

# Episode 314 - TD41 - Cicero Challenges Epicurus: Can Pleasures Really Overcome Pains?

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2025 at 5:34 PM

Welcome to Episode 314 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](http://EpicureanFriends.com), where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

We are closing in on the end of those portions of Tusculan Disputations that are most relevant to Epicurean philosophy today, so we'll pick up this week after [Section 26 of Part 5](#).

As we close in on Cicero's final arguments on virtue, we will focus on the very different view of virtue held by Epicurus. Two passages that reveal this difference are:

Quote

## **Cicero, Tusculan Disputations 3.41—42 (Usener 67, 69)**

[Epicurus On The End] 'For my part I cannot conceive of anything as the good if I remove the pleasures perceived by means of taste and sex and listening to music, and the pleasant motions felt by the eyes through beautiful sights, or any other pleasures which some sensation generates in a man as a whole. Certainly it is impossible to say that mental delight is the only good. For a delighted mind, as I understand it, consists in the expectation of all the things I just mentioned - to be of a nature able to acquire them without pain... ' A little later he adds: 'I have often asked men who were called wise what they could retain as the content of goods if they removed those things, unless they wanted to pour out empty words. I could learn nothing from them; and if they want to babble on about virtues and wisdoms, they will be speaking of nothing except the way in which those pleasures I mentioned are produced.' (Long & Sedley - Hellenistic Philosophers)

Quote

XII. The truth of the position that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

Suppose on the other hand a person crushed beneath the heaviest load of mental and of bodily anguish to which humanity is liable. Grant him no hope of ultimate relief in view also give him no pleasure either present or in prospect. Can one describe or imagine a more pitiable state? If then a life full of pain is the thing most to be avoided, it follows that to live in pain is the highest evil; and this position implies that a life of pleasure is the ultimate good. In fact the mind possesses nothing in itself upon which it can rest as final. Every fear, every sorrow can be traced back to pain; there is no other thing besides pain which is of its own nature capable of causing either anxiety or distress.

Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the Telos, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to live agreeably.

virtues, and all wise men have full experience of such joys, we are bound to admit that they are all happy.

XXVI. A. Even in torture and upon the rack?  
M. Do you think I meant an bed of violets and roses? Or is Epicurus, who merely puts on the mask of a philosopher and has bestowed the title on himself, to be allowed to say (and say it indeed he does, really and truly, with my pronounced approval, spite of his inconsistency) that there is no time when the wise man, even if burnt, racked, cut in pieces, cannot cry out: "I count it all as nothing," particularly as Epicurus restricts evil to pain and good to pleasure, makes a mock of this "right and base" of ours and says we are baited with words and uttering sounds empty of meaning, and that nothing interests us except the bodily sensation of either rough or smooth? Shall we allow this man, whose judgment differs but little from the instinct of the beasts, to be forgetful of himself and be disdainful of fortune at the moment when all that he holds good and evil is at fortune's disposal; to say that he is happy in the extremity of torture and upon the rack at the moment when he has laid down that not only is pain the worst of evils but is the only one as well? And he has in no way provided for himself those healing aids to the endurance of pain to be found in strength of soul, shame of baseness, the habitual practice of patience, the lessons of fortitude, a manly hardness, but says that he finds peace in the recollection of past

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virtues, and all wise men have full experience of such joys, we are bound to admit that they are all happy.  
XXVI. A. Even in torture and upon the rack?  
M. Do you think I meant on beds of violets and roses? Or is Epicurus, who merely puts on the mask of a philosopher and has bestowed the title on himself, to be allowed to say (and say it indeed he does, really and truly, with my pronounced approval, spite of his inconsistency) that there is no time when the wise man, even if burnt, racked, cut in pieces, cannot cry out: "I count it all as nothing," particularly as Epicurus restricts evil to pain and good to pleasure, makes a mock of this "right and base" of ours and says we are basted with words and uttering sounds empty of meaning, and that nothing interests us except the bodily sensation of either rough or smooth? Shall we allow this man, whose judgment differs but little from the instinct of the beasts, to be forgetful of himself and be disdainful of fortune at the moment when all that he holds good and evil is at fortune's disposal; to say that he is happy in the extremity of torture and upon the rack at the moment when he has laid down that not only is pain the worst of evils but is the only one as well? And he has in no way provided for himself those healing aids to the endurance of pain to be found in strength of soul, shame of baseness, the habitual practice of patience, the lessons of fortitude, a manly hardiness, but says that he finds peace in the recollection of past

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## Post by "Cassius" of December 31, 2025 at 7:16 AM

There is a section in this weeks text that might be of special interest to [Don](#), since i recall him mentioning the issue several times.

In [this section of Tusculan Disputations](#) Cicero is sharply critical, but I find particularly interesting the "for I do not apprehend how past pleasures can allay present evils" as that is a direct challenge for us to explain the common reference in Epicurus to using the pleasures of the past to "offset" or "array against" current pains.

### Quote

Nor did he take any trouble to provide himself with those remedies which might have enabled him to bear pain; such as firmness of mind, a shame of doing anything base, exercise, and the habit of patience, precepts of courage, and a manly hardiness: but he says that he supports himself on the single recollection of past pleasures, as if any one, when the weather was so hot as that he was scarcely able to bear it, should comfort himself by recollecting that he was once in my country Arpinum, where he was surrounded on every side by cooling streams: for I do not apprehend how past pleasures can allay present evils. But when he says that a wise man is always happy, who would have no right to say so if he were consistent with himself, what may they not do, who allow nothing to be desirable, nothing to be looked on as good but what is honourable? Let, then, the Peripatetics and old Academics follow my example, and at

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length leave off muttering to themselves; and openly and with a clear voice let them be bold to say, that a happy life may not be inconsistent with the agonies of Phalaris's bull.

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**Post by “Cassius” of December 31, 2025 at 5:42 PM**

Episode 314 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our episode is entitled: "Cicero Challenges Epicurus: Can Pleasures Really Overcome Pains?"

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