

The “Absence of Pain” Problem

Post by “Rolf” of April 14, 2025 at 3:32 PM

Hey folks!

I reached out to Cassius recently asking about the “absence of pain” problem. I’m fairly new to both this forum and epicurean philosophy as a whole, so I wasn’t sure about posting publicly, but Cassius kindly welcomed me to do so, so here goes!

Everything I’ve read on Epicureanism so far has been fairly easy to grasp and smooth sailing. However, the description of pleasure as the “absence of pain” in certain passages really threw me off. Little did I know that this was actually a common topic of debate.

After some digging (and reading lots of threads on EpicureanFriends!), I’ve come to the following understanding. That said, this is something I’d very much like to dive into deeper.

As illustrated by the cup analogy, the absence of pain is necessarily the greatest quantity of pleasure possible, since 100% pleasure indicates 0% pain in the cup. Therefore, when Epicurus talks about pleasure being the absence of pain in Menoeceus, he is saying that the end goal, the *ideal* to strive for in Epicureanism is NOT the pleasure of the “prodigal” (who spends money recklessly without concern for long-term pleasure) nor the pleasures of sensuality (imprudent pleasures, such as those endorsed by the Cyrenaics), but complete pleasure, free of pain. The term “absence of pain” here is used to emphasise the contrast between the epicurean view of pleasure and other, less prudent views of pleasure that often cause more pain.

This is further supported by the preceding text, where Epicurus talks about how habituating oneself to a simple diet is good because it makes luxuries more enjoyable when they come up. If he really meant that the goal was an ascetic, zombie-like state of painlessness, it would make no sense for him to talk about the enjoyment of luxuries right before.

As for PD3, I echo Cassius’ thoughts on it being a response to the contemporary views on the viability of pleasure as the goal of life (ie. The limited quantity).