

Episode 271 - TD01 - Understanding Epicurus Through Tusculan Disputations

Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2025 at 10:56 AM

Welcome to Episode 271 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.

This week we begin a new series covering Cicero's Tusculan Disputations from an Epicurean viewpoint. This series addresses five of the greatest questions in philosophy, with Cicero speaking for the majority and Epicurus the main opponent:

- 1. Is Death An Evil? (Cicero says no and Epicurus says no, but for very different reasons)**
- 2. Is Pain An Evil? (Cicero says no, Epicurus says yes)**
- 3. Does the Wise Man Experience Grief and Fear? (Cicero says no, Epicurus says yes)**
- 4. Does the Wise Man Experience Joy and Desire? (Cicero says no, Epicurus says yes)**
- 5. Is Virtue Sufficient For A Happy Life? (Cicero says yes, Epicurus says no)**

As we found in Cicero's "On Ends" and "On The Nature of the Gods," Cicero treated Epicurean Philosophy as a major contender in the battle between the philosophies, and in discussing this conflict and explaining Epicurus' answers to these questions, we will deepen our understanding of Epicurus and how he compares to the other major schools.

We'll be reading from the [Charles Yonge edition](#).

Here is a link to our discussion guide: [Epicurean Views Of Tusculun Disputations](#)

Our thread here at the forum specifically dedicated to [Tusculan Disputations is here](#).

As usual, this guide is a work in progress, and at the moment the titles of the sections are in flux. Each bullet point contains a section of text referencing Epicurus, but the heading assigned

may not reflect the full topic of the discussion. Feel free to make suggestions on the heading titles, additional surrounding text which should be included for clarity, or any other commentary that would be good to insert to explain each section, and we'll update the discussion guide as we proceed.

The current list of headings includes:

1. Epicureans argue that at death we neither become gods nor companions of gods, so death is not a better state for us
2. Epicureans charge Democritus with having said that the body has feeling after death.
3. No one but Epicureans read Epicurean texts
4. Epicurus gave in to effeminacy in fearing pain
5. Epicurus said there is no evil in infamy itself unless accompanied by pain
6. Epicurus is allegedly laughing at us in regard to pain.
7. Epicurus says that grief arises naturally when we imagine an evil.
8. Epicurus on anticipating future pains - he says it is folly to do so as the Cyreniacs suggest we should.
9. On the happy life according to Epicurus (and Zeno the Epicurean)
10. On Epicurus' consolation
11. Epicurus on attraction as physical
12. On Epicurus' alleged inconsistency
13. Epicurus on the wise man while being tortured
14. Epicurus on nothing good but pleasure
15. Epicurus on the division of desires
16. Epicurus on living in accord with local law.
17. Epicureans on the wise man being always happy.

For purposes of planning ahead, this series will be followed by a series on "Debating Epicurus in Academic Questions." A thread devoted to that series where you can make comments on what aspects of "Academic Questions" to include is [here](#).

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/64892049/media>

Post by “Cassius” of March 7, 2025 at 2:09 PM

More thoughts prior to recording this episode on 3/9:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4318-episode-271-td01-understanding-epicurus-through-tusculan-disputations/>

The first part of Tusculum Disputations focuses on death. Cicero actually seems to embrace some Epicurean arguments in support of the idea that death is not "bad" for us if we cease to exist. In the end however he seems to focus on the benefits of continuing to exist after death, and this is where Cicero says that he would rather be wrong with Plato than right with those (presumably including Epicurus) who don't believe that the soul survives death.

There are also a couple of comments about Epicurean criticism of Democritus in regard to death, and no one but Epicureans reading Epicurean books.

The majority of the material that is likely to be of interest to us however probably starts in Book 2 and is regard to how we should view pain. I think we are going to find that Cicero largely misrepresents how "pain-adverse" Epicurus is, but this is going to give us the opportunity to revisit in more detail many of the issues that we regularly have to address -- i.e., was Epicurus in fact fixated on avoiding pain in the manner of a hypochondriac or someone we might describe as having a "phobia," as Cicero wants to paint him, or was something else going on.

We often spend a lot of time talking about the desirability of pleasure, and this will give us the opportunity to talk about how we can explain the pleasure-pain calculation in a way that doesn't give in to negative stereotypes. These negative stereotypes are a major reason that "regular people" are initially persuaded that Stoicism is superior, and it will be good to talk about various ways to point out that those stereotypes are wrong. We have the examples and arguments cited by Torquatus in Book One to draw on, and if others have suggestions for us to include please let us know.

For example I regularly see references to the camp of Julius Caesar having turned into a breeding-down for Epicureanism among Cassius Longinus and others of Caesar's followers, so this will be a good episode to discuss the combination of Epicurean philosophy with strong action.

Other examples may include:

1 - Cicero's letter to Cassius Longinus, among other aspects of which includes Cicero's remark that he had apparently misjudged the vigor of Epicurean philosophy given Cassius' actions;

2 - Lucian's references to the Epicurean who stood up against Alexander the Oracle-Monger and almost got stoned for doing so, as well as Lucian's general reference that the situation with Alexander called for a Democritus or an Epicurus to stand up against Alexander and expose his fraud;

No doubt there are other example that can be used to show that being an Epicurean doesn't make one a pain-phobic pushover.

Post by "Joshua" of March 7, 2025 at 2:27 PM

Quote

If I err in 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.

-Cato, in Cicero's *De Senectute*

Edit to add; [this](#) is the Perseus Project citation for that quote.

Post by “Cassius” of March 7, 2025 at 2:39 PM

Tusculum Disputations Section 1

XVII. But I return to the ancients. They scarcely ever gave any reason for their opinion but what could be explained by numbers or definitions. It is reported of Plato, that he came into Italy to make himself acquainted with the Pythagoreans; and that when there, amongst others, he made an acquaintance with Archytas and Timæus, and learned from them all the tenets of the Pythagoreans; and that he not only was of the same opinion with Pythagoras concerning the immortality of the soul, but that he also brought reasons in support of it; which, if you have nothing to say against it, I will pass over, and say no more at present about all this hope of immortality.

A. What, will you leave me when you have raised my expectations so high? I had rather, so help me Hercules! be mistaken with Plato, whom I know how much you esteem, and whom I admire myself from what you say of him, than be in the right with those others.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 9, 2025 at 4:02 PM

Touching on the topic of the nature of death which came up during the podcast recording...here is an interesting article... a modern understanding of "What Really Happens When You Die":

Excerpt:

Quote

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4318-episode-271-td01-understanding-epicurus-through-tusculan-disputations/>

When you die, you have to have your death certified by a doctor and a death certificate or a cremation certificate issued. If we have had contact with a patient in the previous two weeks and know the cause of death - if someone has been terminally ill, say - we can sign the death certificate immediately. If we haven't seen the patient in the two weeks before their death, or if they have died after being discharged from hospital, then we must report it to the coroner, who may request a postmortem. The coroner may also request a postmortem if drugs or alcohol are suspected, or if there's any suggestion of a violent death. It's my job to say if somebody is dead, not how they died.

What I'm essentially looking for is brainstem activity. The brainstem is the part of the brain where the body's vital functions are controlled - the breathing, the heart, the brain itself; it is the computer room of the body. If that bit of the brain is dead, then the person is essentially dead. You can still have reflex actions, so you may twitch after death.

To certify that someone is dead, you listen to the heart for one minute and feel for a pulse for one minute. You examine for signs of breathing, you look at the pupils to check there is no response to a shining light. If you're not certain, you can rub on the breastbone, which is a very painful procedure: if they are not dead, they'll quickly jump up and say, "That hurt!"

Nowadays there are machine tests for brainstem death that involve connecting up the brain and looking at the activity. Those tests would be done before organ donation.

[Read the full article here](#)

Post by “Bryan” of March 9, 2025 at 10:59 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

that he not only was of the same opinion with Pythagoras concerning the immortality of the soul,

I wanted to share this dialogue from Lucian's "Philosophies For Sale" (Loeb, Volume 2, page 452)

HERMES: The noblest of philosophies for sale, the most distinguished; who'll buy? Who wants to be more than man? Who wants to apprehend the music of the spheres and to be born again?

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4318-episode-271-td01-understanding-epicurus-through-tusculan-disputations/>

BUYER: For looks, he is not bad, but what does he know best ?

HERMES: Arithmetic, astronomy, charlatanry, geometry, music and quackery; you see in him a first-class soothsayer.

BUYER: May I question him?

HERMES: Yes, and good luck to you!

Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2025 at 8:42 PM

Here is a Greg Sadler / Stoic view of Tusulan Disputations. This of course is from a Stoic point of view but it does a good job of explaining the significance of what is in the book. I see that Sadler is particularly focused on the latter parts of the book on virtue, but I think the former parts on death and pain will interest us as Epicureans even more. I have reviewed the first book today and it's very interesting how the topics Cicero deals with, in attempting to prove the immortality of the soul, are so similar to what Lucretius deals with in his poem and Epicurus deals with in Herodotus and Menoeceus.

I think we'll get a lot out of going through this book closely. Other than Diogenes of Oinoanda and Plutarch, this might be the last major philosophic work that took Epicurus seriously (even in opposition to him) and so it puts Epicurean philosophy squarely in the spotlight of the most advanced philosophic thinking of the ancient world before things deteriorated.

