

Episode 269 - By Pleasure We Mean The Absence of Pain (All Experience That Is Not Painful)

Post by "Cassius" of February 10, 2025 at 7:33 AM

Welcome to Episode 269 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most 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 we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

We are continuing our series of key doctrines of Epicurus, and this week and next week we are focusing on the full meaning of "Pleasure" in the Epicurean framework. Last week we discussed the central role that Pleasure plays as "Guide of Life," and this week we will dive deeper and focus on the full meaning of the word Pleasure in Epicurean philosophy.

Discussion Guide:

[By Pleasure We Mean All Feeling Which Is Not Painful](#)

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/64571869/media>

Post by "Joshua" of February 23, 2025 at 11:40 AM

Quote

As to pleasure the philosophers of old expressed varying opinions. Epicurus makes pleasure the highest good, but defines it as σαρκὸς εὐσταθὲς κατάστημα, or "a well-balanced condition of body." Antisthenes the Socratic calls it the greatest evil; for this is the expression he uses: μανεῖν μᾶλλον ἢ ἡσθεῖν; that is to say, "may I go mad rather than feel pleasure." Speusippus and all the old Academy declare that pleasure and pain are two evils opposed to each other, but that what lay midway between the

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two was the good. Zeno thought that pleasure was indifferent, that is neutral, neither good nor evil, that, p171 namely, which he called by the Greek term ἀδιάφορον. Critolaus the Peripatetic declares that pleasure is an evil and gives birth to many other evils: injustice, sloth, forgetfulness, and cowardice. Earlier than all these Plato discoursed in so many and varied ways about pleasure, that all those opinions which I have set forth may seem to have flowed from the founts of his discourses; for he makes use of each one of them according to the suggestion offered by the nature of pleasure itself, which is manifold, and according to the demands made by the character of the topics which he is treating and of the effect that he wishes to produce. But our countryman Taurus, whenever mention was made of Epicurus, always had on his lips and tongue these words of Hierocles the Stoic, a man of righteousness and dignity: "Pleasure an end, a harlot's creed; there is no Providence, not even a harlot's creed."

-Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* Book IX

Post by "Matteng" of February 23, 2025 at 2:50 PM

Why should someone hold pleasure for evil ?

Maybe that philosophers confuse pleasure and their consequences which sometimes can be painful / harmful.

Such consequences would everyone try to avoid for whom pleasure is the highest good.

Post by "Cassius" of February 23, 2025 at 3:18 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Why should someone hold pleasure for evil ?

Some do it as Torquatus said because they do not know how to pursue pleasure intelligently.

But there are large numbers of people who are by disposition or training (mostly training) who think that asceticism is preferable, because they hate the world and life in it. The Epicureans may not have had much experience in confronting large numbers of those people, or more likely the Epicureans were being charitable by not focusing on them, but this latter is by far the more dangerous group,

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Post by “Godfrey” of February 23, 2025 at 4:40 PM

In addition to what [Cassius](#) just said....

From the Epicurean point of view, no pleasure is an evil. But what can lead to more harm than good is to pursue unnatural desires, and arguably in some cases to pursue particular natural and unnecessary desires. Deciding which desires are worth pursuing is, of course, a matter of individual choice and avoidance.

