

Episode One Hundred Three - Corollaries to the Doctrines - Part Three

Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2021 at 11:02 PM

Welcome to Episode One Hundred Three 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 examine a number of important corollaries of Epicurean doctrine.

Now let's join Martin reading today's text:

[60] There is also death which always hangs over them like the stone over Tantalus, and again superstition, which prevents those who are tinged by it from ever being able to rest. Moreover they have no memories for their past good fortune, and no enjoyment of their present; they only wait for what is to come, and as this cannot but be uncertain, they are wasted with anguish and alarm; and they are tortured most of all when they become conscious, all too late, that their devotion to wealth or military power, or influence, or fame has been entirely in vain. For they achieve none of the pleasures which they ardently hoped to obtain and so underwent numerous and severe exertions.

[61] Turn again to another class of men, trivial and pusillanimous, either always in despair about everything, or ill-willed, spiteful, morose, misanthropic, slanderous, unnatural; others again are slaves to the frivolities of the lover; others are aggressive, others reckless or impudent, while these same men are uncontrolled and inert, never persevering in their opinion, and for these reasons there never is in their life any intermission of annoyance. Therefore neither can any fool be happy, nor any wise man fail to be happy. And we advocate these views

far better and with much greater truth than do the Stoics, since they declare that nothing good exists excepting that vague phantom which they call morality, a title imposing rather than real; and that virtue being founded on this morality demands no pleasure and is satisfied with her own resources for the attainment of happiness.

[62] XIX. But these doctrines may be stated in a certain manner so as not merely to disarm our criticism, but actually to secure our sanction. For this is the way in which Epicurus represents the wise man as continually happy; he keeps his passions within bounds; about death he is indifferent; he holds true views concerning the eternal gods apart from all dread; he has no hesitation in crossing the boundary of life, if that be the better course. Furnished with these advantages he is continually in a state of pleasure, and there is in truth no moment at which he does not experience more pleasures than pains. For he remembers the past with thankfulness, and the present is so much his own that he is aware of its importance and its agreeableness, nor is he in dependence on the future, but awaits it while enjoying the present; he is also very far removed from those defects of character which I quoted a little time ago, and when he compares the fool's life with his own, he feels great pleasure. And pains, if any befall him, have never power enough to prevent the wise man from finding more reasons for joy than for vexation.

[63] It was indeed excellently said by Epicurus that fortune only in a small degree crosses the wise man's path, and that his greatest and most important undertakings are executed in accordance with his own design and his own principles, and that no greater pleasure can be reaped from a life which is without end in time, than is reaped from this which we know to have its allotted end. He judged that the logic of your school possesses no efficacy either for the amelioration of life or for the facilitation of debate. He laid the greatest stress on natural science. That branch of knowledge enables us to realize clearly the force of words and the natural conditions of speech and the theory of consistent and contradictory expressions; and when we have learned the constitution of the universe we are relieved of superstition, are emancipated from the dread of death, are not agitated through ignorance of phenomena, from which ignorance, more than any thing else, terrible panics often arise; finally, our characters will also be improved when we have learned what it is that nature craves. Then again if we grasp a firm knowledge of phenomena, and uphold that canon, which almost fell from heaven into human ken, that test to which we are to bring all our judgments concerning things, we shall never succumb to any man's eloquence and abandon our opinions.

Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2021 at 11:14 PM

We won't quite get to it in the next episode, but in honor of some recent conversations in which we were discussing the extent to which Epicurean ethics are based on Epicurean physics and

Epistemology, I just changed the Home Page opening quote for the new year:

Quote

Moreover, unless the constitution of the world is thoroughly understood, we shall by no means be able to justify the verdicts of our senses. Further, our mental perceptions all arise from our sensations; and if these are all to be true, as the system of Epicurus proves to us, *then only* will cognition and perception become possible. ... [W]hen cognition and knowledge have been invalidated, every principle concerning the conduct of life and the performance of its business becomes invalidated. So from natural science we borrow courage to withstand the fear of death, and firmness to face superstitious dread, and tranquillity of mind, through the removal of ignorance concerning the mysteries of the world, and self-control, arising from the elucidation of the nature of the passions and their different classes.... ("Torquatus" - Cicero's "On Ends" I-XIX

Post by “Cassius” of January 2, 2022 at 11:17 AM

Well I think our listeners will be pleased with today's episode, but it's another long one so it will take some time before it's ready.

