

Episode 201 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 09

Post by "Cassius" of November 11, 2023 at 1:46 PM

Welcome to Episode 201 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. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. 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.

This week we continue our discussion of Book Two of Cicero's On Ends, which are largely devoted Cicero's attack on Epicurean Philosophy. "On Ends" contains important criticisms of Epicurus that have set the tone for standard analysis of his philosophy for the last 2000 years. Going through this book gives us the opportunity to review those attacks, take them apart, and respond to them as an ancient Epicurean might have done, and much more fully than Cicero allowed Torquatus, his Epicurean spokesman, to do.

Follow along with us here: [Cicero's On Ends - Complete Reid Edition](#)

We are using the Reid edition, so check any typos or other questions against the original PDF which can be found [here](#).

This week we start and move forward from Section IX, which begins:

IX. You must then set pleasure aside, not only if you want to pursue a right course, but if you want it to be seemly for you

to speak the language of honest men. Can we then assert that a thing is for the whole of life the supreme good, though we do not think we can say it is so even for a dinner? Yet how does our philosopher talk? There are three kinds of passions, one natural and necessary, another natural but not necessary, a third neither natural nor necessary. In the first place his subdivision lacks neatness; for he has made what were really two classes into three. ' This is not to subdivide, but to rend asunder.

Post by "Cassius" of November 11, 2023 at 8:12 PM

In preparation for tomorrow's episode I re-read from Section IX to the end of Book Two.

The upcoming material is going to be extremely heavy lifting. We are going to need to call on our readers here to help us wade through the extremely detailed and lengthy attacks. It's going to be very worthwhile, but we shouldn't expect it to be easy.

In each episode we need to at least try to slice and dice the argument down into digestible bites, and then we can incorporate week by week other comments that get made on the forum. Cicero embeds a lot of Epicurus' own words in the upcoming sections, and going through it is going to give us the opportunity to put a spotlight on some of Epicurus' most famous sayings.

This is going to be a challenge but I think with help we'll be producing some very helpful conversations.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 12, 2023 at 1:56 AM

I've only had a chance to read IX, but to my mind, all of the arguments are spurious.

- Classifying desires as three or as two, one of which has two parts: the latter may be important if you're concerned with a system of classification, but the former is, to me, more useful. Cicero is only making an argument about form, not about substance.

- His principal technique seems to be to set up and tear down a straw man. He defines something in a way that has little relation to the idea being examined, then proceeds to tear apart this definition of the idea.

- Cicero defines desire very narrowly and negatively, and completely misses the point that Epicurus has a deeper understanding of desire than he, Cicero, does. (The same as with pleasure.) Understanding that desire isn't an evil to be banished was a major innovation of Epicurus', and his classifications are key to that. Cicero, at least to this point, tries to totally eliminate that by centering his argument on the outmoded (or simply wrong) definition of desire, which lumps all desires into what are correctly considered vain desires. By doing this, he's completely missing out on the nuanced and practical conception of desires in Epicurus' philosophy.

- Cicero was part of the privileged class, and he would use any means to preserve that distinction. He may have been an effective lawyer, but he is an extremely shallow and narrow minded philosopher. In his writings his main project seems to be to tear down any ideas foreign to his own, rather than to honestly and deeply examine such ideas. To this point in this passage he's done just that, and reads to me like a buffoon. But, unlike him, I'll try to keep an open mind going forward. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of November 12, 2023 at 2:46 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

He may have been an effective lawyer, but he is an extremely shallow and narrow minded philosopher

It looks to me like he probably was a very effective lawyer, and it struck me in reading these sections that right or wrong he's making a very sophisticated argument that shows extreme intelligence. Here again I like DeWitts phrasing that Cicero could not have misrepresented Epicurus so effectively had he not understood Epicurus so well.

