

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 4:22 PM

Welcome to Episode 288 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

This week we continue our series covering Cicero's "Tusculan Disputations" from an Epicurean viewpoint. This series addresses five of the greatest questions in human life (Death, Pain, Grief/Fear, Joy/Desire, and Virtue) with Cicero speaking for the majority and Epicurus the main opponent.

Today we begin in Part 3, which addresses Grief or pain of mind. We'll first comment on some general points Cicero makes, and then begin reading with [Section IV](#).

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/66855357/media>

Post by "Cassius" of June 25, 2025 at 4:47 PM

This section contains an extended treatment of Epicurean views, [especially the following](#); in which we will have to be cautious, as Cicero himself seems to say that he is stating them differently than would the Epicureans:

Quote from Part 3 Section XV

But I shall speak more particularly on these matters after I have first considered Epicurus's opinion, who thinks that all people must necessarily be uneasy who believe

themselves to be in any evils, let them be either foreseen and expected, or habitual to them; for, with him, evils are not the less by reason of their continuance, nor the lighter for having been foreseen; and it is folly to ruminate on evils to come, or such as, perhaps, never may come; every evil is disagreeable enough when it does come; but he who is constantly considering that some evil may befall him, is loading himself with a perpetual evil, and even should such evil never light on him, he voluntarily takes upon himself unnecessary misery, so that he is under constant uneasiness, whether he actually suffers any evil, or only thinks of it. But he makes the alleviation of grief depend on two things, a ceasing to think on evil, and a turning to the contemplation of pleasure. For he thinks that the mind may possibly be under the power of reason, and follow her directions; he forbids us, therefore, to mind trouble, and calls us off from sorrowful reflections: he throws a mist over our eyes to hinder us from the contemplation of misery. Having sounded a retreat from this statement, he drives our thoughts on again, and encourages them to view and engage the whole mind in the various pleasures with which he thinks the life of a wise man abounds, either from reflecting on the past, or from the hope of what is to come. I have said these things in my own way, the Epicureans have theirs: however, let us examine what they say; how they say it is of little consequence.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 25, 2025 at 6:00 PM

Are we aware of any extent Epicurean texts on the subject of grief?

Quote

But he makes the alleviation of grief depend on two things, a ceasing to think on evil, and a turning to the contemplation of pleasure. For he thinks that the mind may possibly be under the power of reason, and follow her directions; he forbids us, therefore, to mind trouble, and calls us off from sorrowful reflections: he throws a mist over our eyes to hinder us from the contemplation of misery.

Except for the last phrase, this makes sense if you think of it in terms of focusing on pleasant memories of the subject of grief, and not dwelling on the unpleasant memories. As he continues beyond this quote, though, he seems to be describing bad Stoic advice to distract from grief by thinking about unrelated things to drive grief from your mind. To my understanding, this technique generally doesn't end well as it just represses the Feelings.

[PD40](#) comes to mind: *All those who have the power to obtain the greatest confidence from their neighbors also live with each other most enjoyably in the most steadfast trust; and experiencing the strongest fellowship they do not lament as pitiful the untimely end of those who pass away.* Which seems to me to say that in the context of both you and the departed having lived good Epicurean lives, there's really no reason for excessive grieving. As stand-alone advice it becomes muddled, as do so many ideas when presented by Cicero.

Comparing this to the wise man on the rack: the initial pain can't be avoided, but having a solid foundation in the philosophy, remembering the good feelings you've had (and shared, in the case of grief) can balance and/or overcome that pain.

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.

Post by “Cassius” of June 29, 2025 at 3:41 PM

Crossreference:

Thread

[Special Emphasis On "Emotions" In Lucretius Today Podcast / Tusculan Disputations - Should Everyone Aspire To Emulate Mr. Spock?](#)

Beginning with [Episode 288 of the Lucretius Today Podcast](#) recorded today, for the next six weeks or longer we are going to be dealing with important issues as to emotions: Should emotions be considered to be "diseases," as Cicero explains is implied in the Greek "pathe" terminology, or considered as "perturbation" as he says in Latin?

Should all strong emotions be suppressed by the wise man, as the Stoics suggest, or is the wise man going to experience strong emotions?

These issues are discussed...



Cassius

June 29, 2025 at 3:39 PM

Post by “Cassius” of June 30, 2025 at 6:18 AM

Crossreference:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4518-episode-288-td18-tusculan-disputations-part-3-will-the-wise-man-feel-grief-or-ot/>

As it will be relevant to this podcast series on Part 3 of Tusculan Disputations, please post any links to articles or publicly-available material relevant to Philodemus' "On Anger" in this thread below:

Thread

[Philodemus' "On Anger" - General - Texts and Resources](#)

I have long suspected that a number of people who come to Epicurus from other philosophies or religious backgrounds tend to presume that Epicurus was very passive and frowned on all forms of anger. This topic comes back to mind after our most recent A Few Days In Athens Discussion (on Chapter Eight) in regard to the exchange between Metrodorus and Epicurus on the subject near the end of the Chapter.

Frances Wright does not develop this issue very far, but I think it's important for us to...



Cassius

April 1, 2022 at 5:36 PM

Post by “Cassius” of July 3, 2025 at 8:01 PM

Episode 288 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today our episode is entitled: "Will The Wise Man Feel Grief Or Other Strong Emotions?"

