

Episode 288 - TD18 - Tusculan Disputations Part 3 - "Will The Wise Man Feel Grief Or Other Strong Emotions?"

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2025 at 7:08 PM

Yes my first reaction to this is that it is an intentionally unflattering but grounded-in-truth description of such as what Epicurus was doing in his last days. He was mentally weighing total pleasures against total pains and considering that he was happy because the net pleasures predominated over the net pains -- at least up to that point in his life when he decided that this was going to be his "last day."

I can't help but think also that this approach has to be seen realistically as mental and conceptual rather than "clinical." In most normal cases you will be successful in getting past difficult circumstances. However when on the executioner's rack or when in extreme pain from terminal disease, the total sum of pains is going to eventually eclipse the total sum of pleasures. That has to be factored into the decision as to how long to continue to try to live on (were you to choose to endure every-growing pain with no hope of improvement). When the calculus becomes clear that it is about to turn net negative, that is the point is where you choose to exit the stage, as Epicurus himself apparently did.

There's no way that the mind can perceptually maintain a feeling of net pleasure under increasing extreme unrelenting and insolvable pain,. That's where I would say the ultimate limiting factor on pain has to be brought to bear.

And this is why too i expect the Epicureans saw it essential to be clear to people that the "pleasure" they identified was much broader than stimulative pleasure. And further that the "happiness" they identified as their goal did not involve the total absence of all pain from every moment of life and the need to expect that eventually in the case of everyone that calculation is going to turn negative.

I would be very concerned that people would rightly think that they were being defrauded if these points were not made clear. I therefore feel sure that the ancient Epicureans were clear as to the true meaning of pleasure and happiness, and that Cicero's claim of ignorance or misunderstanding was insincere. He knew better, but he chose to give the crowd the unrealistic view of Epicurus that they "wanted" to hear so that he could ridicule it and point out that - as they wanted to understand it - Epicurean philosophy is unworkable.

Today, when people are told that the goal of Epicurean philosophy is "absence of pain," it's going to be even more important to be clear. Most people have no reference point at all to understand these subtleties, and so they will eventually give up on Epicurus due to their unrealistic expectations unless those are corrected promptly.

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