But reading this mass of argument also makes me ask myself whether what Cicero has done here is to create these arguments on his own, or whether, just like he seems to quote lots of Epicurus, what he's really doing is quoting 200 years of Stoic and other honed antiEpicurean argument. How much of this is Cicero and how much of it is plagiarized? Either way this is an extremely well written and thought out argument that represents the vast majority of orthodox "establishment" opinion that's dominated the world for 2000+ years.

It's also interesting to me how it's written in sort of a "cajoling" way - in that he maintains an extremely friendly regard for Torquatus personally even while condemning his ideas. So it's written like a "Come home to Jesus" appeal rather than a slash and burn attack.

Post by "Joshua" of November 12, 2023 at 12:06 PM

Show Notes:

Attic Nights by 2nd century grammarian [Aulus Gellius](#)

On Plutarch "word-chasing" and logic-chopping;

Quote

Plutarch, in the second book of his essay *On Homer*, asserts that Epicurus made use of an incomplete, perverted and faulty syllogism, and he quotes Epicurus's own words: "[Death is nothing to us](#), for what is dissolved is without perception, and what is without perception is nothing to us." "Now Epicurus," says Plutarch, "omitted what he ought to have stated as his major premise, that death is a dissolution of body and soul, and

then, to prove something else, he goes on to use the very premise that he had omitted, as if it had been stated and conceded. But this syllogism," says Plutarch, "cannot advance, unless that premise be first presented."

What Plutarch wrote as to the form and sequence of a syllogism is true enough; for if you wish to argue and reason according to the teaching of the schools, you ought to say: "Death is the dissolution of soul and body; but what is dissolved is without perception; and what is without perception is nothing to us." But we cannot suppose that Epicurus, being the man he was, omitted that part of the syllogism through ignorance, or that it was his intention to state a syllogism complete in all its members and limitations, as is done in the schools of the logicians; but since the separation of body and soul by death is self-evident, he of course did not think it necessary to call attention to what was perfectly obvious to everyone. For the same reason, too, he put the conclusion of the syllogism, not at the end, but at the beginning; for who does not see that this also was not due to inadvertence??

In the same book, Plutarch also finds fault a second time with Epicurus for using an inappropriate word and giving it an incorrect meaning. Now Epicurus wrote as follows: "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of everything that pains." Plutarch declares that he ought not to have said "of everything that pains," but "of everything that is painful"; 3 for it is the removal of pain, he explains, that should be indicated, not of that which causes pain.

In bringing this charge against Epicurus Plutarch is "word-chasing" with excessive minuteness and almost with frigidity; for far from hunting up such verbal meticulousness and such refinements of diction, Epicurus hunts them down.

[full text](#)

Aristotle's work *On Categories*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Categories_\(Aristotle\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Categories_(Aristotle))

Quote

The *Categories* (Greek Κατηγορίαι *Katēgoriai*; Latin *Categoriae* or *Praedicamenta*) is a text from Aristotle's *Organon* that enumerates all the possible kinds of things that can be the subject or the predicate of a proposition. They are "perhaps the single most heavily discussed of all Aristotelian notions".[1] The work is brief enough to be divided, not into books as is usual with Aristotle's works, but into fifteen chapters.

[full text](#)

Cicero continually conflates *the feeling of pleasure* with *things productive of pleasure*, but he forgets his Aristotle; the feeling of pleasure is a subject, while "things productive of pleasure" are predicative on the subject of pleasure. He compounds this error by committing it repeatedly and at length.

While pleasure has manifold causes, it is itself one thing--the feeling of pleasure. It is *subject* to a variety of different conditions (which we express as predicates); quantity (duration), quality (intensity), location, time reference (i.e. *I felt pleasure yesterday* or *feel pleasure now* or *anticipate pleasure in the future*), and so on. Does Cicero not understand this, or does he pretend that it is beyond comprehension for the effect of argument? I think we know the answer.

