

# Episode 195 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 05

Post by "Cassius" of October 9, 2023 at 6:07 PM

Godfrey:

I am thinking that these guys are being ruthlessly logical. Hieronymus of Rhodes has for whatever reason identified "Freedom from pain" to be the ultimate good (maybe Hieronymus really WAS obsessed with escaping pain as all that matters to him, as Epicurus is *alleged* to be?) Since Hieronymus does not equate "pleasure" with "freedom from pain," he excludes "pleasure" from his goal and says it is not necessary.

In contrast as to Epicurus (and if I could record again I would stress this point harder) I am now convinced that Epicurus is saying BOTH of these two points:

"A" - The "limit of pleasure" is exactly the same as and can be called interchangeably "the absence of pain." ALSO:

"B" - Any discrete feeling of "pleasure" is exactly the same as and can be called interchangeably a feeling of "absence of pain." Likewise, if desired, any discrete feeling of "pain" is exactly the same as and could be called interchangeably a feeling of "absence of pleasure."

I think we should be reading Epicurus as being ruthlessly logical, and realizing that he had to bring the normal state within the term "pleasure" for philosophical discussion. You therefore end up with people like Torquatus, and Epicurus in the letter to Menoecus, speaking in terms that sound like (and are, to an extent) a mathematical equivalency:

"Pleasure" = "Absence of Pain" and "Pain" = "Absence of Pleasure."

In the past I would have said that Epicurus was equating them in terms of "Quantity" only, as per the first part of [PD03](#). I would have stressed that Epicurus was not saying that "Pleasure" is the equivalent of "Absence of Pain" in every respect, just "quantity."

Now I would say that my prior interpretation did not go far enough. I would now say that Epicurus is simply redefining the terminology and saying that the terms are interchangeable, because there are only two feelings and the presence of one is the absence of the other, period.

The reason I can embrace this equivalency is I think it is also clear from numerous references in Epicurus and Torquatus this does not lead to a woo-woo definition of absence of pain as something other than or higher than pleasure. The first part of [PD03](#) just gives us the "goal" in terms of "the sum of our experience" -- the theoretical goal being to reach 0% painful experiences which literally means 100% pleasurable experiences.

The second part of [PD03](#) gives us the rest, which is that life is lived as a combination of discrete experiences (even "feeling happy" at a particular moment is a discrete experience) and when we refer to discrete feelings, we can label the desirable ones as either "pleasure" or "absence of pain" and mean exactly the same thing with either term.

To me this is validated by concluding that it is obvious to us (as it would have been to Epicurus) that the step from 99% pleasure/absence of pain to 100% pleasure/absence of pain is absolutely not a difference in kind, but only in degree. No "practical" person in his right mind would suggest that in climbing a mountain, there is no benefit from approaching within a foot of the summit, and that only at the very last inch of the summit is the benefit of mountain climbing realized. The benefit of being within a foot of the summit is essentially indistinguishable from being at the very point of the summit.

You could extend that analogy forever: No practical person in his right mind would suggest that in climbing a ladder, there is no benefit from being on the next to the last rung, and that only when you position yourself on the very last rung does climbing a ladder have any benefit. The benefit of being on the next-to-last rung is essentially similar in every practical respect to being on the highest rung.

No practical person in his right mind would suggest that in dining at a banquet there is no benefit from eating the first delicacy in front of you, and that only after you have eaten delicacies to the point of being stuffed does eating delicacies have any benefit. The benefit of eating each delicacy along the way until you are close is essentially similar in every practical respect to having eaten the last delicacies to the point where you are full.

No one of reasonable mind would conclude that reaching the very summit of the mountain or the top rung of the ladder or being close-to-full of delicacies at a banquet means that every step or bite along the way has been worthless and should be discarded. No MORE steps up the mountain or the ladder or bites of food are needed, but the ones you have taken already are an essential and necessary part of whatever it is that you have accomplished.

Unless Hieronymous was a dedicated ascetic viewing pleasure as evil to be avoided at all costs (maybe he was a proto-Stoic) he was committing the grossest error in denying that pleasure is not a requirement and the same as freedom from pain. So while Hieronymous and Epicurus both were comfortable with embracing "freedom from pain" as a statement of the supreme good, their definitions of what "freedom from pain" really means are so dissimilar as to make a night and day difference.

And in conclusion let's go ahead and be "obstinate" and validate two of Cicero's criticisms:

(1) As to terminology, "Pleasure is the absence of pain" is a key insight that Epicureans naturally keep repeating even if it drives Cicero batty that it has two meanings (first as to the sum or limit, and second as to discrete feelings). If it makes Cicero angry, so what? (I see this as another example of the in-your-face approach, such as "*the sun is the size it appears to be.*")

(2) Regardless of whether it is immodest to say it, Epicurus was wise about the supreme good, and Hieronymus was a fool. If it is being immodest to take a firm position on what is wise and what is not wise in regard to pleasure, then taking a firm position is just what Epicurus was doing, and it seems to me that he is telling us to do the very same thing.

Here's the text again for quick reference:

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

Cicero: "Do you understand, then, what Hieronymus of Rhodes declares to be the supreme good, by the standard of which he thinks all things should be judged?"

Torquatus: "I understand that he holds freedom from pain to be the final good."

Cicero: "Well, what view does this same philosopher hold of pleasure?"

Torquatus: "He asserts that it is not essentially an object of desire."

Cicero: "So he is of opinion that joy is one thing, absence of pain another."

Torquatus: "Yes, and he is grossly mistaken, for, as I proved a little while ago, the limit to the increase of pleasure consists in the removal of all pain."

Cicero: "I shall examine afterwards, what is the sense of your expression absence of pain, but that pleasure means one thing, absence of pain another, you must grant me, unless you prove very obstinate."

Torquatus: "Oh, but you will find me obstinate in this matter, for no doctrine can be more truly stated."

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