

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

Post by "Cassius" of November 10, 2021 at 10:57 AM

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.

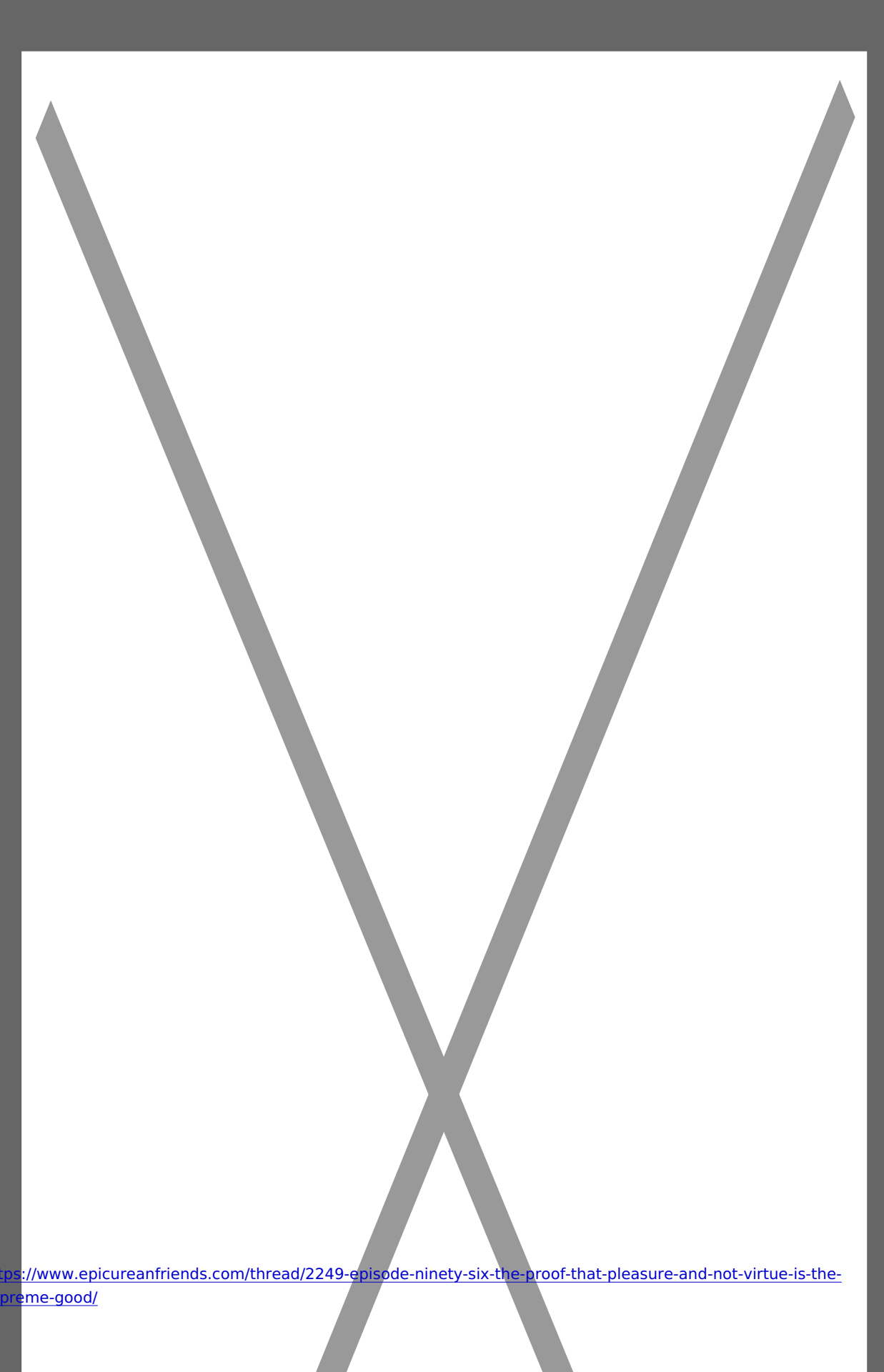
[45] I ask what classification is either more profitable or more suited to the life of happiness than that adopted by Epicurus? He affirmed that there is one class of passions which are both natural and needful; another class which are natural without being needful ; a third class which are neither natural 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?

Post by “Joshua” of November 14, 2021 at 4:41 PM

Not Erasmus, but Plutarch:

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2249-episode-ninety-six-the-proof-that-pleasure-and-not-virtue-is-the-supreme-good/>

[Moralia - Wikipedia](#)

en.m.wikipedia.org

I was way off!

Post by “Don” of November 14, 2021 at 6:31 PM

Spoiler alert: [Joshua](#) , I'm trying to track down your reference to "The only good Epicurean is a Christian" (to paraphrase). Just for listeners, we did not endorse this perspective... Just sayin'.

Post by “Joshua” of November 14, 2021 at 6:52 PM

[Don](#), I said Erasmus, but it was Plutarch, *Moralia*.

[Essays and Miscellanies, by Plutarch](#)

Go here and scroll past the table of contents!

