

Episode 206 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 14 - More On The Nature of Morality

Post by "Cassius" of December 15, 2023 at 9:12 AM

Welcome to Episode 206 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 through Section XV and into XVI, starting roughly here:

Do you not see how extensive is this disagreement? A famous philosopher, by whom not only Greece and Italy, but even all foreign nations have been thrown into excitement, declares that he does not understand what morality means, if it does not lie in pleasure, unless perhaps it be some qualities extolled by the babble of the crowd. But I hold such qualities to be often actually immoral, and if at any time they be not immoral, they are then not immoral when the crowd extols what is essentially in its own nature right and deserves to be extolled; yet it is not called moral for the reason that it is applauded by many men, but because it is of such a nature that even if men knew nothing -about it, or had even been struck with dumbness, it would deserve to be extolled for its inherent loveliness and beauty. So again, yielding to nature, which cannot be withstood, he makes in another passage the statement which you also put forward a little while ago, that an agreeable life is not possible, unless it be also a moral life. What does he now mean by moral? The same that he means by agreeable? So this is it, that a moral life is not possible, unless it be also a moral life? Or, unless it accord with the talk of the multitude? He declares then that without this he cannot live agreeably? What is more immoral than that the life of a wise man should depend on the conversation of those who are no wise men? What is it then that in this passage he understands by moral? Assuredly nothing but what can with justice be extolled in and for itself. Since if it be extolled for the pleasure it brings, what kind of merit is

that which can be bought in the meat- market? Seeing that he assigns such a place to morality as to declare that without it an agreeable life is impossible, he is not the man to adopt the kind of morality which depends on the multitude, and to declare that without that an agreeable life is an impossibility, or to understand anything else to be moral except what is right in itself and worthy of eulogy for its own sake, in its own essence, unaided, and by its own constitution.

XVI. So, Torquatus, when you stated how Epicurus cries aloud that an agreeable life is not possible, unless it be a moral, a wise, and a just life, you yourself seemed to me to be uttering a vaunt. Such energy was breathed into your words by the grandeur of those objects which your words represented, that you seemed to grow taller, and sometimes ceased your walk, and gazing at us almost deposed as a witness that morality and justice are sometimes eulogized by Epicurus. How well it became you to take these words on your lips, for if they were never uttered by philosophers, we should not care to have any philosophy at all! It is from a passion for those phrases which are very seldom employed by Epicurus, wisdom, I mean, courage, justice, temperance, that men of preeminent ability have devoted themselves to the pursuit of philosophy. Our eyesight, says Plato, is the keenest sense we have, yet it does not enable us to descry wisdom. What passionate affection for herself would she inspire in us! Why so? Because she is so crafty that she can build the fabric of the pleasures in the most excellent manner? Why is justice praised, or whence comes this saying so hackneyed from of old, a man you may play with in the dark? This proverb, though pointed at one thing only, has this very wide application, that in all transactions we should be influenced by the character of our actions and not by the presence of witnesses. Indeed the arguments you alleged were insignificant and very weak, I mean, that unprincipled men are tortured by their own consciousness within them, and also by the fear of punishment, which they either suffer, or live in dread of suffering at some time. It is not proper to imagine your bad man as a coward or a weakling, torturing himself about any- thing he has done, and frightened at everything, but rather as one who craftily judges of everything by his interests, being keen, shrewd and hardened, so that he readily devises means for cheating without detection, without witnesses, without any accomplice. Do you think I am speaking of Lucius Tubulus ? He, having presided as praetor over the court for trying murderers, took bribes in view of trials with such openness, that in the following year Publius Scaevola, the tribune of the commons, carried a bill in the popular assembly directing an inquiry to be made into the matter. Under this bill the senate voted that the inquiry should be conducted by Gnaeus Caepio the consul; Tubulus went into exile at once, and did not venture to defend himself; the facts were indeed evident.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/58094461>

Post by “Cassius” of December 15, 2023 at 9:19 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3591-episode-206-cicero-s-on-ends-book-two-part-14-more-on-the-nature-of-morality/>

Last week we ended before fully addressing this passage below. It's wording is a bit complicated, so might be worth comment here in the thread. Cicero appears to be saying that it is not the fact that the crowd may think a thing moral that makes it moral, but the intrinsic beauty of the thing that would make it moral regardless of whether the crowd recognized it or not. Seems like this might be a variation of the Euthyro dilemma that Joshua mentioned in the last episode-- with this variation saying it's not the crowd (rather than god) that judges morality to be beautiful, but that morality is a beautiful thing in itself regardless of whether the crowd recognizes it (?)

Quote from Cicero

A famous philosopher, by whom not only Greece and Italy, but even all foreign nations have been thrown into excitement, declares that he does not understand what morality means, if it does not lie in pleasure, unless perhaps it be some qualities extolled by the babble of the crowd. But I hold such qualities to be often actually immoral, and if at any time they be not immoral, they are then not immoral when the crowd extols what is essentially in its own nature right and deserves to be extolled; yet it is not called moral for the reason that it is applauded by many men, but because it is of such a nature that even if men knew nothing about it, or had even been struck with dumbness, it would deserve to be extolled for its inherent loveliness and beauty.

