

Episode 205 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 13 - Addressing Cicero's Contentions On The Nature of Morailty

Post by "Cassius" of December 9, 2023 at 3:42 PM

Welcome to Episode 205 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 is largely devoted Cicero's attack on Epicurean Philosophy. 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](#). Check any typos or other questions against the original PDF which can be found [here](#).

This week we move on to the middle of Section XIV, starting roughly here:

Cicero says: ... Well, by what is moral we understand something of such a nature that, even if absolutely deprived of utility, it may with justice be eulogized for its own qualities, apart from all rewards or advantages. Now the nature of this object cannot be so easily understood from the definition I have adopted (though to a considerable extent it can) as from the general verdict of all mankind, and the inclinations and actions of all the best men, who do very many things for the sole reason that they are seemly, right and moral, though they see that no profit will follow. Men indeed, while differing in many other points from brutes, differ especially in this, that they possess reason as a gift of nature, and a sharp and powerful intellect, which carries on with the utmost speed many operations at the same moment, and is, if I may so speak, keen-scented, for it discerns the causes of phenomena and their results, and abstracts their common features, gets together scattered facts, and links the future with the present, and brings within its ken the entire condition of life in its future course. And this same reason has given man a yearning for his fellow men, and an agreement with them based on nature and language and intercourse, so that starting from affection for those of his own household and his own kin, he gradually takes wider range and connects himself by fellowship first with his

countrymen, then with the whole human race, and, as Plato wrote to Archytas, bears in mind that he was not born for him-self alone, but for his fatherland and his kindred, so that only a slight part of his existence remains for himself. And seeing that nature again has implanted in man a passion for gazing upon the truth, as is seen very clearly when, being free from anxieties, we long to know even what takes place in the sky; so led on by these instincts we love all forms of truth, I mean all things trustworthy, candid and consistent, while we hate things unsound, insincere and deceptive, for instance cheating, perjury, spite, injustice. Reason again brings with it a rich and splendid spirit, suited to command rather than obedience, regarding all that may happen to man as not only endurable, but even inconsiderable, a certain lofty and exalted spirit, which fears nothing, bows to none, and is ever unconquerable. And now that we have marked out these three classes of things moral, there follows a fourth endued with the same loveliness and dependent on the other three; in this is comprised the spirit of orderliness and self-control. When the analogies of this spirit have been recognized in the beauty and grandeur of outward shapes, a man advances to the display of moral beauty in his words and deeds. For in consequence of the three classes of meritorious qualities which I mentioned before, he shrinks from reckless conduct, and does not venture to inflict injury by either a petulant word or action, and dreads to do or utter anything which seems unworthy of a man.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/58018797>

Post by “Joshua” of December 10, 2023 at 2:50 AM

Three classes of "meritorious qualities";

- **Dutifulness;** "And this same reason has given man a yearning for his fellow men, and an agreement with them based on nature and language and intercourse, so that starting from affection for those of his own household and his own kin, he gradually takes wider range and connects himself by fellowship first with his countrymen, then with the whole human race, and, as Plato wrote to Archytas, bears in mind that he was not born for him-self alone, but for his fatherland and his kindred, so that only a slight part of his existence remains for himself."
- **Truthfulness;** "And seeing that nature again has implanted in man a passion for gazing upon the truth, as is seen very clearly when, being free from anxieties, we long to know even what takes place in the sky; so led on by these instincts we love all forms of truth, I mean all things trustworthy, candid and consistent, while we hate things unsound, insincere and deceptive, for instance cheating, perjury, spite, injustice."
- **Indomitability;** "Reason again brings with it a rich and splendid spirit, suited to command rather than obedience, regarding all that may happen to man as not only

endurable, but even inconsiderable, a certain lofty and exalted spirit, which fears nothing, bows to none, and is ever unconquerable."

And a fourth quality;

- **Orderliness;** "And now that we have marked out these three classes of things moral, there follows a fourth endued with the same loveliness and dependent on the other three; in this is comprised the spirit of orderliness and self-control."