Post by “Cassius” of November 14, 2021 at 6:54 PM

Before you cause a heart attack here in those who have not heard the episode, the reference was to the argument some make that the motive to be a Christian is the pursuit of eternal pleasure - which is not an argument every Christian accepts, by any means ! 😊

Post by “Joshua” of November 14, 2021 at 7:04 PM

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2249-episode-ninety-six-the-proof-that-pleasure-and-not-virtue-is-the-supreme-good/>

"There are no people more Epicurean than godly Christians."

It seems that the rumors of my fallibility were greatly exaggerated! It was Erasmus.

Plutarch claimed that Epicurus made the pleasant life impossible.

Erasmus claimed that only Christians were truly Epicureans.

Post by “Joshua” of November 14, 2021 at 7:06 PM

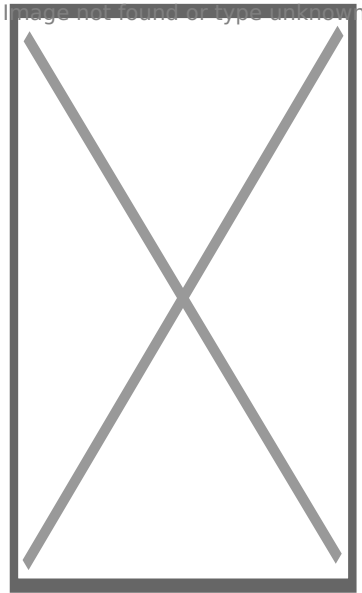
If someone cares to trace the quotation back to the source, I see it attributed to this;

The Epicurean: A colloquy between Hedonius and Spudaeus, by Desiderius Erasmus [1466-1536]

Post by “Don” of November 14, 2021 at 7:50 PM

You know I'm going to take you up on that 😊

Well then, if they are *Epicureans* that live pleasantly, none are more truly *Epicureans*, than those that live holily and religiously. And if we are taken with Names, no Body more deserves the Name of an Epicurean, than that adorable Prince of Christian Philosophers ; for επίκουρος in Greek signifies as much as an *Helper* (p. 342)



[The colloquies of Erasmus : Erasmus, Desiderius, d. 1536 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)
archive.org

Post by “Cassius” of November 14, 2021 at 8:43 PM

Good news - the great majority of editing of today's edition is complete, and we should have the complete episode posted by tomorrow night at the latest.

Post by “Don” of November 14, 2021 at 9:23 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Good news - the great majority of editing of today's edition is complete, and we should have the complete episode posted by tomorrow night at the latest.

Wow! That is some fast turn around! Nicely done!

Post by “Cassius” of November 15, 2021 at 3:56 PM

Episode 96 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 additional proof that Pleasure is the Supreme Good.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/47488929>

Post by “Joshua” of November 15, 2021 at 8:03 PM

Just to give an update; I have finished my recording of the Torquatus. I'll try to get it edited and up tomorrow evening (that part is generally much easier!)

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 16, 2021 at 12:22 PM

I listened to entire Episode 96. I found it enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. You are all contributing such interesting points. Was the "proof" adequately established? Not sure if I missed something. It seems proof is taken on the premise of a materialist framing of the world, and those who come from a supernatural or platonic absolute won't be convinced.

Post by “Cassius” of November 16, 2021 at 6:35 PM

Yes we still have a lot further to go on that! I was afraid I was pushing too hard but you are right it is on these very basic issues that everything turns. It's probably too basic to just say "trust the senses" but in a real way that is what it comes down too. Established the means of proof and what amount is required is something everyone has to think about and come to terms with.

Please ask more questions on this and that will help push us forward !

Post by “Cassius” of November 20, 2021 at 10:02 PM

In tonight's 20th discussion Martin brought up the latest version of this continuing question, which was posted to the Facebook thread for Episode 95. Those of you who weren't on our 20th discussion were spared my rant on the subject, but there's one part of it I want to repeat and reassure you about: No matter how long you are involved in discussion of Epicurean philosophy, this position is going to be thrown in your face, so it is imperative that you develop a response and be prepared to deal with it.

Our episode of course was devoted to explaining the Epicurean position, through Torquatus, that pleasure is the highest good. Whenever that point is made, you can be sure that assorted stoics and neo-stoics are going to come out of the woodwork to point out that "Yes, Epicurus said pleasure was the highest good, but what he also said was that the highest pleasure was tranquility, and that's not a form of sensual pleasure at all but something that transcends the senses!"

Here it is once again, followed (logically enough) by a debate among Stoic-minded people about their own viewpoints:

epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/2381/

My answer to this question is set out in the discussion presented at this link, and at many other places on this forum: [The Full Cup / Fullness of Pleasure Model](#)

But simply posting a link doesn't begin to equip us to address the question. In our 20th discussion, Godfrey and Joshua suggested several different perspectives that need to be considered (one of which is "Who was Menoeceus and how advanced a student was he?" (so that we understand how Epicurus would have tailored his message).

Then there are observations about PD3 (which is very close to the section of the letter to Menoeceus about absence of pain, but which differs in significant respects.

There is an entire series of arguments to be made in addition to those I make about the [Philebus](#) context in the article I linked above.

But for now I would be appreciative to any who would like to extend this thread: How would YOU answer Mr. Daly's question in a way that makes plain how to reconcile the many clear statements about pleasurable sensations made by Epicurus with the argument that Epicurus then (they argue) reversed course and said that the highest pleasure was not a sensual experience at all?