

Episode Ninety-Seven - The Virtues as Instrumental For Pleasure: Temperance and Courage

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2021 at 7:39 PM

Welcome to Episode Ninety-Seven of Lucretius Today.

This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, 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 turned to the presentation of Epicurean ethics found in Cicero's On Ends. Today we continue with that material starting with line forty-seven, and we have Charles back with us for the discussion.

Now let's join the panel with Martin reading today's text:

[47] And on the same principles we shall assert that even temperance is not desirable for its own sake, but because it brings quiet to our hearts and soothes them and appeases them by a kind of harmony. Temperance is in truth the virtue which warns us to follow reason in dealing with the objects of desire or repugnance. Nor indeed is it enough to resolve what we are to do or omit, but we should also abide by our resolve. Most men, however, being unable to uphold and maintain a determination they have themselves made, are overmastered and enervated when the image of pleasure is thrust before their eyes, and surrender themselves to be bound by the chain of their lusts, nor do they foresee what the issue will be, and so for the sake of some paltry and needless pleasure, which would be procured by other means if they chose, and with which they might dispense and yet not suffer pain, rush sometimes into grievous diseases, sometimes into ruin, sometimes into disgrace, and often even become subject to the penalties imposed by the statutes and the courts.

[48] Men however whose aim is so to enjoy their pleasures that no pains may ensue in consequence of them, and who retain their own judgment, which prevents them from

succumbing to pleasure and doing things which they feel should not be done, these achieve the greatest amount of pleasure by neglecting pleasure. Such men actually often suffer pain, fearing that, if they do not, they may incur greater pain. From these reflections it is easily understood that intemperance on the one hand is not repugnant in and for itself, and on the other that temperance is an object of desire, not because it flees from pleasures, but because it is followed by greater pleasures.

[49] XV. The same principles will be found to apply to courage; for neither the performance of work nor the suffering of pain is in itself attractive, nor yet endurance, nor diligence, nor watchings nor much-praised industry itself, no, nor courage either, but we devote ourselves to all such things for the purpose of passing our life in freedom from anxiety and alarm, and of emancipating both mind and body, so far as we can succeed in doing so, from annoyance. As in truth, on the one hand, the entire stability of a peaceful life is shaken by the fear of death, and it is wretched to succumb to pains and to bear them in an abject and feeble spirit, and many have through such weakness of mind brought ruin on their parents, many on their friends and some on their country, so on the other hand a strong and exalted spirit is free from all solicitude and torment, as it thinks lightly of death, which brings those who are subject to it into the same state they were in before they were born, and such a spirit is so disciplined to encounter pains that it recalls how the most severe of them are terminated by death, while the slighter grant many seasons of rest, and those which lie between these two classes are under our control, so that if we find them endurable, we may tolerate them, if otherwise, we may with an unruffled mind make our exit from life, when we find it disagreeable, as we would from a theater. These facts enable us to see that cowardice and weakness are not blamed, nor courage and endurance applauded, for what they are in themselves, but that the former qualities are spurned, because productive of pain, while the latter are sought, because productive of pleasure.

[50] XVI. Justice still is left to complete our statement concerning the whole of virtue, but considerations nearly similar may be urged. Just as I have proved wisdom, temperance and courage to be linked with pleasure, so that they cannot possibly by any means be sundered or severed from it, so we must deem of justice, which not only never injures any person, but on the contrary always produces some benefit, not solely by reason of its own power and constitution, whereby it calms our minds, but also by inspiring hope that we shall lack none of the objects which nature when uncorrupted craves. And as recklessness and caprice and cowardice always torture the mind and always bring unrest and tumult, so if wickedness has established itself in a man's mind, the mere fact of its presence causes tumult; if moreover it has carried out any deed, however secretly it may have acted, yet it will never feel a trust, that the action will always remain concealed. In most cases the acts of wicked men are at first dogged by suspicion, then by talk and rumour, then by the prosecutor, then by the judge; many have actually informed against themselves, as in your own consulship.

[51] But if there are any who seem to themselves to be sufficiently barricaded and fortified against all privity on the part of their fellow men, still they tremble before the privity of the gods, and imagine that the very cares by which their minds are devoured night and day are

imposed upon them, with a view to their punishment, by the eternal gods. Again, from wicked acts what new influence can accrue tending to the diminution of annoyances, equal to that which tends to their increase, not only from consciousness of the actions themselves, but also from legal penalties and the hatred of the community? And yet some men exhibit no moderation in money-making, or office, or military command, or wantonness, or gluttony, or the remaining passions, which are not lessened but rather intensified by the trophies of wickedness, so that such persons seem fit to be repressed rather than to be taught their error.

[52] True reason beckons men of properly sound mind to pursue justice, fairness and honor; nor are acts of injustice advantageous to a man without eloquence or influence, who cannot easily succeed in what he attempts, nor maintain his success if he wins it, and large resources either of wealth or of talent suit better with a generous spirit, for those who exhibit this spirit attract to themselves goodwill and affection, which is very well calculated to ensure a peaceful life; and this is the truer in that men have no reason for sinning.

[53] For the passions which proceed from nature are easily satisfied without committing any wrong; while we must not succumb to those which are groundless, since they yearn for nothing worthy of our craving, and more loss is involved in the mere fact of wrong doing, than profit in the results which are produced by the wrong doing. So one would not be right in describing even justice as a thing to be wished for on its own account, but rather because it brings with it a very large amount of agreeableness. For to be the object of esteem and affection is agreeable just because it renders life safer and more replete with pleasures. Therefore we think that wickedness should be shunned, not alone on account of the disadvantages which fall to the lot of the wicked, but much rather because when it pervades a man's soul it never permits him to breathe freely or to rest.

[54] But if the encomium passed even on the virtues themselves, over which the eloquence of all other philosophers especially runs riot, can find no vent unless it be referred to pleasure, and pleasure is the only thing which invites us to the pursuit of itself, and attracts us by reason of its own nature, then there can be no doubt that of all things good it is the supreme and ultimate good, and that a life of happiness means nothing else but a life attended by pleasure.