Bear in mind Cicero's project here; as he stated at the top of page 49, it is his opinion "that if I shew there is something moral, which is essentially desirable by reason of its inherent qualities and for its own sake, all the doctrines of your school are overthrown."

In his *Republic*, Cicero gives us a fuller description of this Natural Law, and the foundation of his morality;

Quote

There is in fact a true law - namely, right reason - which is in accordance with nature, applies to all men, and is unchangeable and eternal. By its commands this law summons men

to the performance of their duties; by its prohibitions it restrains them from doing wrong. Its

commands and prohibitions always influence good men, but are without effect upon the bad. To

invalidate this law by human legislation is never morally right, nor is it permissible ever to

restrict its operation , and to annul it wholly is impossible. Neither the senate nor the people

can absolve us from our obligation to obey this law, and it requires no Sextus Aelius to expound

and interpret it. It will not lay down one rule at Rome and another at Athens, nor will it be

one rule to-day and another tomorrow. But there will be one law, eternal and

unchangeable, binding at all times upon all peoples; and there will be, as it were, one common

master and ruler of men, namely God, who is the author of this law, its interpreter, and its

sponsor. The man who will not obey it will abandon his better self, and, in denying the true

nature of a man, will thereby suffer the severest of penalties, though he has escaped all the other

consequences which men call punishments. (Cicero, THE REPUBLIC, II, 22.)

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Lucretius' extensive treatment of early human history paints a very different picture; (Ian Johnston translation)

Quote

Then, once they had acquired huts, hides, and fire

and woman linked up with man and moved

into one [home and] learned [marriage customs],

and they saw themselves creating offspring,

at that point the human race first began

to soften. Fire meant their freezing limbs

could no longer tolerate the cold so well

under heaven's roof, sexual habits made

their strength diminish, and children soon

shattered the stern character of parents

with their endearing charms. And then neighbours

began to join in mutual agreements,

seeking not to harm each other or be harmed,

and they entrusted children and the race

of women to the care of all, pointing out

with vocal sounds, gestures, and broken words
that it was right for all to have pity
on the weak. And though they could not create
universal harmony, nonetheless,
large numbers would faithfully keep their word,
or else the human race would, even then,
have been entirely killed off, and breeding
could not have kept up their generations
to this very day.

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And finally, Lucretius' response to the claim that the gods will punish those who violate their law;

Quote

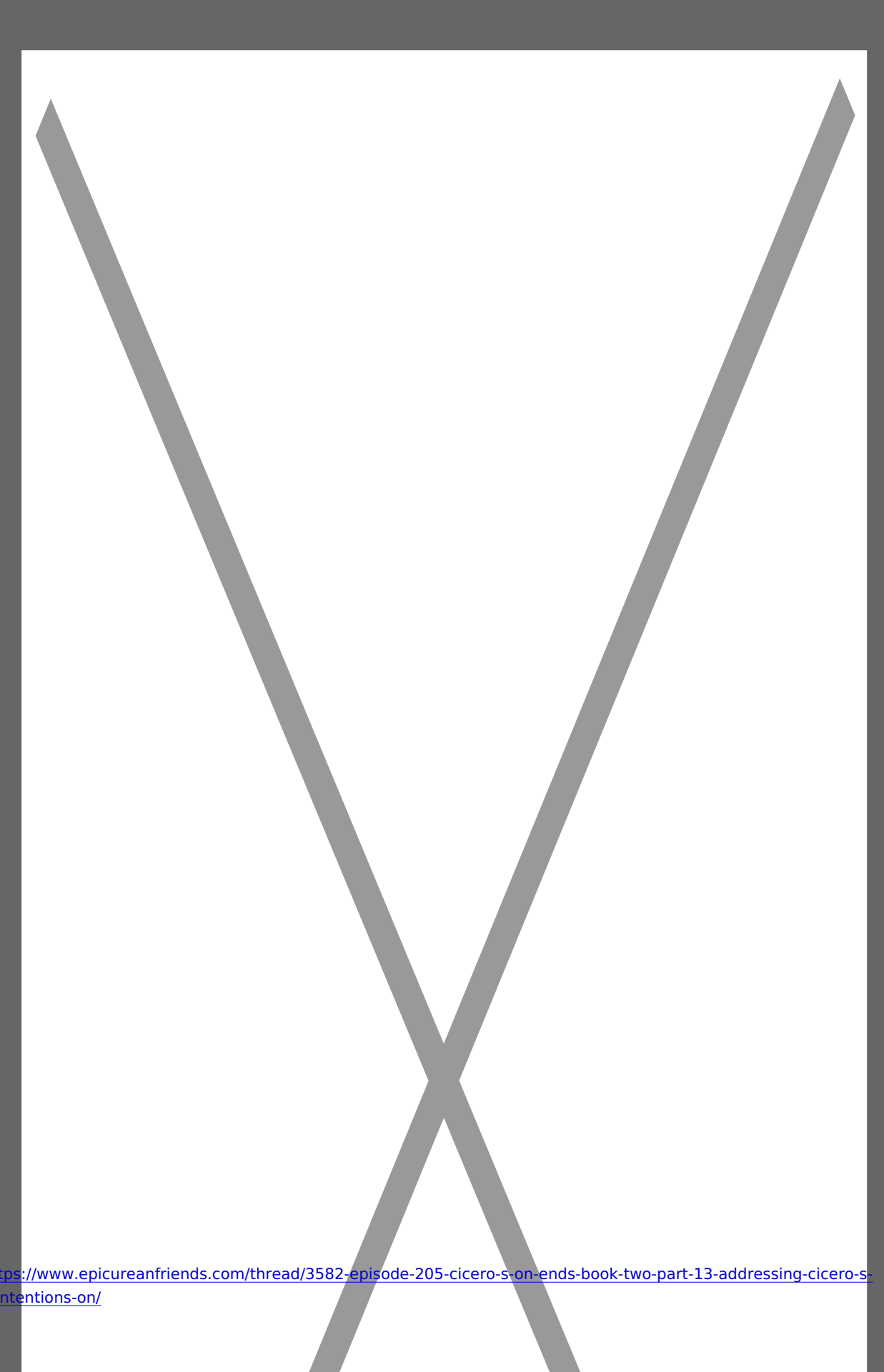
O unhappy race of men,
when they ascribed such actions to the gods
and added to them bitter rage! What sorrows
they then made for themselves, what wounds for us,
what weeping for our children yet to come!
There is no piety in being seen
time and again turning towards a stone
with one's head covered and approaching close
to every altar, and hurling oneself
prostrate on the ground, stretching out one's palms
before gods' shrines, or spreading lots of blood
from four-footed beasts on altars, or piling

sacred pledges onto sacred pledges,
but rather in being able to perceive
all things with one's mind at peace.

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Post by "Joshua" of December 10, 2023 at 3:01 AM

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[Euthyphro dilemma - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

The Euthyphro Dilemma also bears heavily on Cicero's claims about the source of morality.

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2023 at 9:09 AM

Episode 205 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we address Cicero's criticisms of Epicurus based on Cicero's view of the nature of morality.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/58018797>

Post by “Bryan” of December 15, 2023 at 1:23 PM

I love that you are lecturing Cicero as though he is sitting next to you.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 15, 2023 at 6:50 PM

And I love that [Cassius](#) *finally* got irritated with Cicero.

Post by “Joshua” of December 16, 2023 at 5:24 PM

As promised, I have tracked down the quote that I attributed to Cicero around the 46:30 mark. It comes from his [De Senectute](#), *On Old Age*, in a work that Cicero sent to Atticus. The main speaker of the work is Cato.

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3582-episode-205-cicero-s-on-ends-book-two-part-13-addressing-cicero-s-contentions-on/>

For these reasons, Scipio, my old age sits light upon me (for you said that this has been a cause of wonder to you and Laelius), and not only is not burdensome, but is even happy. And if I err in my belief that the souls of men are immortal, I gladly err, nor do I wish this error which gives me pleasure to be wrested from me while I live. But if when dead I am going to be without sensation (as *some petty philosophers* think), then I have no fear that these seers, when they are dead, will have the laugh on me!

