

# Episode 176 - "Epicurus And His Philosophy" Part 28

## - Chapter 12 - The New Hedonism 05

Post by "Cassius" of June 1, 2023 at 7:53 PM

This is powerful stuff, and it demands a clear answer:

Quote from Cicero To Torquatus, in Book 2 of On Ends

But Epicurus, as I imagine, is both willing, if it is in his power, to speak intelligibly, and is also speaking, not of an obscure subject like the natural philosophers, nor of one depending on precise rules, as the mathematicians are, but he is discussing a plain and simple matter, which is a subject of common conversation among the common people. Although you do not deny that we understand the usual meaning of the word voluptas, but only what he means by it: from which it follows, not that we do not understand what is the meaning of that word, but that he follows his own fashion, and neglects our usual one; for if he means the same thing that Hieronymus does, who thinks that the chief good is to live without any annoyance, why does he prefer using the term "pleasure" rather than freedom from pain, as Hieronymus does, who is quite aware of the force of the words which he employs? But, if he thinks that he ought to add, that pleasure which consists in [pg 132] motion, (for this is the distinction he draws, that this agreeable pleasure is pleasure in motion, but the pleasure of him who is free from pain is a state of pleasure,) then why does he appear to aim at what is impossible, namely, to make any one who knows himself—that is to say, who has any proper comprehension of his own nature and sensations—think freedom from pain, and pleasure, the same thing?

This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?

But when I go through the letter the Menoecus, and the positive sections of Torquatus in Book One and Two of On Ends, the statements I am listing below are the only "explanations" that I find. These are not really explanations at all, but a series of "assertions" that are united only by the connection that we have defined there to be only two feelings, pleasure and pain, with no middle ground. So what is the total effect when we string these together: (my comments after number 14):

1. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. (Menoecus)
2. For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure. (Menoecus)
3. "When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, but freedom from pain in the body and from trouble in the mind." (Menoecus)
4. For the pleasure which we pursue is not that alone which excites the natural constitution itself by a kind of sweetness, and of which the sensual enjoyment is attended by a kind of agreeableness, but we look upon the greatest pleasure as that which is enjoyed when all pain is removed. (Menoecus)
5. Now inasmuch as whenever we are released from pain, we rejoice in the mere emancipation and freedom from all annoyance, and everything whereat we rejoice is equivalent to pleasure, just as everything whereat we are troubled is equivalent to pain, therefore the complete release from pain is rightly termed pleasure. For just as the mere removal of annoyance brings with it the realization of pleasure, whenever hunger and thirst have been banished by food and drink, so pain is removed. For just as the mere removal of annoyance brings with it the realization of pleasure, whenever hunger and thirst have been banished by food and drink, so in every case the banishment of pain ensures its replacement by pleasure. (Torquatus Book One)
6. [38] Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension. (Torquatus Book One)
7. [39] But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus, sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: *Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good.* My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics, but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it

were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been the supreme good. It would certainly feel no lack, and on this ground, that anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the state of pleasure. (Torquatus Book One)

8. Well, then, said I, you are aware of what Hieronymus<sup>25</sup> of Rhodes says is the chief good, to which he thinks that everything ought to be referred? I know, said he, that he thinks that the great end is freedom from pain. Well, what are his sentiments respecting pleasure? He affirms, he replied, that it is not to be sought for its own sake; for he thinks that rejoicing is one thing, and being free from pain another. And indeed, continued he, he is in this point greatly mistaken, for, as I proved a little while ago, the end of increasing pleasure is the removal of all pain. (Torquatus responding to Cicero in On Ends Book Two)
9. We will examine, said I, presently, what the meaning of the expression, freedom from pain, is; but unless you are very obstinate, you must admit that pleasure is a perfectly distinct thing from mere freedom from pain. You will, however, said he, find that I am obstinate in this; for nothing can be more real than the identity between the two. (Torquatus responding to Cicero in On Ends Book Two)
10. Is it, asked I, the same pleasure that he feels after his thirst is extinguished? It is, replied he, another kind of pleasure; for the state of extinguished thirst has in it a certain stability of pleasure, but the pleasure of extinguishing it is pleasure in motion. (Torquatus responding to Cicero in On Ends Book Two)
11. Why, then, said I, do you call things so unlike one another by the same name? Do not [pg 129] you recollect, he rejoined, what I said just now,—that when all pain is banished, pleasure is varied, not extinguished? (Torquatus responding to Cicero in On Ends Book Two)
12. Now, if that is the variety you mean, I should understand you, as, in fact, I do understand you, without your saying so: but still, I do not see clearly what that variety is, because you say, that when we are free from pain we are then in the enjoyment of the greatest pleasure; but when we are eating those things which cause a pleasing motion to the senses, then there is a pleasure in the emotion which causes a variety in the pleasure; but still, that that pleasure which arises from the freedom from pain is not increased;—and why you call that pleasure I do not know. (Cicero restating Torquatus in On Ends Book Two)
13. IV. Is it possible, said he, for anything to be more delightful than freedom from pain? Well, said I, but grant that nothing is preferable to that, (for that is not the point which I am inquiring about at present,) does it follow on that account, that pleasure is identical with what I may call painlessness? Undoubtedly it is identical with it, said he; and that painlessness is the greatest of pleasures which no other can possibly exceed. (Torquatus responding to Cicero in On Ends Book Two)

