

# Did Epicurus Commit Suicide Due To His Disease? (Merger of Two Threads On When Voluntary Death Makes Sense)

Post by “Don” of December 7, 2022 at 11:03 PM

Cicero, De Finibus 1.15.49

ut enim mortis metu omnis quietae vitae status perturbatur, et ut succumbere doloribus eosque humili animo inbecilloque ferre miserum est, ob eamque debilitatem animi multi parentes, multi amicos, non nulli patriam, plerique autem se ipsos penitus perdiderunt, sic robustus animus et excelsus omni est liber cura et angore, cum et mortem contemnit, qua qui affecti sunt in eadem causa sunt, qua ante quam nati, et ad dolores ita paratus est, ut meminerit maximos morte finiri, parvos multa habere intervalla requietis, mediocrium nos esse dominos, ut, si tolerabiles sint, feramus, si minus, animo aequo e vita, cum ea non placeat, tamquam e theatro exeamus.

Specifically:

si tolerabiles sint, feramus, si minus, animo aequo e vita, cum ea non placeat, tamquam e theatro exeamus.

Rackham's translation (that [Cassius](#) gives above) reads:

It is schooled to encounter pain by recollecting that pains of great severity are ended by death, and slight ones have frequent intervals of respite; while those of medium intensity lie within our own control: we can bear them if they are endurable, or if they are not, we may serenely quit life's theater, when the play has ceased to please us.

Yonge ([from Project Gutenberg](#) ) reads:

For as the whole condition of tranquil life is thrown into confusion by the fear of death, and as it is a miserable thing to yield to pain and to bear it with a humble and imbecile mind; and as on account of that weakness of mind many men have ruined their parents, many men their friends, some their country, and very many indeed have utterly undone themselves; so a vigorous and lofty mind is free from all care and pain, since it despises death, which only places those who encounter it in [pg 116]the same condition as that in which they were before they were born; and it is so prepared for pain that it recollects that the very greatest are terminated by death, and that slight pains have many intervals of rest, and that we can master moderate ones, so as to bear them if they are tolerable, \*\*and if not, we can depart with equanimity out of life, just as out of a theatre, when it no longer pleases us.\*\*

Okay, so here are those initial thoughts I foreshadowed previously...

I read this text in relation to PD4

"Pain does not last continuously in the flesh; instead, the sharpest pain lasts the shortest time, a pain that exceeds bodily pleasure lasts only a few days, and diseases that last a long time involve delights that exceed their pains." (Saint-Andre)

The reason that "the sharpest pain lasts the shortest time" is because, in Epicurus's time at least, that meant it would kill you.

However, according to this PD again, "diseases that last a long time involve delights that exceed their pains."

Both sections of this PD are exactly the situations that Epicurus found himself in, but he wrote on his deathbed: "My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them." If there was a time to advocate suicide, this would surely have been a place to do it. And yet, Epicurus's conduct at the end of life even gets lauded by Stoics like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca.

I've admitted my Latin is rudimentary, at best, but it seems to be that the way the punctuation in the Latin goes seems to set up the following phrases:

si tolerabiles sint "if it (pain) is tolerable"

feramus "we bear (it)"

si minus "if not"

animo aequo "with a calm mind"

e vita "from life"

cum ea non placeat "when it (life) no longer pleases"

tamquam e theatro exeamus "as if we are exiting from a theater"

Read in the context of PD4, this Ciceronian text says to me: When pain is no longer tolerable, it is going to kill you. but you should be able to face that situation, with a calm mind, as if you're simply exiting a theater presenting a play that you are no longer enjoying.

To my reading, this text is not advocating suicide even in the most extreme cases, because Epicurus was experiencing pains so bad that "nothing could augment them." But, even then, he set his "gladness of mind" against that pain to recall happy memories.

If you break down the Yonge translation:

1. the very greatest [pains] are terminated by death
2. slight pains have many intervals of rest

3. we can master moderate ones, so as to bear them if they are tolerable

4. if not, we can depart with equanimity out of life, just as out of a theatre, when it no longer pleases us.

To my reading of the text, it is saying that if you have intolerable pain, it'll be over soon. Keep your calm mind in anticipation of leaving life as you would walking out of a theater when the play no longer pleases you.

I don't think I'm doing any tricky or complex exegesis here. I'm trying to read the text as literally as possible, and I'm not seeing an advocacy of suicide in any sense.