Notice the snideness of that last remark. One of the pastimes of a certain kind of religious person is to mock the people who disagree with them with false certainty about that alleged afterlife. "Christopher Hitchens knows the truth now, and he's burning in hell!" In Cicero's hands it takes a slightly different form, prefiguring Pascal's Wager; "If Epicurus turns out to be right, he can have a good laugh at me." Obviously he cannot have that laugh, which is the whole point.

In the third century Tertullian, foreseeing the death of antiquity and the beginning of the long darkness, particularly relished the presumptive possession of this non-knowledge:

Quote

What a panorama of spectacle on that day! Which sight shall excite my wonder? Which, my laughter? Where shall I rejoice, where exult--as I see so many and so mighty kings, whose ascent to heaven used to be made known by public announcement, now along with Jupiter himself, along with the very witnesses of their ascent, groaning in the depths of darkness? Governors of provinces, too, who persecuted the name of the Lord, melting in flames fiercer than those they themselves kindled in their rage against the Christians braving them with contempt?

Whom else shall I behold? Those wise philosophers blushing before their followers as they burn together, the followers whom they taught that the world is no concern of God's, whom they assured that either they had no souls at all or that what souls they had would never return to their former bodies? The poets also, trembling, not before the judgment seat of Rhadamanthus or of Minos, but of Christ whom they did not expect to meet.

Then will the tragic actors be worth hearing, more vocal in their own catastrophe; then the comic actors will be worth watching, more lither of limb in the fire; then the charioteer will be worth seeing, red all over on his fiery wheel; then the athletes will be worth observing, not in their gymnasiums, but thrown about by fire--unless I might not wish to look at them even then but would prefer to turn an insatiable gaze on those who vented their rage on the Lord.

"This is He," I will say, "the son of the carpenter and the harlot, the sabbath-breaker, the Samaritan who had a devil. This is He whom you purchased from Judas, this is He who was struck with reed and fist, defiled with spittle, given gall and vinegar to drink. This is He whom the disciples secretly stole away to spread the story of His resurrection, or whom the gardener removed lest his lettuces be trampled by the throng of curious idlers."

What praetor or consul or quaestor or priest with all his munificence will ever bestow on you the favor of beholding and exulting in such sights? Yet, such scenes as these are in a measure already ours by faith in the vision of the spirit. But what are those things which "eye has not seen nor ear heard and which have not entered into the heart of man"? Things of greater delight, I believe, than circus, both kinds of theater, and any stadium.

Post by "Joshua" of December 16, 2023 at 5:31 PM

In the same text Cicero gets in another jab at Epicurus;

Quote

I often heard from my elders — who, in turn, said they, when boys, had heard it from old men — that Gaius Fabricius used to marvel at the story told him, while an envoy at the headquarters of King Pyrrhus, by Cineas of Thessaly, that there was a man at Athens who professed himself "wise" and used to say that everything we do should be judged by the standard of pleasure. Now when Manius Curius and Tiberius Coruncanius learned of this from Fabricius they expressed the wish that the Samnites and Pyrrhus himself would become converts to it, because, when given up to pleasure, they would be much easier to overcome. Manius Curius had lived on intimate terms with Publius Decius who, in his fourth consulship, and five years before Curius held that office, had offered up his life for his country's safety; Fabricius and Coruncanius also knew him, and they all were firmly persuaded, both by their own experience and especially by the heroic deed of Decius, that assuredly there are ends, inherently pure and noble, which are sought for their own sake, and which will be pursued by all good men who look on self-gratification with loathing and contempt.

Why then, do I dwell at such length on pleasure? Because the fact that old age feels little longing for sensual pleasures not only is no cause for reproach, but rather is ground for the highest praise.

Post by “Pacatus” of December 16, 2023 at 6:01 PM

"Why then, do I dwell at such length on pleasure? Because the fact that old age feels little longing for sensual pleasures not only is no cause for reproach, but rather is ground for the highest praise."

