

Opening Discussion of Kelly Arenson's "Health And Happiness In Plato And Epicurus"

Post by "Cassius" of July 31, 2026 at 6:17 PM

I have another analogy that I think applies.

Today a friend sent me the linked video because he was so impressed how it went through the Bible and asked a series of questions that calls the Bible into question. [109 Questions For God](#)

I think the video is good, and there was a time when I really would have been impressed by it. And a video like that probably has a lot of good uses for those people who are really worried about whether the Bible is true.

But the entire approach of the video is to "play on the other team's turf." It accepts many of the premises of the Bible and simply tries to use its own logic against it.

That's useful to a point, but when do you move on and stop granting them their premises in the first place.

Arenson's book really shines the spotlight on these stupid platonic arguments that the goal is "being" not "becoming" and so our goal ought to be "health" rather than the pleasures that Plato acknowledges that some people find to be good.

When you accept the premise that only the "complete" or the "perfect" or "things that have a limit" are good, then you're playing on Platonic turf.

As Arenson says even Aristotle was smart enough to reject that "processes are inferior to goals" argument.

It looks to me like Epicurus included the discussion, such as contained in PDO3, because Plato was fixated on arguing that there is a middle ground between pleasure and pain and that that middle ground - absence of pain - is not pleasure at all.

Epicurus refutes that by arguing that there are only two feelings, that if you don't feel any pain what you feel is pleasure, and at that point that's actually the most "complete" pleasure because there's no pain involved at all.

That wins the logical point and is something that is important for people immersed in Platonism (like almost everyone was in 300 BC) to know.

But by even granting the premise that the state of "absence of pain" is important to talk about, you set the stage that Cicero walked into when he pointed out that "if you're concerned about pleasure you shouldn't care about absence of pain at all." That produced the argument that

Epicurus really *should* have said he was a value dualist (a term we've seen here recently) and admitted that pleasure and pain are two separate goals and not the same thing.

Torquatus adamantly refused to admit that and for good reason - there's only pleasure and pain and so when we have no pain what is left is the most "complete" pleasure possible.

But is "complete pleasure" the most intense? Is it the longest in duration? Does it involve the most parts of the body? No necessarily on any of those three counts, except on purely "logical" terms. No one can credibly argue that "feeling no pain" tells you *anything* about the specific mental or bodily experience of a particular moment.

So while the point is important for refuting Plato's anti-pleasure logic, and needs to be discussed with anyone who is concerned about "being vs becoming" - it's a point that makes little sense *outside that context*. Arenson spends a lot of time talking about whether Cicero knew what he was talking about, and how much we should believe his descriptions about what Epicurus taught, but what is beyond dispute is that Cicero has succeeded in perpetuating this "war" between "pleasure as a process" vs. "the goal as some fixed and definite thing." And every anti-Epicurean of every religious stripe or ascetic position has used that as an invitation to say that that "fixed and definite thing" is not pleasure at all, but something entirely different.

So to be clear I am not criticizing Epicurus at all - he had to make the point to refute Plato on pleasure just like he refuted Aristotle on atomism. But we have to understand the specific history of the argument and the context in which it lives, because *outside its context* the terminology is easy to twist into the opposite of what Epicurus intended.

And that's the same reason most of us don't spend a lot of time on logical arguments about the flora and fauna of the garden of Eden -- we reject the whole paradigm, and it doesn't bother us.

The whole paradigm of "being vs becoming" and "pleasure as a process" and "pleasure as restricted to replenishment" are similar artifacts of a specific ancient argument that few people recognize or care about anyone - and for good reason - it was nonsense from the time Socrates and Plato et al started spinning it.