Cicero, *Pro Plancio*

Cicero pretends to be scandalized at Epicurus' mention of the pleasures of sex, and insists that he would need to apologize before even naming it, but in a trial defending Gnaeus Plancius who was accused of bribery in an election, Cicero casually dismisses an allegation that Plancius and his friends raped an actress;

Quote

And would you dim with your sullying insinuations the lustre of that untarnished life ? You hint darkly at acts of immorality, charges which cannot even be suspected, far less substantiated, against him. Not content with inventing charges, you invent names for your charges, and call him " bigamist." You say that he took with him to the province a companion to be the instrument of his base passions ; this statement is not a charge, but a reckless and libellous falsehood. You say that he raped a ballet-girl ; we hear that this crime was once committed at Atina by a band of youths who took advantage of an old privilege allowed at the scenic games, especially in country towns. ** [31] What a tribute to the propriety of my client's youthful days. He is reproached with an act which he was permitted by privilege to commit, and yet even that reproach is found to be baseless. You say that he released a criminal from prison. True, but the release was inadvertent, as you are aware, and was ordered at the request of an excellent young man whose claims upon my client were not to be put by ; and a warrant was subsequently issued for the re-arrest of the prisoner. These, gentlemen, and these alone, are the scandals alleged against my client's life, and it is on these that you are asked to base your doubts of his scrupulous honour and integrity.

Again, as I said during the recording, I should not have seen the need to mention this case if Cicero had not insinuated that Epicurus was a sexual pervert.

Cicero, *On Ends*, Book I

Cicero attempts to lure Epicurus into absurdity by asking whether absence of pleasure is the most intense pain; he forgets that Torquatus has given us his answer: if you consider the description of the life of pleasure in its most complete form, then the opposite of this life is certainly a life of anguish.

Quote

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

Suppose on the other hand a person crushed beneath the heaviest load of mental and of bodily anguish to which humanity is liable. Grant him no hope of ultimate relief in view, also give him no pleasure either present or in prospect. Can one describe or imagine a more pitiable state? If then a life full of pain is the thing most to be avoided, it follows that to live in pain is the highest evil; and this position implies that a life of pleasure is the ultimate good. In fact the mind possesses nothing in itself upon which it can rest as final. Every fear, every sorrow can be traced back to pain; there is no other thing besides pain which is of its own nature capable of causing either anxiety or distress.

Post by “Joshua” of November 12, 2023 at 1:06 PM

I made the point that demanding that desire be pulled up by the roots to prevent profligacy would be like demanding that public roads should be pulled out of their beds to prevent highway robbery. It occurs to me now that Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* has an exchange that bears on this analogy; that the law stands in the way of vengeance is not an argument against the law, it is an argument against vengeance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDBiLT3LASK>

That desire can lead to profligacy is not an argument against desire, it is an argument against profligacy. Epicurus' advice to moderate desire is exactly what is needed here, but Cicero makes him out to be a patron of profligates unless he condemns desire full stop. This is nothing other than fundamentalism. Only a lunatic would demand that roads be destroyed if they provide aid and comfort to vagabonds--a sensible person will weigh that risk against going roadless through thick cover, but what is this if not the vagabond's home turf? He will have us denounce the name of desire, of pleasure, and adopt the speech of his "illustrious men"--but are vagabonds and profligates incapable of putting on such airs? *And thus I clothe my naked villainy/ With odd old ends stol'n out of holy writ;/ And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.* Will they not crouch behind the form of virtue, even behind the name of the gods themselves? Will Cicero throw away arms if they are carried also by deserters? Medicine, if peddled also by quacks? This is not philosophy, this is not wisdom--this is the petulance of a child threatening to take their ball and go home. Yet Cicero counsels even this.

Nature has given us pleasure as the *dux vitae*, the guide of life. To spurn this gift for the virtues held to be noble by the crowd would be to put forth on water not with a star to direct our course, but with mere smoke of public opinion, that falls silent as soon as we are out of earshot from the shore. My pilot in these matters is not so lacking in sense as to succumb to that line. We will cleave to that which announces itself to our natures to be good, and not merely that which announces itself for applause in the forum or the marketplace.

Post by "Cassius" of November 14, 2023 at 7:30 PM

It may be several days before this episode is released but currently in the editing phase I want to point out that I think Joshua really outdid himself this week.