<https://youtu.be/xvd3sjxQ3Ak>

Post by “Cassius” of March 12, 2025 at 6:48 AM

Editing this first episode is taking a little longer than normal as i think about what this book is all about and how to break it down.

Each of the five parts is divided between an opening discussion that has some interesting information but which is unrelated to the topic, followed by a specific topic.

It's probably going to make sense after this general introductory episode to focus on the main topic of each section, and then come back at the end and mop up the interesting but random details in the introductions.

With that as the organizing theory, the topics that will be addressed can be seen to be major issues of relevance to Epicurus as to all schools:

- ** Is Death An Evil?
- ** Is Pain An Evil?
- ** Does the Wise Man Experience Grief and Fear?
- ** Does the Wise Man Experience Joy and Desire?
- ** Is Virtue Sufficient For A Happy Life?

Cicero presents the Epicurean view on all of these after setting up the question, and he contrasts the view of each school on these topics. These amount to the kind of "practical question" that many of us here want to focus on, so i think it will make sense for us to read Cicero's presentation word for word, like we did in Lucretius, so we'll probably go back to what we were doing in On Ends and On the Nature of the Gods and organize each week according to a specific section of text.

That means that unless something happens during editing and I find that we'll be backtracking too much, we'll start the next episode in Part I, section V:

A. To me death seems to be an evil.

M. What to those who are already dead? or to those who must die?

A. To both.

M. It is a misery then, because an evil?

A. Certainly.

M. Then those who have already died, and those who have still got to die, are both miserable?

A. So it appears to me.

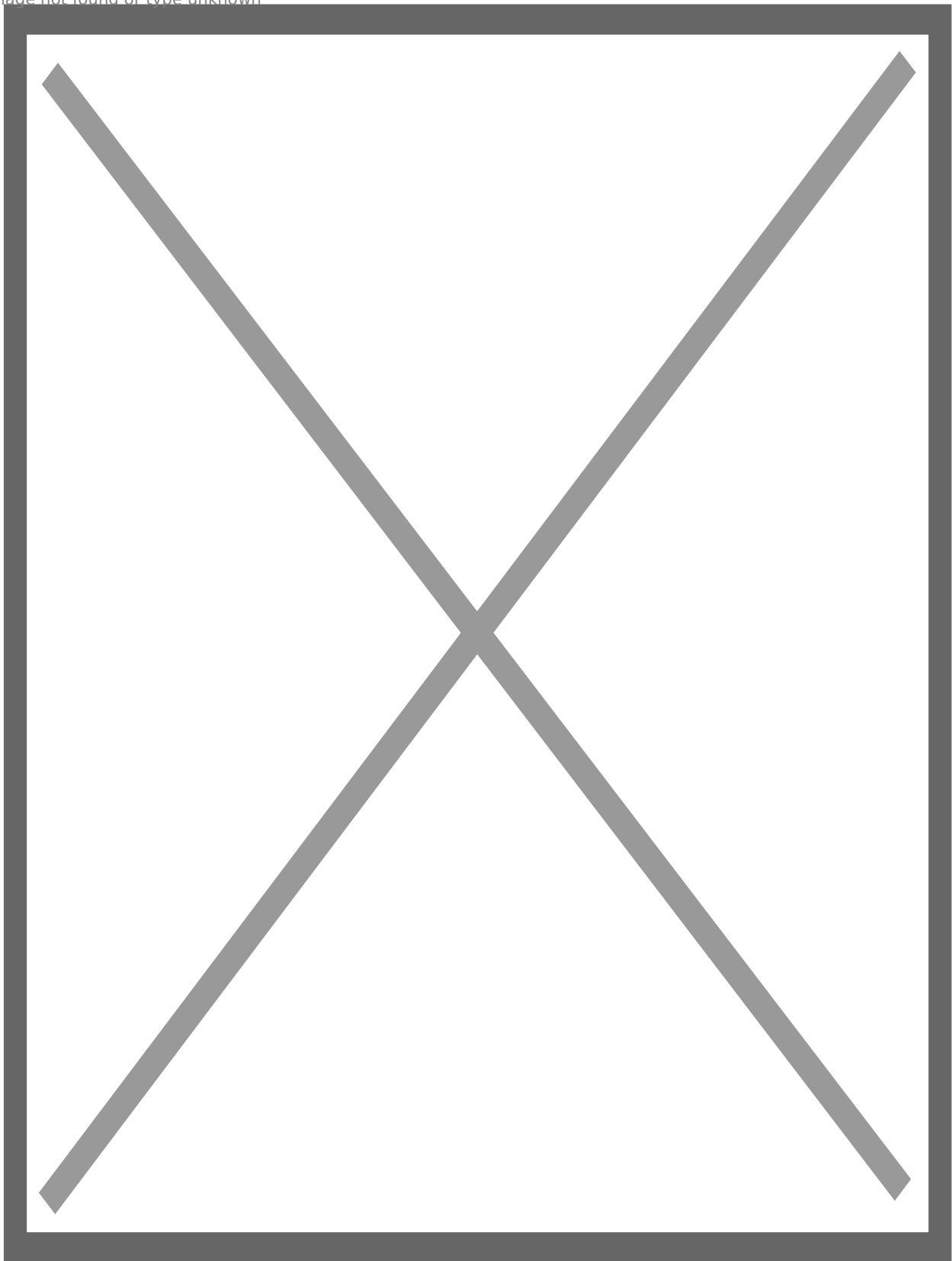
M. Then all are miserable?

