

Epicurus

Reading 18 – Epicureanism in Cicero's *On the Ends of Good Things and Bad Things*

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"O Epicurus! You who were first able to raise so bright a light from so great a darkness, shedding light on the blessings of life! ... For as soon as your system of philosophy that arose in your divine intellect begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind disperse and the walls of the world open wide. ... You placed human existence from amid great waves of trouble and great darkness of the mind into a condition of tranquility and a clear light. ... I follow you, the glory of the Greeks!" —Titus Lucretius Carus

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Reading 18

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The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher.

Epicureanism in Cicero's *On the Ends of Good Things and Bad Things*

IN BRIEF: *The Roman L. Manlius Torquatus explains Epicurus' ethical system, namely how pleasure¹ is the highest good that leads to a life of tranquility and happiness, and how pain is the opposite. Along the way, he discusses how the virtues produce pleasure and how selfless friendship is central to the Epicurean way of life.²*

L. MANLIUS TORQUATUS, THE FRIEND OF CICERO, IS SPEAKING:

WE ARE SEEKING, then, that which is the final and ultimate good, that which all philosophers agree must be of such a nature as to be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else.

"Epicurus proposes that this is pleasure, which he

holds to be the highest good, while pain is the highest evil. He sets out to prove this in the following manner: [30] every animal, as soon as it is born, longs and strives for pleasure, delighting in it as the highest good, while it rejects pain as the highest evil, driving it away when possible. As long as the animal is not

seduced or perverted, it does so thanks to the prompting of nature's own genuine and honest proclamation. Thus, Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to *prove* that we seek pleasure and avoid pain. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, just as fire is perceived to be hot, snow white, and honey sweet. None of these things require an elaborate argument to establish them; it is enough merely to draw attention to them. ...

"Take away sensation from a human being and nothing remains. It follows that nature herself is the judge of that which is in agreement with or contrary to nature. Aside from pleasure and pain, how does nature perceive or judge a thing in order to seek or avoid something?

[32] "... No one rejects, dislikes, or avoids pleasure itself, simply because it is pleasure. Rather, those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful, and so they avoid it. Nor again is there anyone who loves, pursues, or desires to obtain pain itself, simply because it is pain. Rather, it is because at times things happen in which toil and pain can procure some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no troublesome consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no pleasure? [33] On the other hand, we blame with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so charmed and seduced by the allurements of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to follow. And equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which amounts to avoiding toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be received and every pain rejected. But at certain times, and thanks to the claims of duty or the obligations of business, it will often happen that pleasures have to be refused and troubles accepted. In these matters, therefore, the wise man

always holds to this principle of selection: he postpones certain pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to drive away even worse pains. ...

[37] "... The tendency of all the virtues to produce pleasure is a topic that will be treated in its own place later. At present I will proceed to explain the nature of pleasure itself along with its qualities in order to remove the error of all those who are ignorant in their understanding of our school of philosophy, supposing it to be devoted to pleasure, luxurious and effeminate, when it is serious, moderate, and austere. The pleasure we pursue is not that kind alone which directly affects our physical nature with a delightful feeling—a positively agreeable perception of the senses. Rather, as we understand it, the greatest pleasure is that which is perceived upon the removal of every pain. When we are delivered from pain, we delight in the liberation itself—in the absence of every trouble and distress. But everything that causes delight is a pleasure—just as everything that is displeasing is a pain. Therefore, the complete removal of pain has correctly been termed a pleasure. For example, when hunger and thirst are banished by food and drink, the mere fact of getting rid of the distress of each causes a consequent pleasure. So, generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place.

[38] "Accordingly, Epicurus held that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain. For the state supposed by some thinkers to be intermediate—characterized as it is by the absence of every pain—is itself, he held, a pleasure. Not only that, but it is truly the highest pleasure. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel pleasure or pain. But Epicurus holds that the absence of every pain defines the highest pleasure. Beyond this, pleasure may be varied and divided, but it may not be enlarged and extended. ...

[40] "The truth of the position that pleasure is the final good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us posit a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and great pleasures in both body and mind, undisturbed either by the

presence or prospect of pain. What possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess a strength of mind that is a defense against all fear of death or pain. He will know that death is the complete removal of sensation, and that long-term pain is slight and severe pain is brief, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. [41] Let such a man, moreover, have no dread of any supernatural power. Let him never allow the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection. How can things be better for this man?

"Suppose, on the other hand, a man crushed beneath the heaviest load of mental and bodily pain that can befall a human being. Grant to him no hope of ultimate relief. Nor does he have either present pleasure nor any expectation of any pleasure to come. Can one describe or imagine a more miserable condition?

"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. This judgment implies that to live with 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 beside pain that is by its own nature able to disturb or torment.

[42] "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 when they are a means by which one may live with pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which everything else is a means, is the highest or ultimate or final good. It is what the Greeks term *telos*, the end or goal of life. It must therefore be admitted that the highest good is to live in an agreeable manner.

"Those who place the highest good in virtue alone are captivated by the splendor of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be liberated from the greatest error. Your *Stoic* school goes on about the extraordinary beauty of the virtues. But if

they did not produce pleasure, who would judge them either praiseworthy or desirable? We prize the art of medicine not for its interest as a science but for its conduciveness to good health. The art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. The same is true for wisdom, which must be regarded as the art of living. If wisdom brought about nothing good, it would not be sought after. But as things stand, it is sought after because it is the skilled worker that procures and produces pleasure." [43] ...

"Ignorance regarding good and evil is the one great disturbing factor in the life of men. Error about these often deprives us of our greatest pleasures and tortures us with the most distressing pains of mind. So it is that we need the aid of wisdom to rid us of our fears and desires, to root out all our false beliefs and thoughtlessness, and to serve as our infallible guide to the attainment of pleasure. Truly it is wisdom alone that can drive sorrow away from our souls and prevent us from trembling in fear. Go to school with her, and you may live in peace, quenching the glowing flames of desire.

"For the desires are insatiable. They ruin not only individual men but whole families. They often overthrow the republic all at once. [44] Hatred, disagreement, discord, sedition, and war are born from desires. Nor do they only flaunt themselves abroad or turn their blind onslaughts solely against others. Even when kept within the soul they quarrel and fall out among themselves. And this inevitably makes the whole of life bitter.

"So only the wise one who prunes away all vanity and error can possibly live untroubled by grief and fear, content within the bounds that nature has set.

[45] "Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to living well than Epicurus' teaching regarding the different kinds of desires. He said that one kind is both natural and necessary. Another is natural without being necessary. A third is neither natural nor necessary. The principle of classification is that the necessary desires are satisfied with little trouble or expense. The natural desires also require little,

since nature's own riches, which are enough to make her content, are both easily procured and limited in amount. But for the imaginary, empty desires, it is impossible to discover either a measure or an end to them.

[46] "If then we observe that error and ignorance reduce the whole of life to confusion, while wisdom alone is able to protect us from the onslaughts of passion and the menaces of fear, teaching us to bear even the affronts of fortune with moderation, and showing us all the paths that lead to calmness and peace, why should we hesitate to avow that wisdom is to be desired for the sake of the pleasures it brings and folly to be avoided because of its troublesome consequences?

[47] "The same principle will lead us to declare that moderation also is not desirable for its own sake but because it bestows peace of mind, and it calms the heart with a peaceful sense of harmony. For it is moderation that warns us to be guided by reason in what we seek and what we avoid. Nor is it enough to judge what it is right to do or to leave undone—we also need to abide by our judgment. Most men, however, are unable to stand firm. Their resolution weakens and succumbs as soon as the fair form of pleasure meets their gaze, and they surrender themselves prisoners to their passions, failing to foresee the inevitable result. So it is that for the sake of a pleasure at once small and unnecessary, and one which they might have procured by other means or even denied themselves altogether without pain, they experience a serious disease, or loss of fortune, or disgrace, and often they are penalized by the law within the courts of justice.

[48] "On the other hand, those who are resolved to enjoy their pleasures so as to avoid all painful consequences from them, and who retain their faculty of judgment and avoid being seduced by pleasure into courses that they perceive to be wrong, attain the very highest pleasure by forgoing pleasure. Similarly, they also often voluntarily endure pain in order to avoid experiencing greater pain by not doing so. This clearly proves that immoderation is not undesirable for its own sake, while moderation is desirable

not because it shuns pleasures, but because it procures greater pleasures.

[49] "The same account also holds for courage. The performance of labors, the bearing of pains, are not in themselves attractive, nor are endurance, industry, watchfulness, nor yet that much lauded virtue, diligence, nor even courage. But we aim at these virtues in order to live without trouble or anxiety within our soul and body, and without fear, and so far as possible to be free from distress. The fear of death disturbs the calm and even tenor of life. And to bow the head to pain and bear it abjectly and feebly is a wretched thing. Such weakness has caused many men to betray their parents or their friends, and some their fatherland, and very many utterly to ruin themselves. So, on the other hand, a strong and lofty soul is entirely free from anxiety and torment. It makes light of death, for the dead are only as they were before they were born. It is schooled to encounter pain by recollecting that pains of great severity are terminated by death, and that slight ones decrease now and then, while those of medium intensity are within our own control—that is, we can bear them if they are endurable, or, if they are not, we may serenely quit life's theatre when the play has ceased to please us. These considerations prove that timidity and cowardice are not blamed, nor courage and endurance praised, on their own account. The former are rejected because they produce pain, and the latter are preferred because they produce pleasure.

[50] "It remains to speak of justice—to complete the list of the virtues. But this virtue can practically be treated in the same way as the others. I have shown that wisdom, moderation, and courage are so intricately linked with pleasure that they cannot possibly be separated or divided from it. The same must be judged to be the case with justice. Not only does justice never cause anyone harm, but, on the contrary, it always adds some strength or benefit, partly because of its essentially calming influence on the soul, partly because of the hope that it guarantees a never-failing supply of the things that nature—uncorrupted, unspoiled—really wants.

"And just as thoughtlessness, passion, and cowardice always torment the soul, as well as disturb and

cause storms in the soul, so wickedness, when seated in the mind, causes disturbance by the mere fact of its presence. And once one commits an act of wickedness, however secret the act, one may never feel sure that it will always remain a secret. What usually follows upon a wicked act are, first, suspicion; next, gossip and rumor; then, the accuser comes and the judge. Many wrongdoers have even informed against themselves, as happened in your consulship. [51] And even if any think themselves well guarded and fortified against detection by their fellow-men, they still dread the gods and believe that the anxiety devouring their souls by night and by day is sent by the immortal gods to punish them.

"But how can wickedness lessen the troubles of life, when it increases them thanks to conscience and the penalties of the law and the animosity of one's fellow citizens? Even so, some men indulge without limit their avarice, ambition and love of power, passions, gluttony, and those other desires, which ill-gotten gain can never reduce but rather must inflame all the more—so that it appears that these desires must be restrained more than unlearned.

[52] "Men of sound natures, therefore, are summoned by the voice of true reason to justice, fairness, and honesty. For the man of low status or no power, wrongful behavior is not profitable since it is difficult for such a man to succeed in his designs or to keep up his success when once achieved. On the other hand, for the rich and clever, generous conduct seems more appropriate, and liberality wins them affection and good will, the surest means to a life of peace and quiet. This is so particularly because there really is no motive for making any mistakes or committing any transgressions, [53] since the desires that originate with nature are easily satisfied without wronging anyone, while those that are empty or imaginary should be resisted given that they desire nothing at all that is truly desirable. Not only that, but there is more loss inherent in wrongdoing itself than there is profit in the gains that wrongdoing brings. So, we cannot correctly say that injustice is desirable in itself. It is only so thanks to the all the enjoyment it can produce. ...

"Therefore, we hold that wickedness should be avoided not only because of the inconveniences that result from wickedness but even far more because when it whirls and whirls in the soul, it never gives the soul a chance to rest or be quiet.

[54] "If then even the glory of the virtues, on which all the other philosophers particularly love to speak, has no significance unless virtue is directed to pleasure—since in comparison with virtue, pleasure is the only thing that is satisfying, naturally calling us to itself—it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the highest and final of all the goods, and that to live happily is nothing other than to live with pleasure.

[55] "The view thus firmly established has corollaries that I will briefly explain. One, in themselves, the ends of good things and bad things, that is, pleasure and pain, are not open to mistake. Where people go wrong is in not knowing what things produce pleasure and pain.

"Two, again, we aver that pleasures and pains of the soul arise from the pleasures and pains of the body (and therefore I allow your contention that any Epicureans who think otherwise fail in their cause; and I am aware that many do, though not those who can speak with authority). Even though we experience mental pleasure that is delightful and mental pain that is annoying, still, both arise from the body and return to the body.

"Three, nevertheless, we maintain that the aforementioned does not prevent pleasures and pains of the soul from being much greater than those of the body. For the body can feel only what is present to it at the moment, whereas the soul can also sense the past and the future. Granting that pain of the body is equally painful, yet our sensation of pain can be enormously increased by the belief that some evil of unlimited magnitude and duration threatens to befall us hereafter. And the same consideration may be transferred to pleasure: a pleasure is greater if not accompanied by any fear of evil. [56] This is clearly the case, then: that great pleasure or distress of soul contributes more to a happy or miserable life than does pleasure and pain of the body that is equal.

"Four, we do not agree that when pleasure is withdrawn, affliction at once follows, unless the pleasure

happens to have been replaced by a pain. By contrast, one is glad to lose a pain even though no active sensation of pleasure follows—so one can understand how the absence of pain is pleasure.

[57] “But—five—just as we are elated by the expectation of good things, so are we delighted by their recollection. Fools are tormented by the memory of former evils, while wise men have the delight of renewing in grateful remembrance past goods. We have the power both to hide our misfortunes in an almost perpetual forgetfulness and to summon up pleasant and agreeable memories of our successes. But when we fix our mental gaze closely on the events of the past, then sorrow or gladness follow depending on if these were evil or good.

“I proclaim that here is a very bright road to living happily—an open way, simple and direct. For clearly a human can have no greater good than complete freedom from pain and distress coupled with the enjoyment of the greatest pleasures of the body and soul.

“See then how the theory embraces every possible enhancement of life, every aid to the attainment of that highest good, which is our object. Epicurus, the man whom you denounce as a voluptuary, cries aloud that no one can live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly—and that no one can live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. [58] For truly, it is impossible for a city torn by civil discord to be happy and prosper. The same is true for a house where there is disagreement among the masters. Even less, then, is it possible for a soul that is divided against itself and filled with inward discord to taste any bit of pure and unimpeded pleasure. No—the one who always has inconsistent resolutions and contradictory inclinations cannot experience quiet or tranquility.

[59] “If the enjoyment of life is hindered by the more serious bodily illnesses, how much more must it be hindered by the illnesses of the soul. But extravagant and imaginary desires—for riches, fame, power, and also for licentious pleasures—are nothing but illnesses of the soul. There are grief, distress, and sorrow, which devour the soul and consume a human being with anxiety if one does not understand

that there is no pain in the soul, now or in the future, that is not connected with bodily pain. Every fool is oppressed by one of these illnesses; therefore, there is no fool who is not miserable. [60] There is also death, the stone of Tantalus, that is forever hanging over our heads. And there is superstition, which poisons and destroys all peace. Moreover, fools do not recall past goods, nor do they enjoy present goods; rather, they merely await future goods. And since these goods are necessarily uncertain, they are consumed with the greatest agony and fear. And the climax of their torment is when they perceive too late that all their dreams of wealth or power, influence or fame, have come to nothing. For truly pleasures do not result from these—the pleasures that set them on fire to take on many and great toils.

[61] “Or look again at others who are petty, narrow-minded men, or confirmed pessimists, or spiteful, envious, ill-tempered creatures, unsociable, abusive, and brutal, or others given over to the shallowness of sensual love, impudent or reckless, wanton, headstrong and yet irresolute, always changing their minds. Because of this, their lives have no break from distress. So it is that no fool is happy. Nor is there any wise man who is not happy. This is a truth that we establish far more conclusively than do the Stoics. ...

[62] “At the same time this Stoic doctrine can be stated in an unobjectionable form—one, in fact, that we Epicureans approve. For Epicurus presents his wise man as always happy in this way: his desires are kept within bounds; he disregards death; he has a true understanding of the immortal gods; he does not hesitate, if it is better, to depart from life. Prepared in this manner, he enjoys perpetual pleasure since there is no moment when the pleasures he experiences do not outweigh the pains. He remembers the past with gratitude and grasps the present, giving mind to its delight, and does not rely on the future. He expects to enjoy these delights in the present. Moreover, the vices I mentioned a few moments ago are entirely absent. When he compares his life with that of foolish men, he experiences great pleasure. But if the wise man meets up with pains, they are never so severe that the anguish is more than the joy.

[63] "Again, Epicurus says well that 'fortune barely hinders the wise man. The great concerns of life, the things that matter, are directed by his own deliberation and reason.' And this, that 'no greater pleasure could be obtained from a life of infinite duration than is actually obtained by this existence that we know to be finite.'

