

# The Ethics of Epicurus and its Relation to Contemporary Doctrines by Jean-Marie Guyau. Edited by Testa and Ansell-Pearson, translated by Testa

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For [Cassius](#) , here are some excerpts from the end of Book 1 regarding the absence of pain:

*"We conclude then that the sovereign pleasure and the sovereign good is the absence of pain and trouble, aponia, ataraxia; it is rest itself and tranquillity, katastēma.*

*"Should we believe, following most critics, that Epicurus understood absolute imperturbability to be a state similar to sleep and death? – The idea of trouble, which Epicurus strongly conceived and developed, has its natural principle in the idea of harmony. One can only disturb that which is harmonious, and one only fears turmoil and trouble because one wishes to preserve harmony. The last word of Epicureanism, therefore, should not be aponia, the absence of pain, but rather the conservation of pleasure: it is with a view to conserving pleasure that we must avoid every change, every movement coming from the outside. It is to preserve pleasure that we must reduce ourselves to [a state of] imperturbability regarding the outside. This imperturbability is itself only a means – indeed, an infallible one – with the help of which one preserves oneself, one maintains oneself, one persists in being and in the harmony of being.*

*"To summarize, the good according to Aristippus consists in moving, in changing oneself, running from pleasure to pleasure, enhancing past enjoyment with a new enjoyment. In contrast, to possess the good, Epicurus says, is to rest immobile in oneself. Instead of concerning oneself with gaining [new enjoyments] we need to make every effort not to lose anything. It is to restrain and restrict all the fugacious and superficial enjoyments to just one, an indestructible and profound one, which is an enjoyment of life itself. The good, then, is serenity."*

*"To express the ineffable enjoyment that Epicurus experiences when elevating himself above what is accidental and variable, he finds the word euphosunē insufficient. The etymology of this term is eu-phrēn, and it expresses a fortunate disposition of the soul, a sort of fugitive chance. He situates the euphosunē among the inferior pleasures of movement. Additionally, he even demotes to a second rank the chara, that is to say, the joy, elation, that has its source in movement (kata kinēsin) and in the tension of muscles or energy (energeia). The only really profound pleasure is constitutive pleasure, which is, as we have seen, the one that engenders the absence of pain and trouble: aponia and ataraxia. The Epicurean sage does not rejoice himself, rather he enjoys. – If Epicurus excludes everything that appears to imply movement and change from happiness, he does not limit himself to express his conception negatively. First, the term hēdonē katastēmatikē (stable and constitutive pleasure), which constantly*

appears in his writings, expresses something different from the absence of trouble and absolute imperturbability; it seems to designate a pleasure that is at the same time stable and profound, inherent in our nature, in our sensible constitution. Epicurus employs another term which is even more positive, eustathes katastēma sarkos (stable constitution of the flesh). We have seen him employing another expression that is not less striking: sumplērōthēsetai to tēs psuchēs kai to tou sōmatos agathon (will fulfil the good of soul and body). This plenitude of good cannot be the void defining insensibility. Epicurus uses words like pistis bebaios, pistōma bebaiotaton, which are anything but negative: the unshakable assurance of the sage is not the laisser-aller of apathy. We will see him speaking elsewhere of the courageous struggle of the sage against fortune, tuchē antitattesthai. How could this conscious struggle be considered as that passive and empty resignation, which is so often attributed to the Epicureans? Finally, another strongly positive term that is employed by Epicurus confirms our interpretation: it is the term hugieia; that is, the healthy and good proportionate state of the being as a whole, body and soul, in order and harmony. This is undoubtedly the happiness that the Epicurean sage finds within himself once he has eliminated all trouble. 51"

Footnote 51: "Félix Ravaisson (Essai sur la Métaphysique d'Aristote, II, 105, 106) seeks to refer [or reduce] hugieia and aponia to the mere absence of peine and trouble. Having this identification [of hugieia and aponia] as his starting point, this is Ravaisson's conclusion: 'The goal of wisdom and the art of living is, according to Epicurus, to reach a point where one no longer feels anything ... Epicureanism finds sovereign good in a state of absolute impassibility, which is an abstraction, a negation, in a word, nothing.' - Impassibility in relation to the exterior, maybe; but inner insensibility? - The [Epicurean] texts we have quoted prove the opposite. Ataraxia is, without any doubt, the negation of all that which is foreign to [a certain] being; but what is left is the being itself, which affirms itself in face of the exterior: the ineffable enjoyment of intimate harmony - spiritual and material - is this an abstraction, is this nothing? It seems much more logical to refer, by finding support in [Epicurus'] texts, aponia (the absence of ponos, pain or suffering) and ataraxia (the absence of trouble or turmoil) to hugieia (health) than to reduce, without a clear reason, hugieia to aponia. Epicurus does not say anywhere that the absence of pain [peine] constitutes pleasure all by itself. He rather says that 'pleasure is perceived as soon as all pain is subtracted [enlevée],' percipitur omni dolore detracto (Cicero, De finibus, X, xi, 37). Epicurus' originality in relation to his predecessors - Aristippus, on the one hand, and Hieronymus, on the other - is precise to have denied the existence of a purely negative or neutral state, in which one would only find absence of pain: Epicurus this intermediate state, this medium quiddam (Cicero, De finibus, I, 38); it is not, therefore, turning it into his ideal. That which also helps refuting Ravaisson's position is the consequences that he extracts from his hypothesis: 'If the end goal of happiness is not suffering or perceiving any pain, doesn't this mean that what is most desirable for man is to die - and, what is more, to never have come into existence in the first place?' (Essai sur la Métaphysique d'Aristote, II, 113). - We will [later] see the verse of the poet that Ravaisson mentions attacked by Epicurus himself. - Moreover, Ravaisson writes, 'Pleasure is nothing but the end of pain, and whenever pain comes to an end only by means of death itself.' - Believing that Epicurus did not see these consequences or simply accepted them means attributing to him incredible naivety and

*absurdity. Let us look, by means of contrast, to a text by Epicurus: 'Death is indifferent to us, because all good and all evil reside in the action of feeling, and death is the privation of sensibility: mēthen pros hēmas einai ton thanaton, epei pan agathon kai kakon en aisthēsei, sterēsis d' estin aisthēseōs ho thanatos' (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, X, 124). How could one [after reading this passage] still defend the thesis according to which Epicurus thought that insensibility and negation found in sterēsis (privation) consisted in achievement and perfection, or the sumplērōsis (plenitude) of the good? Neither insensibility nor death are good for Epicurus, and he clearly responds to all those who attribute this idea to him."*

*" 'From the moment when we are freed from pain, we enjoy the deliverance itself and exemption from every kind of constraint.' (Cicero, De finibus, I, xi, 37; I, xvii, 56) To live in freedom, in rest and harmony with oneself, to have the inner feeling that one lives, this is supreme pleasure, in comparison to which all the others are but so many changing forms. Forever the same, this pleasure can exist independently and subsist above all others."*

Lots to chew on!