible to discover any boundary or limit to false passions.

[46] XIV. But if we see that all human life is agitated by confusion and ignorance, and that wisdom alone can redeem us from the violence of our lusts and from the menace of our fears, and alone can teach us to endure humbly even the outrages of fortune, and alone can guide us into every path which leads to peace and calm, why should we hesitate to say that wisdom is desirable in view of pleasures, and unwisdom to be shunned on account of annoyances?