

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

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## **Post by “Joshua” of November 7, 2021 at 12:12 PM**

With apologies to [Ogden Nash](#);

Two Kinds of Pleasure

There are, according to Epicurus-

's letter,

Two kinds (if I understand the schematic)

Of pleasure;

The first kind is kinetic, and happens-

(It'd better!)

When it happens to you. That's one, and

The other

Happens, or rather doesn't (it's katastematic);

Like atar-

Axia, it's something of a state or condition.

Think *eta* 'r

*Epsilon*: for the difference, by his verdict

Is pleasure

Active or pleasure passive. If this all seems drastic,

Or you forget 'er,

Then maybe you can just try to be phlegmatic.

But what / have found  
Is that the pleasure you seize and treasure  
Is better  
Than the pleasure you seek to measure.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 7, 2021 at 12:32 PM**

There are probably a lot of semantic kinks in that poem that we could work out if we bothered to do so, but the conclusion for me is basically what I've said in this episode and what I've jotted off there; that there's a charm or agreeableness inherent to pleasure that is lost to me the instant I attempt to analyze or categorize it.

#### Quote

We insist on precision around here , though it bends the poesy a little out of shape.

-Edward Abbey

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### **Post by “Martin” of November 7, 2021 at 3:51 PM**

I agree that for quite some pleasures, we might spoil them if we analyze them while we experience them. The main benefit of that analysis would be to improve the hedonic calculus. Therefore, we should rather analyze them afterwards, e.g. at the time we plan actions for future pleasures.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 7, 2021 at 4:27 PM**

Martin makes an excellent (and very Epicurean) point! *Usefully* analyzing pleasureable experiences with a view toward improving them in the future is very practical, and hence very much worth doing.

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**Post by “Kalosyni” of November 9, 2021 at 1:30 PM**

[Quote from Martin](#)

for quite some pleasures, we might spoil them if we analyze them while we experience them

This reminded me of the importance of moving fully into the body during the experience of short bursts of intense pleasure (eating chocolate or the moment of orgasm) by opening up the body and breathing in deeply and exhaling slowly to create a tantric experience.

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**Post by “Don” of November 9, 2021 at 2:34 PM**

I'd be wary about bringing tantra into it, but any time you can be fully present and aware is going to increase your ability to tune into your experience of pleasure.

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**Post by “Cassius” of November 9, 2021 at 6:45 PM**

Ok who is going to explain the "tantra" reference?? 😊

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**Post by “Kalosyni” of November 9, 2021 at 7:00 PM**

I regret using the word "tantra" as it has nothing to do with Epicurus. (btw...I was thinking "western tantra" and not "Eastern religious tantra").

Let's leave it at what [Don](#) said:

[Quote from Don](#)

any time you can be fully present and aware is going to increase your ability to tune into your experience of pleasure.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 9, 2021 at 7:15 PM**

Don posted something about mindfulness in another thread recently; as I've been reflecting on it, I have come to the conclusion that I can certainly see it as another useful tool in the Epicurean toolkit; to "occupy serene heights, well fortified by the teachings of the wise", as Lucretius has put it.

If Elayne were still around, she might caution against 'going too deep', for medical and mental health reasons, as it can have unintended consequences. Some people report feeling more lonely, more anxious, more depressed, etc.

Don might read that paragraph and conclude that he and I are still talking about different things! ☐☐

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### **Post by “Don” of November 9, 2021 at 8:39 PM**

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

I've been reflecting on it, I have come to the conclusion that I can certainly see it as another useful tool in the Epicurean toolkit; to "occupy serene heights, well fortified by the teachings of the wise", as Lucretius has put it.

I certainly agree with that paragraph!

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### **Post by “Don” of November 9, 2021 at 9:01 PM**

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Ok who is going to explain the "tantra" reference?? 😊

LOL. Maybe when you're older.

Seriously though, the Buddhist tantra is popular in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist is about using \*everything\* as a vehicle to enlightenment: sex, anger, other things many see as "negative" or "evil." Its focus in the West has become fixated on "tantric sex", but I'll let you Google it Wikipedia that.

On second thought, let's take [Kalosyni](#) 's advice and stick with

[Quote from Don](#)

any time you can be fully present and aware is going to increase your ability to tune into your experience of pleasure.

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### **Post by “Godfrey” of November 9, 2021 at 9:49 PM**

As a technique of "Epicurean mindfulness" I sometimes focus on my current sensations, preconceptions or feelings. I may start out by focusing on a particular sensation, and then notice to my surprise that I'm aware of a preconception involving that particular experience.

Having said that, my understanding is that "meditation" for the ancient Greeks was actually more of a thought process, for example memorizing doctrines or visualizing the extent of the universe, as opposed to Buddhist or Hindu forms of meditation. It's taken me a while to buy into this, but now I think that the Greek technique is quite good for internalizing the philosophy and increasing pleasure.

