

Would You Rather Live For A Week As (1) Epicurus During the Last Week of His Life or (2) An Anonymous Shepherd Laying In The Grass In The Summertime With No Pain At All?

Post by "Cassius" of October 10, 2023 at 9:14 AM

[New followup at Facebook:](#)

John Bramwell

On the 9th September Cassius Amicus posed an interesting question whether I would prefer to be an ignorant shepherd lying in the grass or Epicurus in pain both with only a week to live.

There is no easy answer to this poser as there are other factors to be contemplated. Did the young shepherd have an old widowed mother to take care of etc.

But what if the period of time were different and what if they did not know the time frame at all.

Had the shepherd been told of the horrors that might await him, all sorts of things.

I am not going to give an opinion except that I think it is only human beings that have a concept of death and once this "cat" was out of the bag there was no going back.

Perhaps I am being naive but I believe that Epicurus put the cat back in the bag, so to speak.

CASSIUS REPLY:

Hi John. The point in the hypothetical was to compare the life of an educated Epicurean, even with significant physical pain (Epicurus), to the life of an uneducated regular person who spends his or her time without significant physical pain (the hypothetical shepherd). As you say, there are all sorts of unknowns in the hypothetical, but the issue involves assessing what "absence of pain" really means in Epicurean philosophy and how we process that term as the goal of life.

This is a subject on which Cicero criticized Epicurus extensively in Book 2 of Cicero's "On Ends," and that's the subject of our most recent Episode 195 of the Lucretius Today podcast.

Ultimately I think there is no absolute answer to the question of which life is "best" or which "should" be preferred. There are no divine answers or Platonic absolutes which establish which is "better." We all have our own feelings of pleasure and pain as to what is most significant to us, and we can offset pleasures against pains and still find a predominance of pleasure even in

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situations involving significant pain.

I respect anyone who answers differently from me as having a right to their own opinion, but I know which I personally prefer to choose in my own life. I frequently choose actions which bring some amount of pain in exchange for greater pleasure thereafter, and I do not obsess over avoiding all forms of pain every second of my life.

I think the position we take on what Epicurus is saying on this point is the difference between considering Epicurus to be the greatest philosopher of the western world vs. considering Epicurus to be a ho-hum also-ran.

Note: the podcast post is here: