

# An Epicurean Understanding of Pleasure

There is another saying extant which is supplementary to the former: "Acute pains quickly result in death; protracted pains are not marked by acuteness."<sup>63</sup> In protracted suffering the principle of the subtraction of pain from pleasure holds good. Upon this notion depends the so-called Calculus of Pleasure. This title is neither ancient nor precise; it is no more a calculus of pleasure than of pain and it might more rightly be called a calculus of advantage. The supporting text runs as follows: "The right way to judge all these pleasures and pains is by measuring them against each other and by scrutiny of the advantages and disadvantages."<sup>64</sup> Since it is postulated that **continuous** happiness is possible, it follows that the process is always subtraction. The pain is subtracted from the pleasure.

As for "continuous pleasures," these words acquired the status of a slogan through the teaching of Epicurus. An exhortation of his begins: "It is to continuous pleasures that I summon you."<sup>65</sup> The debate over the feasibility of achieving continuity was part of the protracted controversy over the rival claims of virtue and pleasure, which raged for two centuries and is rehearsed for us in the last book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*.<sup>66</sup> As so often in the courts of law, the old advocate

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was slated to make the final address, and he won a resounding verdict for virtue, and, at the same time, hypocrisy. The Empire, being founded upon political hypocrisy, required specious labels, which Stoicism was prepared to furnish. Reason, virtue, and duty were unimpeachable catchwords, acceptable to hypocrites even more than to saints.