Post by “Joshua” of December 17, 2023 at 3:40 AM

Do we know what the source is for the "babble of the crowd" bit? He seems to be attributing this to Epicurus, but I don't know of any citation that would support the claim. Epicurus is *often* mistrustful of the judgment of the crowd. The opinions of the multitude are wrong concerning the nature of the gods, wrong about celestial bodies, wrong about the causes of things, and so on.

VS29. To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many.

VS45. The study of nature does not create men who are fond of boasting and chattering or who show off the culture that impresses the many, but rather men who are strong and self-sufficient, and who take pride in their own personal qualities not in those that depend on external circumstances.

VS67. *Since the attainment of great wealth can scarcely be accomplished without slavery to crowds or to politicians, a free life cannot obtain much wealth; but such a life already possesses everything in unfailing supply. Should such a life happen to achieve great wealth, this too it can share so as to gain the good will of one's neighbors.*

VS81. *The soul neither rids itself of disturbance nor gains a worthwhile joy through the possession of greatest wealth, nor by the honor and admiration bestowed by the crowd, or through any of the other things sought by unlimited desire.*

In the Letter to Menoikeus, he makes it seem as though the Hoi Polloi are wrong about everything!

Very strange. Here is an alternative translation;

Quote

There, Torquatus, is a full, detailed and complete scheme of Moral Worth, a whole of which these four virtues, which you also mentioned, constitute the parts. Yet your Epicurus tells us that he is utterly at a loss to know what nature or qualities are assigned to this Morality by those who make it the measure of the Chief Good. For if Morality be the standard to which all things are referred, while yet they will not allow that pleasure forms any part of it, he declares that they are uttering sounds devoid of sense (those are his actual words), and that he has no notion or perception whatever of any meaning that this term Morality can have attached to it. In common parlance 'moral' (honourable) means merely that which ranks high in popular esteem. And popular esteem, says Epicurus, though often in itself more agreeable than certain forms of pleasure, yet is desired simply as a means to pleasure.

Do you realize how vast a difference of opinion this is? Here is a famous philosopher, whose influence has spread not only over Greece and Italy but throughout all barbarian lands as well, protesting that he cannot understand what Moral Worth is, if it does not consist in pleasure; unless indeed it be that which wins the approval and applause of the multitude. For my part I hold that what is popular is often positively base, and that, if ever it is not base, this is only when the multitude happens to applaud something that is right and praiseworthy in and for itself; which even so is not called 'moral' (honourable) because it is widely applauded, but because it is of such a nature that even if men were unaware of its existence, or never spoke of it, it would still be worthy of praise for its own beauty and loveliness. Hence Epicurus is compelled by the irresistible force of instinct to say in another passage what you also said just now, that it is impossible to live pleasantly without also living morally (honourably). What does he mean by 'morally' now? The same as 'pleasantly'? If so, does it amount to saying that it is impossible to live morally unless you — live morally? Or, unless you make public

opinion your standard? He means then that he cannot live pleasantly without the approval of public opinion? But what can be baser than to make the conduct of the Wise Man depend upon the gossip of the foolish? What therefore does he understand by 'moral' in this passage? Clearly, nothing but that which can be rightly praised for its own sake. For if it be praised as being a means to pleasure, what is there creditable about this? You can get pleasure at the provision-dealer's. No, — Epicurus, who esteems Moral Worth so highly as to say that it is impossible to live pleasantly without it, is not the man to identify 'moral' (honourable) with 'popular' and maintain that it is impossible to live pleasantly without popular esteem; he cannot understand 'moral' to mean anything else than that which is right, — that which is in and for itself, independently, intrinsically, and of its own nature praiseworthy.

Anybody got an idea where this stuff comes from? Perhaps Cicero didn't read Greek as well as he thought he did...but I have to assume that he is misinterpreting what Epicurus actually said here. If the reference to the crowd is actually derived from what Epicurus said about justice existing only by convention based on mutual advantage, then Cicero has grossly misunderstood that idea.

Post by “Joshua” of December 17, 2023 at 4:56 AM

"Cicero seems to be honestly and entirely unaware of the firm basis for justice which Epicureanism provided. He can see nothing beyond the fear of punishment, and therefore the fear of detection, - and yet he has Torquatus say that the necessary things of life can be won without injustice. He omits the social contract as a basis of justice. He does not see the doctrine as a whole."

"Moreover Cicero's failure to explain or attack the Epicurean theory of justice and the social compact is a significant omission in his discussion of Epicurean virtue."

This is Mary Porter Packer's summation of Cicero on Epicurus and Justice. Was Cicero confusing morality with justice, and inferring that Epicurus' morality was based on mutual advantage? Cicero has his god-ordained moral law, but Epicurus looks to the covenants made by the multitude for his morality? Did he utterly fail to comprehend what Epicurus was actually saying!?

