

# Article: The Ethical Implications of Epicurus' Theology by Stefano Mecci

Post by "Cassius" of September 27, 2023 at 11:58 AM

## [Quote from Joshua](#)

I should note that the words 'kinetic' and 'katastematic' made a rare appearance on this week's podcast episode, along side a few quotes from John Stuart Mill. Most notably his claim that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

Yes - it's probably going to take me until Friday but there is some good material in this episode, primarily because we encounter Torquatus saying this as to mental vs bodily pleasures:

## Quote

[55] XVII. I will concisely explain what are the corollaries of these sure and well grounded opinions. People make no mistake about the standards of good and evil themselves, that is about pleasure or pain, but err in these matters through ignorance of the means by which these results are to be brought about. Now we admit that mental pleasures and pains spring from bodily pleasures and pains; so I allow what you alleged just now, that any of our school who differ from this opinion are out of court; and indeed I see there are many such, but unskilled thinkers. I grant that although mental pleasure brings us joy and mental pain brings us trouble, yet each feeling takes its rise in the body and is dependent on the body, though it does not follow that the pleasures and pains of the mind do not greatly surpass those of the body. With the body indeed we can perceive only what is present to us at the moment, but with the mind the past and future also. For granting that we feel just as great pain when our body is in pain, still mental pain may be very greatly intensified if we imagine some everlasting and unbounded evil to be menacing us. And we may apply the same argument to pleasure, so that it is increased by the absence of such fears.

[56] By this time so much at least is plain, that the intensest pleasure or the intensest annoyance felt in the mind exerts more influence on the happiness or wretchedness of life than either feeling, when present for an equal space of time in the body. We refuse to believe, however, that when pleasure is removed, grief instantly ensues, excepting when perchance pain has taken the place of the pleasure; but we think on the contrary that we experience joy on the passing away of pains, even though none of that kind of pleasure which stirs the senses has taken their place; and from this it may be understood how great a pleasure it is to be without pain.

I personally am fully on board with Torquatus in these statements. What I am not on board with is the apparent tendency of modern constructions to consider mental pleasures to be "katastematic" or in any other reason inherently superior to bodily pleasures. My reading of this is that depending on circumstances the significance of mental vs bodily ebbs and flows with the context of daily life.

I was thinking already about this before Joshua posted, but I believe this implicates Joshua's regular observation that humans are not inherently different from or similar to other animals.

Just like other animals we have our inherent abilities and capacities, and we have unique attributes that make us human just like cats have attributes that make them cats and dogs have attributes that make them dogs. We spend more time and effort (apparently) than do some other animals in mental activities, but that doesn't mean that we are "spiritual beings" or in any way different than other forms of life. It's useful to talk about specific activities in specific ways, but it's not useful, and in fact harmful, to take some activities out of the context of the whole and deify them as if they are all that we are about.

The Torquatus material is exactly where I would expect Epicureans to be after almost 200 years of discussion: We are beings with both mental and physical activities and life is a constant balancing and processing of different experiences between them. We are no more born with a goal of achieving some specific mental state than a cat is born to live anything but a cat's life or a dog a dog's life. A human's life is a mix of mental and physical activities day in and day out, and all of us - cats, dogs, and humans - are just doing the best we can to live the best mix of experiences.

When you pull things like "mental state" out of context and focus on them exclusively, as if achieving them for a moment is the single goal of your life for which everything else is subordinate, you're headed for trouble. In my view Epicurus is saying that pleasure and pain are navigation beacons, not destinations. The only stable and static point that comes along after birth is death, and death is *\*not\** the goal of life.

[Wikipedia:](#)

1 Vivāmus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,	Let us live, my Lesbia, and love,
2 rumoresque senum severiorum	and the rumors of rather stern old men
3 omnes unius aestimemus assis!	let us value all at just one penny!
4 soles occidere et redire possunt;	Suns may set and rise again;
5 nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,	for us, when once the brief light has set,
6 nox est perpetua una dormienda.	an eternal night must be slept.

[Gaius Valerius Catullus](#)

Another version:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3354-article-the-ethical-implications-of-epicurus-theology-by-stefano-mecci/?postID=26155#post26155>

## Code

My sweetest Lesbia, let us live and love;  
And though the sager sort our deeds reprove,  
Let us not weigh them. Heaven's great lamps do dive  
Into their west, and straight again revive;  
But, soon as once set is our little light,  
Then must we sleep one ever-during night.

### [Let Us Live and Love \(5\)](#)

My sweetest Lesbia, let us live and love; And though the sager sort our deeds reprove, Let us not weigh them.

poets.org

And my favorite version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yzs2Fq1ICZU>