A. Every one.

Post by "Cassius" of March 12, 2025 at 10:41 AM

Here is another review of the topics and significance of TD:

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[Tusculan Disputations](#)

Tusculan Disputations is considered by many to be Cicero's richest and most profound philosophical work. This new, original translation is available in Kindle,...
qcurtius.com

Post by "Cassius" of March 14, 2025 at 9:15 PM

Episode 271 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today's episode is entitled: "Understanding Epicurus Through Tusculan Disputations," which is an introduction to our new series of episodes.

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/64892049/media>

Post by "Bryan" of March 15, 2025 at 2:05 AM

This is great, thank you both! I've got the books and will read along.

Yes it is interesting De Finibus starts with a bit of an apology for Latin, but here in T.D., Cicero is a bit more confident; also, both are addressed to Brutus.

Cicero admits Amafinius was popular. As you said Joshua, at 4.3,6 we hear that "...by the publication of his works, the crowd had its interest stirred, and flocked to the teaching he advocated in preference to any other."

So Cicero gives us a hard time on both ends by saying Amafinius' style is so bad that he is only read by *Epicureans*—but then admits *that is a large part of the population!*

The topic of Democritus' zombies is interesting, great sources for that! "Stories of people who appeared to have died and then came back to life were collected by many of the ancients including the scientist Democritus in his writings..." (Proclus, Commentary on the Republic, 2.113.6)

Post by "Cassius" of March 15, 2025 at 3:17 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4318-episode-271-td01-understanding-epicurus-through-tusculan-disputations/>

[Quote from Bryan](#)

The topic of Democritus' zombies is interesting, great sources for that! "Stories of people who appeared to have died and then came back to life were collected by many of the ancients including the scientist Democritus in his writings..."

Bryan I have the feeling that there is more going on here than I understand. I would think that anyone of normal experience would know that there are "degrees" of sickness and disease, including being "knocked out" and in "comas" that would present interesting questions of how "far gone" a person is before death. That wouldn't seem to me to be so exotic as to pose a particularly difficult question, and I think we have instances in Lucretius where it is spoken of that the spirit retreats within the body.

I suppose everyone was interested in this just as to what it says about how life operates, but I don't necessarily see why the Epicureans would be critical of Democritus on this unless Democritus were trying to draw from this some conclusion about the soul to which the Epicureans objected.

Do we really know and understand Democritus' religious views? Just because he was an atomist, does that mean that he had rejected all supernatural influences, or did he perhaps try to integrate the supernatural with his atoms, perhaps due to some issue deriving from his determinism and skepticism?

I sure wish we had more info on Democritus!

Post by "Bryan" of March 15, 2025 at 10:33 AM

It seems he said that the god-to-man connection via films is a *deliberate* communication from the gods to men -- and he thought the films have their *own* perception.

Post by "Cassius" of March 15, 2025 at 3:20 PM

Very helpful!

So to what extent did Democritus keep his atomism essentially theistic?

Was Democritus laying the groundwork for a no supernatural universe, or just laying the groundwork for today's theists to say that God works not in mysterious ways but through atoms?

Simply referring to Democritus as a great man is not very clarifying in terms of what he actually believed.

Post by “Bryan” of March 15, 2025 at 10:49 PM

Following the Democritus' zombies, I was expecting ghosts, and at 1.13.29:

"they had no grasp of a reasoned system of causation and were influenced by the frequent sight of apparitions, mostly seen in the hours of night, to think that those who had departed from life still lived." Which is very reminiscent of the apparitions Lucretius talks about.

But the necromancy surprised me! Cicero uses the greek ἡ νεκυομαντεία, nekyomanteia. 1.16.36, and says his friend Appius practiced the rituals, but the ghosts were uncommunicative. "none the less they wish the phantoms to speak and this cannot take place without tongue and palate."

Cicero even gives a sample of the Latin.

"Unde animae excitantur obscura umbra aperto ex ostio Altae Acheruntis, falso sanguine, mortuorum imagines!"

Please never say that three times by candlelight.