Mary Porter Packer does not directly address the "babble of the multitude" question. Her general summation of *De Finibus* is that Cicero is a baffled, misreading, and unreliable transmitter of Epicureanism, because his signal failure is in refusing to consider each of Epicurus' claims in light of the whole philosophy. So I am at a loss, except in this respect; if

Cicero believed that Epicurus looked to the multitude for his understanding of morality, CICERO WAS WRONG.

Post by “Bryan” of December 17, 2023 at 5:13 AM

Interestingly there is some academic fussing over the word in question here. The usual text is (De Finibus 2.15) *si id non sit in voluptate, negat se intellegere, nisi forte illud quod multitudinis **rumore** laudetur.*

But it looks like we also have "minore" (R) and "timore" (NV) as options.

*nisi forte illud quod multitudinis **minore** laudetur:* Unless, perhaps, that which is commended **by a smaller** gathering (ie, the garden?).

*nisi forte illud quod multitudinis **timore** laudetur:* Unless, perhaps, that which is commended **out of fear** from the multitude. (ie, Epicurus is trying to avoid legal issues?).

Post by “Cassius” of December 17, 2023 at 5:58 AM

My best effort at understanding this is that he is referring to Epicurus' comments about one's reputation and esteem of one's neighbors (such as Torquatus had himself referred to in regard to the reasoning of his ancestors for at least part of their heroic deeds). Epicurus saw being esteemed as a friend as an important tool toward living a pleasurable life, just like friendship itself, so he focused on the actual views of the people around us rather than simply looking at their number.

But just like any other tool toward pleasure, circumstances can make it useless or even harmful (eating too much ice cream can make ice cream harmful) and so Epicurus would have distinguished the benefits of the good regard of the crowd when they are acting as friends from the detriment of the foolishness of the crowd when the crowd is acting negatively.

So when Cicero says (rightly) that Epicurus held virtue to be necessary for a happy life, Epicurus wasn't saying that it's the judgment of every single crowd that gives worth to acting virtuously, but that the good feeling of any number of people (who can hold you in esteem even when they sometimes disagree with you, or with whom you can separate if they become no longer your friends) is the part that's not possible to live well without.

Quote

No, — Epicurus, who esteems Moral Worth so highly as to say that it is impossible to live pleasantly without it, is not the man to identify 'moral' (honourable) with 'popular' and maintain that it is impossible to live pleasantly without popular esteem; he cannot understand 'moral' to mean anything else than that which is right, — that which is in and for itself, independently, intrinsically, and of its own nature praiseworthy.

So I think i'd extend what I commented last week in regard to the dilemma as to whether the gods love the good because it is good, or the good is good because the gods love it. Both of the important premises in that analysis are incorrect - there are both no supernatural gods to whose judgment we should defer, and there is no absolute good. Neither exists, and talking about them together just makes things more confusing.

And in questioning whether the crowd's esteem is valuable because it is always good, or whether the good is what the crowd esteems (both of which Cicero rejects), I'd say that Epicurus is focusing on the practical and saying that acting virtuously will gain us the esteem of our friends, which is always going to be desirable, but that the esteem of the crowd is something that may or may not be desirable (just as we don't want to share in the crowd's views of the gods, but we do want to share our like-minded friends' views of the gods).

Cicero is trying to bluster his way through this and make Epicurus look bad by insisting on the absolute nature of "the good" and "the crowd" rather than on Epicurus' position that nothing is ultimately good if not based on pleasure, and that our attitude toward the crowd isn't determined by counting their numbers but by their positions and their attitude toward you. (Of course there are times when things are practically speaking pretty clear -- a murderous crowd outside your front door is going to be undesirable most of the time, but a crowd politely telling you that the sun revolves around the earth but otherwise respecting you may not be a problem at all.)

And always in the background in evaluating the final meaning is that Cicero is not allowing Epicurus to define "pleasure" to include the normal healthy condition of body or mind. When you factor in the Epicurean aspect of pleasure that does not involve "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll then things look significantly different.

Edit: I made some significant edits while writing this post and I'm not sure these formulations are final either 😊

Post by “Cassius” of December 22, 2023 at 5:15 AM

Episode 206 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week we continue to address Cicero's view of the nature of morality.

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/58094461>

Post by “Cassius” of December 23, 2023 at 9:16 PM

I mentioned in the episode that I would link to sections of Wagner's "Tannhauser" where the lead character sings that beauty should be touched and embraced rather than simply admired from afar in a "Platonic love" kind of way.

Here are the excerpts I posted in the past. I will update this post with the minute mark for where to find the specific part.

I have two clips - this first one is a "best of Defense of Pleasure" which focuses on the key defense of Venus /Pleasure arguments (and more up-tempo music).

In this clip, the discussion of embracing beauty starts around 3:40, but this shorter clip doesn't give the "Platonic" side to which he is reacting:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41TYXuK91us>

And in enjoyment alone do I recognize love!

This second is significantly longer and contains most of the dialogue that sets up the background issues of the conflict with Pleasure/Venus. Start at 14:38 and you will get the setup, including the "platonic" singers praising beauty but saying that it cannot be touched. Wolfram von Essenbach summarizes the "glamor" of virtue.... and then the second pro-virtue singer nails the "keep your distance" part.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RV60cW4IbM>