

Episode 278 - TD08 - Two Opposite Views On When We Might Be Better Off Dead

Post by "Cassius" of April 24, 2025 at 6:35 PM

Welcome to Episode 278 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 continue our 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. 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.

Today we continue debating the nature of death in [Section XXXII](#).

Our general discussion guide for Tusculan Disputations is here:
<https://epicureanfriends.github.io/tusculundisput...lish/section:12>

And a side-by-side version with comments is here:

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/65839796/media>

Post by “Joshua” of April 26, 2025 at 12:25 AM

It seems to me that we could pick up the pace in the coming sections if we wanted to. The overarching argument in sections XXXII and after is this; *They are wrong who think that the soul dies with the body, but even if they were right death still would not be an evil.*

Here is a rough outline of the sections to come.

- XXXII
 - Even if we allow that the soul is not immortal, death is not an evil.
 - We can dismiss the Stoic view entirely, because they allow what is difficult to believe (i.e. that the soul can exist apart from the body) - but deny what is easy to believe (i.e. that the soul, if it can exist apart from the body, can be immortal)
 - Should we then consider the views of Panætius the Platonist? who;
 - *"maintains what nobody denies, that everything which has been generated will perish; and that even souls are generated, which he thinks appears from their resemblance to those of the men who begot them; for that likeness is as apparent in the turn of their minds as in their bodies. But he brings another reason; that there is nothing which is sensible of pain which is not also liable to disease; but whatever is liable to disease must be liable to death; the soul is sensible of pain, therefore it is liable to perish."*
- XXXIII
 - His arguments are easily refuted.
 - He does not know that he is confusing the intellect with *"those parts of the mind in which those disorders, anger and lust, have their seat"*
 - He also does not acknowledge that there are many sons of great Romans who are lazy and indolent, and do not resemble their fathers in their *"turn of mind"*
 - However, we have sufficiently spoken of the immortality of the soul, and must now *"prove that, even if the soul did perish, there would be, even then, no evil in death."*
- XXXIV **Note: We covered this section in episode 271**
 - I am in hopes that our fate is to "mount up to heaven", but if the soul should perish with the body, there would be no pain or feeling of any kind in the body after death.

And *"though Epicurus charges Democritus with saying [that the body feels pain after death]; the disciples of Democritus deny it"*

- Death is not an evil because;
 - The moment of death is instantaneous, and pain in dying is slight
 - When we die we do not leave mostly good things behind; rather most of what we leave behind is evil
- XXXV
 - Even when life seems to be mostly good for some, the caprices of fortune frequently changes good with evil. It is an evil to be tied to these changes, where even blessings are uncertain.
 - It would have been better for men like Priam and Pompey to die sooner than they did.
- XXXVI
 - *"These calamities are avoided by death, for even though they should never happen, there is a possibility that they may; but it never occurs to a man, that such a disaster may befall him himself."*
 - *"But should we grant them even this, that men are by death deprived of good things, would it follow that the dead are therefore in need of the good things of life, and are miserable on that account?"*
 - No. *"These considerations apply to the living, but the dead are neither in need of the blessings of life, nor of life itself."*
 - Do living people want wings or horns? Certainly not. But why not?
 - Because *"not to have what neither custom nor nature has fitted you for, would not imply a want of them, even though you were sensible that you had them not."*
 - *"To want, then, signifies this; to be without that which you would be glad to have: for inclination for a thing is implied in the word want"*
 - *"To want," then, is an expression which you cannot apply to the dead, nor is the mere fact of wanting something necessarily lamentable. "*
 - *"For to want, implies to be sensible; but the dead are insensible; therefore the dead can be in no want."*
- XXXVII
 - Besides, this is hardly a question for philosophy when generals and whole armies have rushed into death without fear.
 - *"But are any of these miserable now? nay, they were not so even at the first moment after they had breathed their last: nor can any one be miserable after he has lost all sensation. Oh, but the mere circumstance of being without sensation is miserable. It might be so if being without sensation were the same thing as wanting it; but as it is evident there can be nothing of any kind in that which has no existence, what can there be afflicting to that which can neither feel want, nor be sensible of anything?"*

- The death of soul and body together means complete destruction, and *"there is no difference between a Hippocentaur, which never had existence, and king Agamemnon [who no longer exists]"*
 - *"M. Camillus [who died centuries before Cicero] is no more concerned about this present civil war, than I was at the sacking of Rome [which happened centuries before Cicero was born]"*
- XXXVIII
 - *"Why, then, should Camillus be affected with the thoughts of these things happening three hundred and fifty years after his time? And why should I be uneasy if I were to expect that some nation might possess itself of this city, ten thousand years hence?"* It is not because we regard ourselves, but because we have such high regard for our country.
 - Thus death *"does not deter a wise man from making such provision for his country and his family, as he hopes may last for ever; and from regarding posterity, of which he can never have any real perception, as belonging to himself."*
 - *"just in the same manner as our birth was the beginning of things with us, so death will be the end; and as we were no ways concerned with anything before we were born, so neither shall we be after we are dead; and in this state of things where can the evil be? since death has no connexion with either the living or the dead; the one have no existence at all, the other are not yet affected by it."*
 - [note; this is Lucretius' argument from symmetry]
 - Furthermore, death is in some ways like sleep. There is no sensation in sleep, and there cannot be any in death.
- XXXIX
 - Is it miserable to die 'before our time'? How can it be? Our time of life has been loaned to us by nature, and we cannot complain when she who has given it out recalls it back.
 - *"They that complain thus, allow, that if a young child dies the survivors ought to bear his loss with equanimity; [but] that if an infant in the cradle dies, they ought not even to utter a complaint; and yet nature has been more severe with [the infants] in demanding back what she gave. They answer by saying, that such [infants] have not tasted the sweets of life; while the [older children] had begun to conceive hopes of great happiness, and indeed had begun to realize them. Men judge better in other things, and allow a part to be preferable to none; why do they not admit the same estimate in life?"*
 - I don't think anyone would be happier if a longer life were granted to them. Even if old age gives us prudence, who is to say what constitutes old age? *"But because there is nothing beyond old age, we call that long; all these things are said to be long or short, according to the proportion of time they were given us for"*
 - Compare the longest life of a man with the length of eternity, and by such comparison our lives will seem shorter than the life of an insect.

- XL through XLIX; [Note; I'll get around to these sections eventually.]
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Post by “Cassius” of April 26, 2025 at 6:37 AM

Yes I agree we can pick up the pace and that outline will be helpful! Most of what needs to be said about death we've covered already, and we have four more major topics to pick up when we're finished with death.

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2025 at 8:53 PM

Episode 278 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today's episode is entitled: "Two Opposite Views On 'Being Better Off Dead'"

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/65839796/media>

Post by “Cassius” of May 1, 2025 at 8:57 PM

I didn't get a chance to do my usual "two pass" editing of this episode, so if someone hears something that really needs to be re-edited, please let me know.