The cite to Aulus Gellius is just outstanding. Even at this moment I haven't had time to check out the full quote but it really helps with responding to Cicero's argument.

Further, Joshua points out an excellent response to one of Cicero's arguments against Epicurus' position on pleasure as the absence of pain. That one should appear around the twenty minute mark in the episode, but it will be findable by my response that Joshua's point was so good and "that's why we pay him the big bucks" to be on the podcast. A poor joke by me, but I'll point out the section in the final editing, as Joshua's point is definitely worth hearing.

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 4:51 AM

Episode 201 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is Now Available!

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/57641761>

Post by “Cassius” of November 15, 2023 at 5:29 AM

Joshua from your references on Gellius in [Attic Nights](#), here is something else I think is *highly* useful: Gellius is showing us a list of examples where highly reputable Greek writers were using the negation of a term as the extreme point of its opposite, and he includes within the list Epicurus' use of "absence of pain."

I see this has helping a lot with the argument we are always facing: Why wasn't Epicurus more clear about the meaning of "Absence of pain?" Did he mean some fancy type of experience that isn't related to what we think of as "pleasure" at all? Or did he mean simply "100% pleasure" when he talked about "absence of pain?"

Seems to me this clearly shows that Gellius fully understood that it was totally proper for Epicurus to use "absence of pain" interchangeably and as a synonym for "pleasure." He cites in support of this two of the most renowned figures in all literature: not only Virgil (as to the unflattering meaning of the word "unpraised") but also Homer ("Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults")!

Here's the quote:

Quote

9 But concerning inlaudatus it seems possible to give two answers. One is of this kind: There is absolutely no one who is of so perverted a character as not sometimes to do or say something that can be commended (laudari). And therefore this very ancient line has become a familiar proverb:

Oft-times even a fool expresses himself to the purpose.

10 But one who, on the contrary, in his every act and at all times, deserves no praise

(laude) at all is inlaudatus, and such a man is the very worst and most despicable of all mortals, just as freedom from all reproach makes one inculpatus (blameless). Now inculpatus is the synonym for perfect goodness; therefore conversely inlaudatus represents the limit of extreme wickedness.

11 It is for that reason that Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults; for example:

"And not unwillingly they charged,"

and again:[15](#)

Not then would you divine Atrides see

Confused, inactive, nor yet loath to fight.

12 Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words:[16](#) "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains." 13 Again Virgil on the same principle called the Stygian pool "unlovely."[17](#) 14 For just as he expressed abhorrence of the "unpraised" man by the denial of praise, 15 so he abhorred the "unlovable" by the denial of love. 16 Another defence of inlaudatus is this: laudare in early Latin means "to name" and "cite." Thus in civil actions they use laudare of an authority, when he is cited. 17 Conversely, the inlaudatus is the same as p141 the inlaudabilis, namely, one who is worthy neither of mention nor remembrance, and is never to be named; 18 as, for example, in days gone by the common council of Asia decreed that no one should ever mention the name of the man who had burned the temple of Diana at Ephesus.[18](#)

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So we have here direct testimony from the ancient world that there is no need to look for any kind of hidden meaning in the use of these terms other than that when you have two of a pair, the presence of one is the absence of the other: "pleasure" is "the absence of pain" and "pain" is "the absence of pleasure" --- and that's what you point out in this episode Cicero was specifically denying that Epicurus had done!