In the meantime I wanted to note that today we will include a reference to the stone of tantalus, and to my surprise (found out only during recording) the standard references on the net to Tantalus focus mostly on the water in which he is standing and the branches above his head, and the Wikipedia page doesn't even have an example artwork with the stone. So we will want to supplement our discussion with links to the "stone" symbology when we find them.

Post by “Joshua” of January 2, 2022 at 11:51 AM

Show Notes:

The House of [Atreus](#);

<https://www2.classics.upenn.edu/myth/content/tragedy/media/atreustree.gif>

[Tantalus](#);

In the third book of [Lucretius](#)

Referenced In the [8th Isthmian Ode](#) of [Pindar](#)

In the plays of [Aeschylus](#);

Of which the [Oresteia](#) contains the following;

The [Agamemnon](#) ([Text of the play](#))

[See also [The Browning Version](#)]

[The Libation Bearers](#)

[The Eumenides](#)

[Iphigenia](#);

In [Lucretius](#) (he calls her [Iphianassa](#))

And also;

Don's translation and commentary on [The Letter to Menoikeus](#)

Nates compilation of [The Principle Doctrines](#)

My recording of [The Torquatus](#) (with thanks to Cassius)

And finally,

[Why we chose the Reid translation](#)

[Cassius](#), let me know if I left anything out!

Post by “Joshua” of January 2, 2022 at 11:54 AM

Lucretius and Pindar mention the stone, but without explaining it. In both cases they are describing a fate narrowly avoided.

Post by “Joshua” of January 2, 2022 at 12:28 PM

There is also that strange passage in the Hippocratic Oath enjoining its reader not to cut those who "labour beneath the stone". This is generally interpreted as being a kidney stone (which, incidentally, Epicurus suffered from).

Apparently Hippocrates felt that kidney stones were the domain of *surgeons*, not of the *physicians* he was instructing. It is possible that Hippocrates really was as high-minded as all of that, but to my juvenile ear upon first hearing or reading those words, the "stone" seemed in context more like a punishment from the gods which it was forbidden to treat. And further, that there was something effeminate in dying of this "labor".

It is indeed curious the emphasis (or sometimes invention) which the biographers have placed upon the death of philosophers--often written as if they had 'gotten their due'.

So it was that Empedocles (who thought he was a god) died by leaping into a volcano; Socrates, the wisest man (in his own estimation), in all of Greece, died by his own hand; Archimedes was slain by a blunt instrument of the Roman soldiery while himself distracted by the higher mathematics; Lucretius was offed after he quaffed, allegedly, a love potion; Zeno the Stoic died of holding his breathe to suppress the pain of a broken toe; Julius Caesar suffered epilepsy and, in spite of controlling the Roman empire could not control even his own body (much less the governing body of the Senate); Protagoras had held that 'man was the measure of all things', but found by experience that he did not measure up against the sea in storm (he died of shipwreck). And on it goes.

Post by "Cassius" of January 6, 2022 at 7:46 PM

Episode 103 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our topic is focused on more mistakes made be people who do not identify pleasure as the goal of life and pursue it intelligently.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/48196889>

Post by "Godfrey" of January 8, 2022 at 1:28 PM

Two thumbs up!

👍 It pleased me greatly to hear the repeated statements that in order to fully understand the philosophy you need to understand the nature of the universe.

👍 Joshua your pleasure engine idea sounds like a fruitful one to pursue! As I recall, Gosling and Taylor came to a similar idea in *The Greeks on Pleasure*, although it wasn't nearly as concise and illustrative as your framing of it.

Excellent work, as always!

Post by “Cassius” of January 8, 2022 at 1:33 PM

Thank you Godfrey! If you recall Gosling and Taylor saying something similar to Joshua, and you can think of a location in the book to cite, please let us know!

Post by “Godfrey” of January 8, 2022 at 7:42 PM

Quote

19.4.27 Ataraxia is achieved by the removal of superstitious fear and false beliefs, the constant memory of the truth, and attention to present experience and perception. Now the mind is free of disturbance and so memory and expectation operate without anxiety. Similarly when physical pain is removed the body operates without pain and that will mean that always some pleasurable and painless perception is occurring, a condition of good cheer.

It's been quite a while since I read *TGOP*; this is the closest thing I can find in my notes (*TGOP* is one of those rare books in which I actually took notes; I can't recall if this is a quote or a paraphrase). But, to me, this reinforces the idea that understanding the physics, the canonic, the worldview, becomes something of a pleasure engine.

Having *ataraxia* in the quote is interesting: is it too "out there" to describe *ataraxia* as a pleasure engine? That never even occurred to me until reviewing this.