14. They are also two distinct things, that you may not think that the difference consists only in words and names. One is to be without pain, the other to be with pleasure. But your school not only attempt to make one name for these two things which are so exceedingly unlike, (for I would not mind that so much,) but you endeavour also to make one thing out of the two, which is utterly impossible. But Epicurus, who admits both things, ought to use both expressions, and in fact he does divide them in reality, but still he does not distinguish between them in words. For though he in many places praises that very pleasure which we all call by the same name, he ventures to say that he does not even suspect that there is any good whatever unconnected with that kind of pleasure which Aristippus means; and he makes this statement in the very place where his whole discourse is about the chief good. But in another book, in which he utters opinions of the greatest weight in a concise form of words, and in which he is said to have delivered oracles of wisdom, he writes in those words which you are well acquainted with, O Torquatus. For who is there of you who has not learnt the κύρια δόξαι of Epicurus, that is to say, his fundamental maxims? because they are sentiments of the greatest gravity intended to guide men to a happy life, and enunciated with suitable brevity. Consider, therefore, whether I am not translating this maxim of his correctly. "If those things which are the efficient causes of pleasures to luxurious men were to release them from all fear of the gods, and of death, and of pain, and to show them what are the proper limits to their desires, we should have nothing to find fault with; as men would then be filled with pleasures from all quarters, and have on no side anything painful or melancholy, for all such things are evil." (Cicero, summarizing his complaint to Torquatus in Book 2)

To me, this is in fact, as Cicero is labeling it, a war of a non-standard definition of pleasure against the "standard" definition of pleasure, just like goes on in regard to Gods. In fact I think Cicero could make the exact same argument as to [Epicurean gods](#) as to Epicurean pleasure -- Why does Epicurus insist on labeling as "gods" beings who appear to exist without all the attributes that every other Greek and Roman think that they have?

No doubt there was and is an answer to this, and Cicero strategically decided to omit it from On Ends, even though it almost certainly would have been explained at length in other Epicurean writing.

So it seems to me that just as with "the gods," Epicurus has reached a conclusion based on his observations of nature (1-that there are no supernatural realms or beings, and 2- that there is no guidance on how to live other than pleasure and pain) and he is taking those as givens and rewriting his vocabulary accordingly. Neither he nor Torquatus make any effort whatsoever to describe what specific positive actions the gods are taking, or what specific pleasures or pains we are experiencing - they are both reducing the question to one of math-like logic, from which they will derive all their specifics as if from a theorem. They aren't saying much of anything specific about gods except that they exist confidently in perfect bliss, and they aren't saying much of anything about what a person is or should do at a particular moment other than that we should seek pleasure and avoid pain, with the logical extreme being that we should seek 100% pleasure and 0% pain, with the result that the primary only logical point is that the

absence of pain is pleasure, and the total absence of pain is total (the limit) of pleasure.

Epicurus didn't need modern science to confirm his opinions about atoms or gods or pleasure -- he was reasoning absolutely logically based on observation of things around him, and he was denying the truth of supernatural worlds or supernatural ideas or ideal forms or essences or anything which cannot logically be validated by the senses.

I am not sure exactly what these observations I am making leads to, but I would say that part of the conclusion is that adding modern scientific observations to the mix adds to our level of satisfaction with the conclusion, but whether we have one researcher or 100 researchers on indivisibility or gods or pleasure, Epicurus would not say that the strength of his argument is really improved. That's because the argument really rests on commitment to having confidence in what we can learn through the senses when we apply our minds in a rigorously reasonable manner.

I also think it means that it is an error to look at "pleasure is the absence of pain" as if we were doctors cataloging types of pleasures or types of pains or trying to doctor around with them or diagnose some as "better" or "worse." The point is that just as with the gods, where correct definitions lead to deeper understanding of how divinity is not to be feared but to be admired, with "pleasure," when considering its role in human life, a correct definition of pleasure as all of the many experiences of life which we experience as not involving pain leads us to realize that life itself (especially in comparison to the nothingness of death) is pleasurable and to be savored.