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### **Post by “Don” of November 9, 2021 at 9:57 PM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

my understanding is that "meditation" for the ancient Greeks was actually more of a thought process, for example memorizing doctrines or visualizing the extent of the

I think you're right.

I'd also suggest we dig into the practice Philodemus talks about as "setting before the eyes" which strikes me as a vivid visualization. I've seen him use it in reference to anger and, as I understand, you "set before your eyes" what you look like when you are angry and have lost all reason and composure. Really investigate if that's what you want. Do you like the look of yourself that way?

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 10, 2021 at 10:49 AM**

Episode 95 of the Lucretius Today podcast is now available. Today we continue our examination of Epicurean Ethics by reading further into the Torquatus narrative contained in Cicero's "On Ends." Our topic today is understanding the concept of "Absence of Pain."

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/47409749>

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 10, 2021 at 12:05 PM**

Here is the selection from Seneca I mentioned at the end of the episode. Since the important part of it is a direct attack on the dialecticians, it sounds purely Epicurean to me, rather than Stoic, so I consider this to be part of what Seneca "borrowed" from Epicurus:

*(Seneca's Letters - Book II Letter XLVIII)*

In answer to the letter which you wrote me while traveling, - a letter as long as the journey itself, - I shall reply later. I ought to go into retirement, and consider what sort of advice I should give you. For you yourself, who consult me, also reflected for a long time whether to do so; how much more, then, should I myself reflect, since more deliberation is necessary in settling than in propounding a problem! And this is particularly true when one thing is advantageous to you and another to me. Am I speaking again in the guise of an Epicurean? But the fact is, the same thing is advantageous to me which is advantageous to you; for I am not your friend unless whatever is at issue concerning you is my concern also. Friendship produces

between us a partnership in all our interests. There is no such thing as good or bad fortune for the individual; we live in common. And no one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility; you must live for your neighbor, if you would live for yourself. This fellowship, maintained with scrupulous care, which makes us mingle as men with our fellow-men and holds that the human race have certain rights in common, is also of great help in cherishing the more intimate fellowship which is based on friendship, concerning which I began to speak above. For he that has much in common with a fellow-man will have all things in common with a friend.

And on this point, my excellent Lucilius, I should like to have those subtle dialecticians of yours advise me how I ought to help a friend, or how a fellowman, rather than tell me in how many ways the word "friend" is used, and how many meanings the word "man" possesses. Lo, Wisdom and Folly are taking opposite sides. Which shall I join? Which party would you have me follow? On that side, "man" is the equivalent of "friend"; on the other side, "friend" is not the equivalent of "man." The one wants a friend for his own advantage; the other wants to make himself an advantage to his friend. What you have to offer me is nothing but distortion of words and splitting of syllables. It is clear that unless I can devise some very tricky premises and by false deductions tack on to them a fallacy which springs from the truth, I shall not be able to distinguish between what is desirable and what is to be avoided! I am ashamed! Old men as we are, dealing with a problem so serious, we make play of it! 'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese."

Suppose now that I cannot solve this problem; see what peril hangs over my head as a result of such ignorance! What a scrape I shall be in! Without doubt I must beware, or some day I shall be catching syllables in a mousetrap, or, if I grow careless, a book may devour my cheese! Unless, perhaps, the following syllogism is shrewder still: "'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a syllable does not eat cheese. Therefore a mouse does not eat cheese." What childish nonsense! Do we knit our brows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces?

***Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbor's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods. Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy men, sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing? This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they***