Post by “Cassius” of February 25, 2025 at 5:08 PM

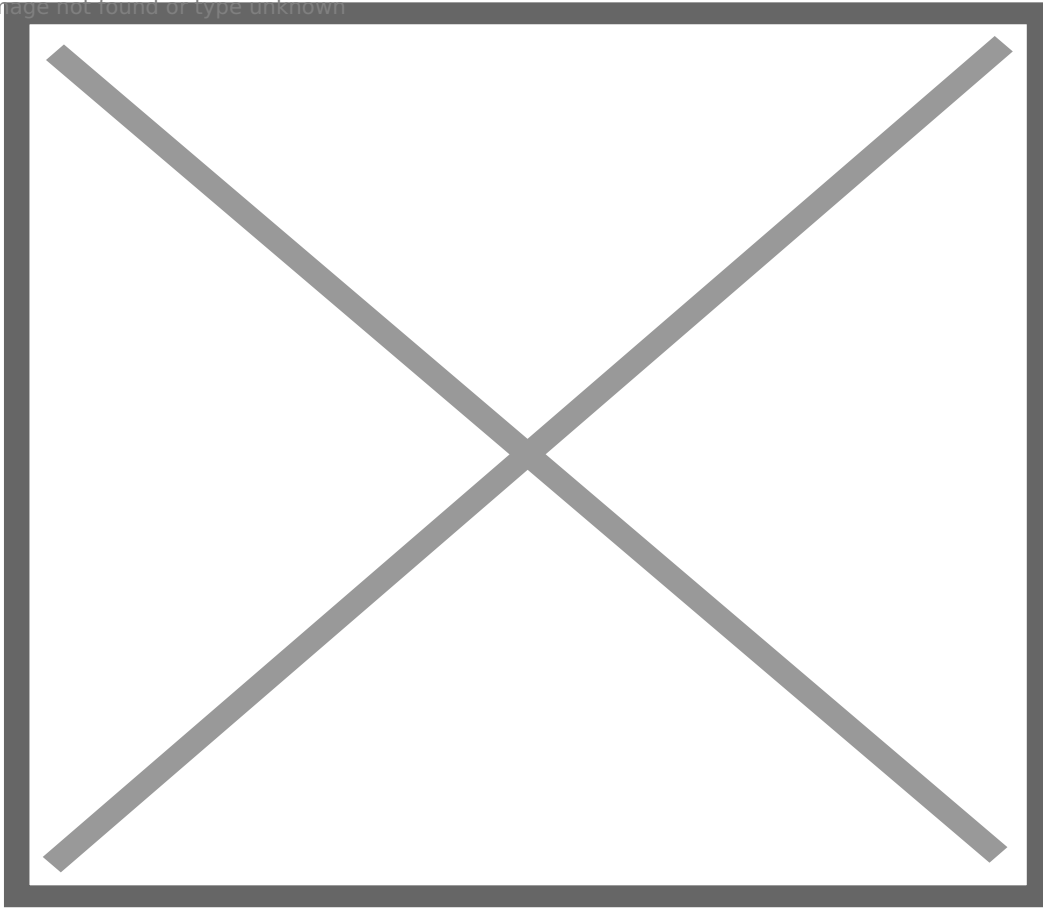
Episode 269 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today's episode is entitled: "By Pleasure We Mean The Absence of Pain."

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Post by “Cassius” of February 25, 2025 at 10:43 PM

A complete show transcript is available [here](#):

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Post by “Godfrey” of February 26, 2025 at 2:04 PM

Another fine podcast! 👍

During your discussion of the proem to Lucretius' Book 2, my mind was roaming as it tends to do in the fog of morning....

The trope of standing above or far from a battle or disaster, I think, relates directly to the Stoic exercise of "the view from above". I'm not exactly sure what the Stoic take on this exercise is: one's insignificance? how we're just like ants running around? But Lucretius' take is to use "the view from above" to examine pleasure.

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Further afield, as it were: for some reason, this proem brought to mind the movie Gladiator II. From there, it occurred to me that Lucretius may have been inspired by attendance at the Coliseum spectacles. In each of these cases, pleasure is derived from watching the suffering of others, but the experience is quite different from watching misfortune unfold in real time and in person, however remote. Having recently observed the latest LA wildfires from atop a neighborhood bluff, I can attest that any pleasure (maybe a feeling of relative safety?) is more than offset by horror at what is transpiring, and the thought that it could spread. (A storm at sea often continues ashore; the victors of a bloody battle may be inspired by blood lust to rape and pillage the defenseless citizens nearby.) The same scene, viewed in a cineplex or a theatrical stage, occurs at a remove from which the musings of Lucretius are far more understandable. And more Epicurean, I posit. Of course, this is my take from 2025, which may bear no relation to Lucretius' day. Or perhaps it does.

The marine layer now dissipated: to work.

Post by “Cassius” of February 26, 2025 at 2:08 PM

Godfrey if you have not read the article Don recently posted by Sedley on Epicurean vs Cyreniac happiness I hope you will, and comment.

I hadn't fully absorbed it when we recorded the podcast but I think it has additional insights into mental pleasure and the "big picture" that we will want to talk about further - probably this next podcast too.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 26, 2025 at 2:20 PM

I've read it, but long enough ago to have forgotten it. I've decided to shelve Timaeus for the time being, so I'll read this instead and with more pleasure.

It does look like a very good article as I look over my highlights from before.

Post by “Joshua” of February 26, 2025 at 2:23 PM

Mount Etna is on the island of Sicily, not in Greece as I mistakenly said in this episode. Mea culpa!

Post by “Cassius” of February 26, 2025 at 3:30 PM

For the sake of extending the discussion of the Sedley article into the future, I've started a new thread here, and suggest that new people who come across this and wish to talk about the article go here:

Thread

[David Sedley's "Epicurean vs Cyreniac Happiness"](#)

[epicureanfriends.com/wcf/filebase/file/76/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/filebase/file/76/) Thanks to Joshua for finding this article and Don for finding the link at Academia. There are a number of very important aspects to this article (which I suspect is also one of Dr. Sedley's most recent articles on Epicurus) that could fit under different categories here. However it came to our attention in the discussion of how Infinite time does not contain "greater" pleasure than finite time, and we first mention it in Lucretius Today 269.

I want...



Cassius

February 26, 2025 at 3:29 PM