"He held that logic is not important as a guide to conduct or as an aid to thought. Natural philosophy he judged all-important. This science explains to us the meaning of terms, the nature of predication, and the law of consistency and contradiction. Secondly, a thorough knowledge of the facts of nature relieves us of the burden of superstition, frees us from the fear of death, and shields us against the disturbing effects of ignorance, from which horrible and dreadful things often manifest. Lastly, to learn what nature's real requirements are improves the moral character also. Besides, it is only by firmly grasping a well-established scientific system, observing the rule or canon that has fallen, as it were, from heaven so that all men may know it—it is only by making that canon the test of all our judgments that we can hope always to stand fast in our belief, unshaken by the eloquence of any man.

[64] "On the other hand, without a full understanding of natural things, it is impossible to maintain the criterion of sense perceptions. Further, every mental presentation has its origin in sensation. So it is that no certain knowledge will be possible unless all sensations are true—just as the theory of Epicurus teaches they are. Those who deny the validity of sensation and say that nothing can be perceived are not even able to expound their own argument since they have excluded the evidence of the senses. Moreover, by abolishing knowledge and science, they abolish all possibility of rational life and action. Hence, natural philosophy supplies courage to face the dread of death, and consistency to resist the fear of religious phenomena, and a calming of the soul to take away all ignorance regarding the mysteries and every secret thing, and moderation and self-control by explaining the nature of the desires and their different kinds. And, as I showed just now, the canon or

criterion of knowledge, which Epicurus also established, delivers a way to distinguish between a true thing and a false thing.

[65] "There remains a topic that is quite necessary for this discussion—that of friendship. ... About it, Epicurus says this: that of all the means of living happily that wisdom has devised, none is greater, none is more productive, none is more delightful than friendship. Nor did he only establish this in truth by his speaking alone but much more by his life—in what he did and how he behaved. ... In a single, small house, Epicurus hosted a large group of friends united by the closest sympathy and affection. And this still goes on in the Epicurean school. ...

[66] "... Friendship can no more be separated from pleasure than can the virtues, which we have discussed already. A solitary, friendless life is necessarily plagued by secret dangers and plenty of fear. Therefore, reason itself advises the acquisition of friends. Having them makes one strong and offers the hope of being able to experience pleasure.

[67] "And just as hatred, jealousy, and contempt are hindrances to pleasure, so friendship is the most trustworthy protector—and producer—of pleasure. This is so both for our friends and ourselves. Not only is it enjoyable in the present but it inspires us with hope for the near and distant future. So, it is not possible to possess a stable and ongoing delight in life without friendship.

"Moreover, it is not possible to maintain friendship itself unless we value our friends as much as we value ourselves. Therefore, this unselfishness itself is brought about in friendship—this, while friendship is also closely linked with pleasure. For we rejoice in our friends' joy as much as in our own, and we are equally pained by their anxieties. [68] Therefore, the wise man will feel exactly the same toward his friend as he does toward himself, and he will exert himself as much for his friend's pleasure as he would for his own. ...

[71] "If then the teachings I have related are noble and clear; if everything I have said is drawn from the well of nature; if my whole discourse is confirmed by the reliability of the senses; if, prompted by the voice of nature, unspoiled and untouched baby children

and speechless animals nearly find a voice to proclaim that there is nothing more fortunate than pleasure and nothing more troublesome than pain;—if so, then should we not feel the greatest gratitude for the man who caught this utterance of nature's voice and

grasped its significance so firmly and so fully that he has led all good and healthy men into the way of a life of calmness and tranquility, quiet and happiness?"

So ends Reading 18. See you in **another reading or item**.

NOTES

¹ "Pleasure" here is *voluptas*. In Book 2 of Cicero's *On the Ends of Good Things and Bad Things*, M. Cato states, "I mean the same by 'pleasure' as Epicurus does by *hēdonē*. One often has some trouble discovering a Latin word that is the precise equivalent of a Greek word. In this case, however, no search was necessary. No instance can be found of a Latin word that more exactly conveys the same meaning as the corresponding Greek word than does the word *voluptas*. Every person in the world who knows Latin attaches to this word two ideas—that of gladness of mind, and that of a delightful excitation of agreeable feeling in the body" (2.13).

² The translation that follows is a modified version of H. Rackham's translation of *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (1914)—typically given as *On the Ends of Good and Evil*.

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