Here is where Cicero alleges at Book 2, ix that Epicurus does NOT in referring to "freedom from pain" call it "pleasure" ;

is free from pain. But this condition of freedom from pain is not called pleasure. *I am not anxious about terms*, says he. But how if the thing signified is entirely different? *I shall find many persons, or rather persons without number, who are not so pedantic or so troublesome as you are, and such that I may easily win them over to any doctrine I choose.* Why then do we hesitate to say, if absence of pain be the highest pleasure, that to be without pleasure is the intensest pain? Why does not this hold good, as I put it? *Because pain has for its opposite not pleasure, but the removal of pain.*

I see this as another example of why Cicero cannot be acquitted of the charge of intentional misrepresentation. Cicero certainly knows that Epicurus is equating absence of pain as another description of pleasure, and yet rather than admit Epicurus' usage and simply disagree with the conclusion, he keeps harping on what is essentially "*Why don't you use the same term every time you refer to pleasure?*"

So I think we see in Homer and Virgil a part of the answer: it is entirely legitimate to emphasize the meaning of a term by contrasting it with the total absence of its opposite.

Gellius has pointed out for us that two of the greatest poets of Greece and Rome did exactly that, and he is including Epicurus' use of "absence of pain" as another illustration of the same thing.

I'm not sure that this is not one of the most clear and authoritative supportive statements from the ancient world as to how we should interpret Epicurus' use of the term "absence of pain" -- and I am embarrassed to say I am pretty sure I had never heard of it at all before you brought it up in the podcast!

Even worse, I think i had heard of the title "Attic Nights" - but I thought it was some kind of love poem! 😊

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 5:41 AM

I can't pass over this line from [Gellius](#) either:

Quote

In bringing this charge against Epicurus Plutarch is "word-chasing" with excessive minuteness and almost with frigidity; for far from *hunting up* such verbal meticulousness and such refinements of diction, Epicurus *hunts them down*.

I am not sure that the word play between "hunting up" and "hunting down" is totally obvious to us, but this seems to be a witticism that amounts to a strong endorsement of Epicurus.

Does anyone have a different interpretation other than it means something like: "*Epicurus is not only not guilty of playing games with words himself, he is hunting down and exposing those who do!*"

If that's the meaning then this Latin sentence might deserve a special place along with Lucian's "strike a blow for Epicurus" and Cicero's "master-builder of human happiness" and Laertius' "take for our end that which is the beginning of wisdom" in introducing the [Principal Doctrines](#), and similar praises.

Post by "Don" of November 15, 2023 at 9:34 AM

By Zeus!! What a fantastic episode! [Joshua](#) , you were on fire with the Gellius find and the other references you've shared. 👍 👍

Post by "Joshua" of November 15, 2023 at 10:38 AM

Thank you! Cassius has previously said that our timeline of Lucretius □Torquatus □Letters of Epicurus □DeWitt would be good preparation for Cicero in Book II, and I think he was right. Some of these arguments require a more researched response, of the kind that gets easier with time and reading.

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 10:59 AM

I'll restate the same point Don made --- Joshua made some outstanding points in this episode that simply would not be possible to make without having dived into a lot of background reading. Joshua always brings an encyclopedic knowledge of general literature to the table, but in this case the cross-referencing of Books One and Two, and the reading far enough to find Aulus Gellius, are just things that aren't going to happen for the general reader no matter how well intentioned.

To repeat my "joke" I will say that this is why we pay Joshua so well for his input --- 😊 In this case I hope the payment in satisfaction from knowing how much his work is appreciated is good enough!

Post by “Godfrey” of November 15, 2023 at 2:25 PM

Excellent episode! [Joshua](#) , it brings me great pleasure to see that you so firmly share my distaste for Cicero.

The thought occurred to me after hearing [Joshua](#) 's comparison of Books 1 and 2: how would Cicero's argument be affected if the two books were presented in the opposite order? Meaning Cicero's ranting first, then answered with Torquatus' explanation, giving Torquatus the last word....

Post by “Don” of November 15, 2023 at 2:27 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Joshua , it brings me great pleasure to see that you so firmly share my distaste for Cicero.

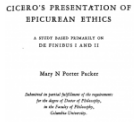
😊 Ditto!

Post by “Joshua” of November 22, 2023 at 1:08 PM

Mary Porter Packer's essay on Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics;

File

[Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics - By Mary Porter Packer \(1938\)](#)



A study based primarily on De Finibus I and II



Cassius

February 16, 2022 at 1:27 PM