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/66855357/media>

Post by “Cassius” of July 3, 2025 at 9:43 PM

In this episode and next week as well we are dealing with questions about whether the wise man will experience grief, and whether the strong emotions should be considered to be a disease, topics on which the schools differed, and it's sometimes hard to tell Cicero's own views.

Here in [Academic Questions](#) is how Cicero explains the Stoic view (see especially the second paragraph):

Quote

X.

Zeno, then, was not at all a man like Theophrastus, to cut through the sinews of virtue; but, on the other hand, he was one who placed everything which could have any effect in producing a happy life in virtue alone, and who reckoned nothing else a good at all, and who called that honourable which was single in its nature, and the sole and only good. But as for all other things, although they were neither good nor bad, he divided them, calling some according to, and others contrary to nature. There were others which he looked upon as placed between these two classes, and which he called intermediate. Those which were according to nature, he taught his disciples, deserved to be taken, and to be considered worthy of a certain esteem. To those which were contrary to nature, he assigned a contrary character; and those of the intermediate class he left as neutrals, and attributed to them no importance whatever. But of those which he said ought to be taken, he considered some worthy of a higher estimation and others of a less. Those which were worthy of a higher esteem, he called preferred; those which were only worthy of a lower degree, he called rejected. And as he had altered all these things, not so much in fact as in name, so too he defined some actions as intermediate, lying between good deeds and sins, between duty and a violation of duty; — classing things done rightly as good actions, and things done wrongly (that is to say, sins) as bad actions. And several duties, whether discharged or neglected, he considered of an intermediate character, as I have already said. And whereas his predecessors had not placed every virtue in reason, but had said that some virtues were perfected by nature, or by habit, he placed them all in reason; and while they thought that those kinds of virtues which I have mentioned above could be separated, he asserted that that could not be done in any manner, and affirmed that not only the practice of virtue (which was the doctrine of his predecessors), but the very disposition to it, was intrinsically beautiful; and that virtue could not possibly be present to any one without his continually practising it.

And while they did not entirely remove all perturbation of mind from man, (for they admitted that man did by nature grieve, and desire, and fear, and become elated by joy,) but only contracted it, and reduced it to narrow bounds; he maintained that the wise man was wholly free from all these diseases as they might be called. And as the ancients said that those perturbations were natural, and devoid of reason, and placed desire in one part of the mind and reason in another, he did not agree with them either; for he thought that all perturbations were voluntary, and were admitted by the judgment of the opinion, and that a certain unrestrained intemperance was the mother of all of them. And this is nearly what he laid down about morals.

Post by “Cassius” of July 3, 2025 at 9:53 PM

Also from Section XII the same issue of knowledge is explained by Cicero:

Quote

Then I replied — Arcesilas, as we understand, directed all his attacks against Zeno, not out of obstinacy or any desire of gaining the victory, as it appears to me, but by reason of the obscurity of those things which had brought Socrates to the confession of ignorance, and even before Socrates, Democritus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and nearly all the ancients; who asserted that nothing could be ascertained, or perceived, or known: that the senses of man were narrow, his mind feeble, the course of his life short, and that truth, as Democritus said, was sunk in the deep; that everything depended on opinions and established customs; that nothing was left to truth. They said in short, that everything was enveloped in darkness; therefore Arcesilas asserted that there was nothing which could be known, not even that very piece of knowledge which Socrates had left himself. Thus he thought that everything lay hid in secret, and that there was nothing which could be discerned or understood; for which reasons it was not right for any one to profess or affirm anything, or sanction anything by his assent, but men ought always to restrain their rashness and to keep it in check so as to guard it against every fall.

For rashness would be very remarkable when anything unknown or false was approved of; and nothing could be more discreditable than for a man's assent and approbation to precede his knowledge and perception of a fact. And he used to act consistently with these principles, so as to pass most of his days in arguing against every one's opinion, in order that when equally important reasons were found for both sides of the same question, the judgment might more naturally be suspended, and prevented from giving assent to either.

Post by “Don” of July 3, 2025 at 10:27 PM

For me, there is no doubt that Epicurus used πάθη (pathē) in the sense from πάσχω (páskhō, “to undergo”) + -η (-ē): “(in neutral sense) what is done or what happens to a person”

Everything that we experience falls under one of two pathē: pleasure or pain. All other “feelings” fall under those broad categories of pleasure or pain.

Cicero seems to equate pathē with παραχή (tarakhē) "disturbance of mind; dis-ease" which is the opposite of αταραξία (a-taraksia) "lack of disturbance."

Post by "Cassius" of July 4, 2025 at 6:46 AM

I agree Don....

[Quote from Don](#)

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Which is not to say that Cicero was wrong as to the general usage of the term, if indeed that is what the other philosophers besides Epicurus were doing. I gather Cicero was correct about that, unless there is some reason in other literature to disbelieve him (?)

Post by "Don" of July 4, 2025 at 8:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Agreed. As [Joshua](#) pointed out in the episode, there are two general connotations for that word. Cicero doesn't like Epicurus' expansive use of the word pleasure (ἡδονή hēdonē) as pathē and so just defaults to his (ie, Cicero's) preferred connotation of pathē from πάθος (páthos "pain, suffering") instead of the general more basic sense from πάσχω, "I feel".