

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

Post by "Don" of December 8, 2022 at 12:42 PM

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

It is easy for me to imagine hypothetical circumstances in which continuing to live would result in overwhelming pain with virtually no offsetting pleasure whatsoever.

Oh, it's easy for me, too. If I ever encounter that situation in my life, what will I do? I don't know, but I'm not discounting the option out of hand. Consider a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or a degenerative physical disease where everything, one's mind and one's control over one's body are slowly, inexorably taken from you accompanied by constant pain. Would you - would I - choose to end our suffering? This also brings up the difference between "suffering" and "pain." They're not the same. Is suicide - or physician-assisted suicide - an option?

I have no problem coming up with hypothetical situations around this topic.

But you also say "*virtually* no offsetting pleasure whatsoever," which implies that there's *\*some\** "offsetting pleasure" which almost looks to me like a description of Epicurus's end of life.

Like I said above, I might agree with in principle that suicide - or physician-assisted suicide - is a viable end of life option *in extremis*, but I'm wrestling with whether or not that's *necessarily an Epicurean response* to that situation. I'm just not seeing justification for that *in the extant texts*. I *\*fully\** agree with you as you've said elsewhere about Epicurus insisting that we take charge for our lives and choices. But, *as far as I can see in the texts*, Epicurus and Metrodorus and "Torquatus" never advocated for suicide in response to "intolerable" pain. You've mentioned that Epicurus was able to tolerate his pain and so he wasn't experiencing "intolerable" pain, but to my mind that's splitting hairs. If someone tells me that can't image any greater pain than they were already experiencing and that they feel they're dying within the day, that sounds pretty "intolerable" to me. (Now, whether Epicurus's letter has been embellished over the centuries? Maybe, but we have the text that we have.)

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

"Do you think Epicurus would say that Cassius made a poor decision in committing suicide rather than handing himself over to Antony's men?"

I hesitant to put words in dead people's mouth, so I won't speak for Epicurus. I will say that it seems to be that G. Cassius Longinus committed suicide because he was a *Roman, first and foremost*, not because he was an Epicurean. His Roman culture and upbringing and conditioning led him to that - probably to him - inescapable decision to take his life.

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

The main issue is that I don't see a bright line saying "hang in there to the very last moment" that would apply to everyone in all situations.

It's not a "hang in there until the last moment." That kind of "grit your teeth and bear it" is a Stoic response. That's not what I'm saying the texts say. If you're in pain, you can scream, yell, bite down on a wooden stick, writhe. An Epicurean is not going to "grin and bear it."

BUT, I'm seeing the texts within the time period they were written, which is why it's so hard translating specific ancient situations into modern "hypothetical" scenarios. The intolerable pain, the pain with no pleasure left, the mind-numbing all-encompassing pain - when those texts were written - is going to lead to death imminently. You have wounds or a disease like that, it's going to kill you - most likely in short order. And, even if you are in pain, try to remember to face it "animo aequo" - no regrets, no fear, no superstition.

On the other hand, modern science can work medical miracles in situations that would have been lethal in ancient times! That's where the difficulty comes in. Is it better to allow someone to die rather than provide "life-saving" (usually "life-prolonging-at-what-expense") treatment? That's where the modern "death positive" community is so intriguing and important in providing information on palliative care, hospice care, etc. If pain can be managed and suffering relieved, death can be faced "animo aequo".

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

"never consider suicide lightly and always consider it to be a last resort but know that death is available to you as a relief from pain if in fact you judge the situation makes it the best choice."

Fully agree with that first statement! And that's where the "death positive" movement says that there are ways to mitigate suffering as death approaches. If it is "the best choice," it has to be after every other option has been weighed because of its finality. Too many people see it as just another choice. Here are some statistics about suicide in the US:

#### [Suicide Data and Statistics | Suicide | CDC](#)

This is why the letter to Menoikeus section is so important in my view. Epicurus is specifically addressing people who talk flippantly about suicide and "leaving life as quickly as possible." It couldn't have been the Stoics either, because they were not the powerhouse they would become at the time Epicurus was writing. This seems to be a general cultural attitude in ancient

Greece.

And I know you're not talking flippantly. I know that and want to acknowledge that. But when we talk about suicide being a "choice" or even the "best choice" it seems the old slippery slope argument to making it just another choice if there's pain in one's life. And Epicurus and the Epicurean school did not endorse that in any way.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

death is *unconsciousness* for eternity

I know you didn't mean it this way, but I'll note it anyway. I would caution against using a word like "unconsciousness for eternity" in that context. Unconsciousness is still a state of being and implies a being that is unconscious. Death is the complete absence of sensation and feeling because there's no thing to sense or feel. There is no being - no person, no thing - after one dies. It is the complete cessation of life. Nada. Zilch. No thing. Like I said, I know you didn't mean anything like that by using that word, but it stuck out to me when I read it like "Oops! Better nip this one in the bud before someone else latches onto it!"