Well, I'm nearly ten years older than Cicero was when he died - so maybe he never experienced the sensual pleasure of knowing that your aging prostate still allows great relief when you first wake in the morning! 😬😄

With that bit of crudity aside - and recognizing that “sensual” pleasures were not the be-all / end-all for Epicurus - I still enjoy cooking and eating simple meals, the fruit of the grape, the touch of one I love ... and many other sensual pleasures. Does the range of such pleasures diminish with age? Absolutely! But I don't find that to be cause of either distress or celebration. Besides, you can still find other pleasures. 😊😎

Poor Cicero! 😭

Post by “kochiekoch” of December 18, 2023 at 12:37 PM

LOL! Tertullian sounds vindictive!

So much for loving your enemies! 😄

Post by “Joshua” of December 18, 2023 at 3:58 PM

It occurs to me that if Gaius Fabricius was elected consul in 282 BC around the time he learned of Epicureanism, then Epicurus' name was known in Rome during his own lifetime.

Post by “Cassius” of December 18, 2023 at 5:49 PM

Very interesting Joshua! What do we know about Fabricius?

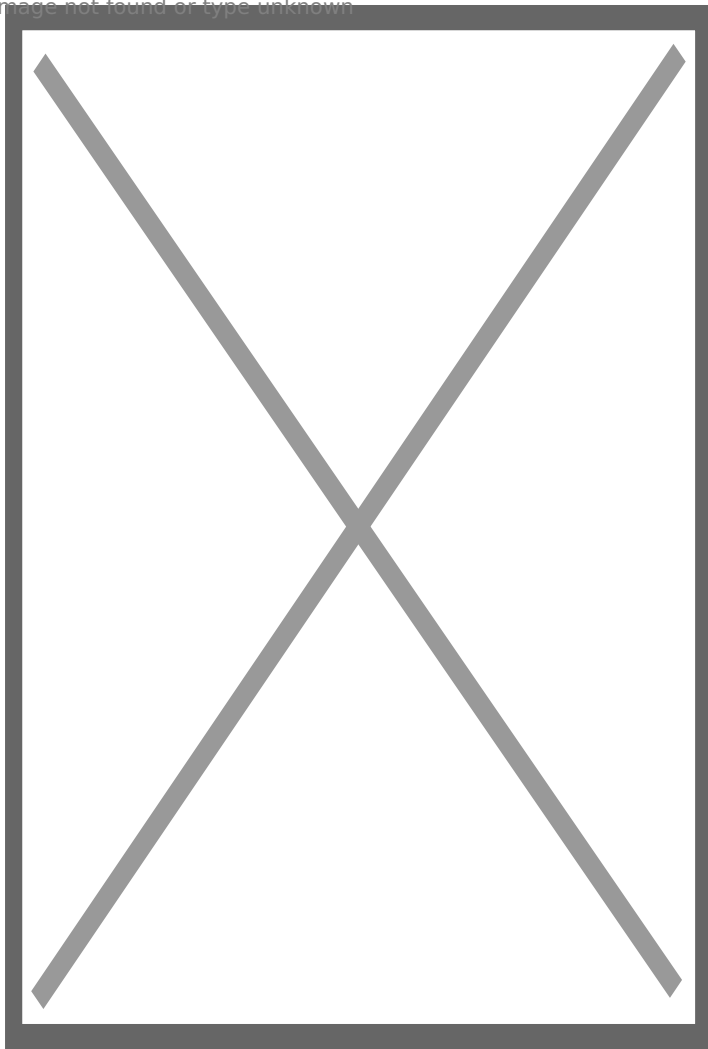
Post by “Joshua” of December 18, 2023 at 5:57 PM

Everything I know about him is in post #8, and the Wikipedia biography is relatively short.

Quote

The tales of Fabricius are the standard ones of austerity and incorruptibility, similar to those told of Curius Dentatus, and Cicero often cites them together; it is difficult to make out a true personality behind the virtues.

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[Gaius Fabricius Luscinus - Wikipedia](#)

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