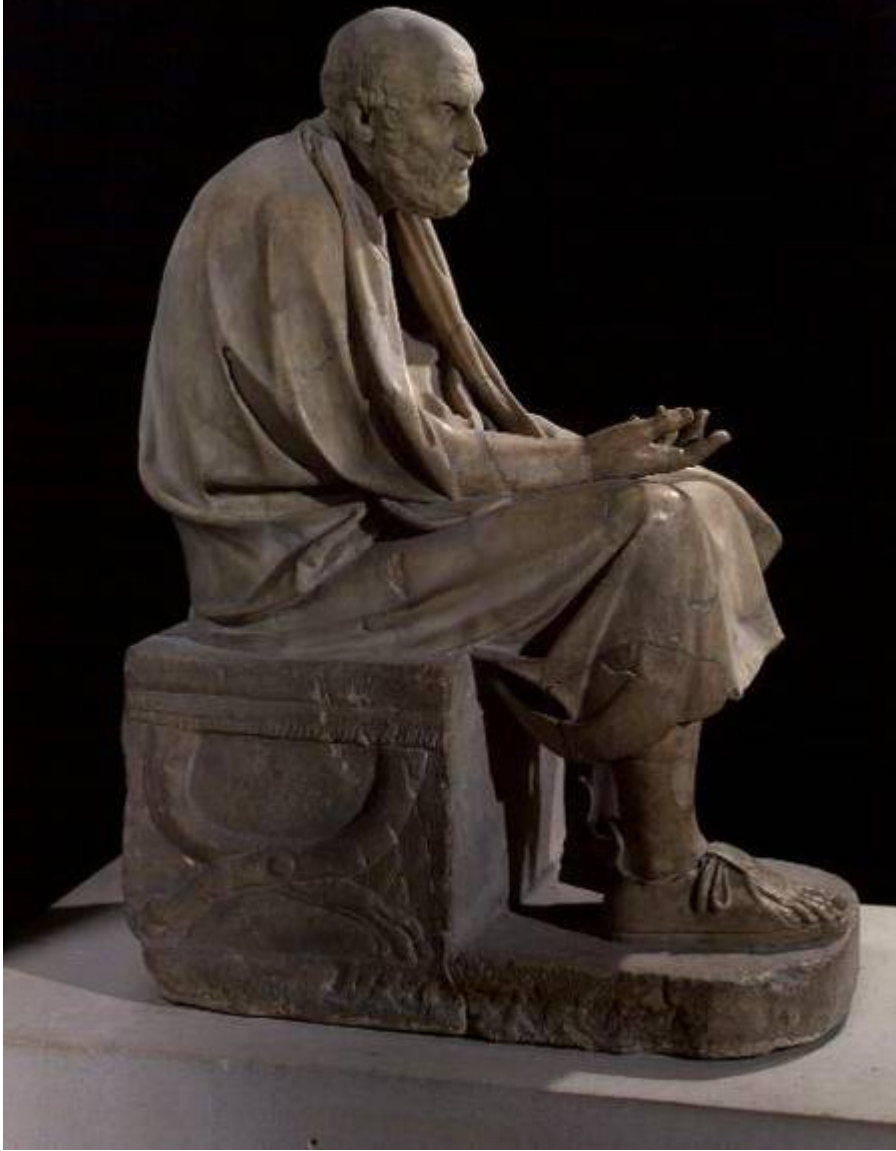
***are, the clear light of truth. Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature.***

I should deem your games of logic to be of some avail in relieving men's burdens, if you could first show me what part of these burdens they will relieve. What among these games of yours banishes lust? Or controls it? Would that I could say that they were merely of no profit! They are positively harmful. I can make it perfectly clear to you whenever you wish, that a noble spirit when involved in such subtleties is impaired and weakened. I am ashamed to say what weapons they supply to men who are destined to go to war with fortune, and how poorly they equip them! Is this the path to the greatest good? Is philosophy to proceed by such claptrap and by quibbles which would be a disgrace and a reproach even for expounders of the law? For what else is it that you men are doing, when you deliberately ensnare the person to whom you are putting questions, than making it appear that the man has lost his case on a technical error? But just as the judge can reinstate those who have lost a suit in this way, so philosophy has reinstated these victims of quibbling to their former condition. Why do you men abandon your mighty promises, and, after having assured me in high-sounding language that you will permit the glitter of gold to dazzle my eyesight no more than the gleam of the sword, and that I shall, with mighty steadfastness, spurn both that which all men crave and that which all men fear, why do you descend to the ABC's of scholastic pedants? What is your answer? Is this the path to heaven? For that is exactly what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God. For this I have been summoned, for this purpose have I come.

Philosophy, keep your promise! Therefore, my dear Lucilius, withdraw yourself as far as possible from these exceptions and objections of so-called philosophers. Frankness, and simplicity beseem true goodness. Even if there were many years left to you, you would have had to spend them frugally in order to have enough for the necessary thing; but as it is, when your time is so scant, what madness it is to learn superfluous things! Farewell

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**Post by "Don" of November 11, 2021 at 11:01 PM**



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**Post by “Godfrey” of November 12, 2021 at 12:07 AM**

Aka "Hand Experiencing Katastematic Pleasure".

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**Post by “Don” of November 12, 2021 at 6:23 AM**

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Aka "Hand Experiencing Katastematic Pleasure".

I was thinking more "Snatch the Pebble from my Hand, Grasshopper" (Those of a certain age will get that reference 😊 )

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**Post by "Cassius" of November 12, 2021 at 9:55 AM**

In either case, he doesn't appear to me the type of dynamic figure that I would be interested in taking lessons from!

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**Post by "Cassius" of November 13, 2021 at 6:29 PM**

Anonymous comment from a Facebook reader on Episode 95:

"About the latest podcast. As a beginning student of Epicureanism, I found Elaine's summary of pleasure and pain very useful in order not to end up in rabbit holes. I reread it regularly to keep seeing the main lines. You could also put a kind of warning on the texts on the website how reliable they are (Philodemus) by whom they were written and for what purpose (Cicero) and how they can best be interpreted. New people are warned then about the rabbit holes."