

Plutarch's Major Works Against Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of July 30, 2025 at 2:33 PM

Dave:

Those two paragraphs are the rather standard explanation which you will read everywhere and be told to accept as unchallengeable. You will be told in most places (NOT here) to accept this formulation if you wish to be accepted as a standard Epicurean.

If you choose to look further, however, you can read the authorities such as Gosling & Taylor's "The Greeks On Pleasure," Boris [Nikolsky](#), and Emily Austin (who follows Gosling & Taylor) and become a dissident who concludes that this formulation as stated loosely by many writers today is very wrong and leads to self-contradictory conclusions that Epicurus did not hold.

This formulation presumes that as soon as you discuss "pleasure" in Epicurean terms, you have to immediately (here, the very second sentence) break pleasure down into these two categories of "settled" and "motion." You are then led down the road to conclude that the pleasures of motion are really important only to the extent that they assist in the achievement of pleasures that are "settled."

Now of course certain aspects of this are beyond doubt, such as statements that "pleasure is the highest good." The issue is not that pleasure is the good, but whether it is essential to break pleasure down into these two categories and determine that some of which are more important than the other, and are in fact the REAL meaning of "pleasure."

Quote

Pleasure, according to the Epicureans, is the highest good ; it is the ultimate aim of all our activities past, present, and future. It is of two kinds, pleasure of a settled state, and pleasure in motion. The settled pleasure is the same as the absence of pain ; indeed only those pleasures in movement are chosen that are incidental to the riddance of pain.

Such are the pleasures of the body. Pleasure of the mind is a reflection of these. Absence of perturbation (atarazia) corresponds to the settled pleasures of the body, and animation (euphrosyné) at the anticipation or remembrance of a pleasure in movement of the body is a pleasure in movement of the mind. Because it is not limited to the present but draws also on past and future, pleasure of the mind admits of greater stability and permanence than pleasure of the body ; it is thus the proper object of the philosophical life.

I don't have a great deal of problem with this summary as far as it goes. But this line of thinking usually proceeds to conclude that "settled" pleasures are the real purpose of Epicurus, and that these are generally mental, and that everything else is subservient to attaining these so-called settled mental pleasures (and of course we're talking about the word *katastematic*). After all, is the argument, Epicurus said that when do not have pain we have no need for pleasure, so of course that means that the real goal is "absence of pain" and means we don't need pleasure at all. Right??????

If you can read all that and continue to understand that ALL pleasures are valued by Epicurus, and that Epicurus does NOT tell you to consider all other pleasures of the body and mind, including joy and delight, as second-class citizens, then no harm is done. In my experience I find that is very hard to do, and that most people who talk frequently about *katastematic* pleasure are deprecating all other types as really important.

So I observe that it is very difficult to go down this road of talking in terms of "types of pleasure" (*ataraxia*, calmness, tranquility, worthy pleasures, etc) without eventually dropping the term "pleasure" except as a code word for the initiated who know that pleasure doesn't include bodily pleasure or active mental pleasure at all.

I urge anyone who is interested in this topic to read the full chapter in Gosling and Taylor where they take apart this formulation and examine the harm that can come from interpreting the distinction as favoring *katastematic* over kinetic pleasure.

Failing reading that whole chapter, there is a shorter article here on the forum by Boris [Nikolsky](#) which also summarizes the issue and discusses how the interpretation of this distinction given by Cicero and others (*Carneades* is mentioned) causes so much confusion.

And failing that, as a last resort, I urge anyone toying with these formulations to consider whether they really want to give up joy and delight in life, which are clearly kinetic pleasures as they are the examples given by *Diogenes Laertius*.

I would also argue that "gladness of mind at the remembrance of past conversations" as cited by Epicurus as more important to him than pain on his last day, constitutes a kinetic pleasure, and that citation indicates that Epicurus himself did not value "*katastematic*" over "kinetic" pleasure.

Quote

And when near his end he wrote the following letter to *Idomeneus*: "On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them; but over against them all I set gladness of mind at the remembrance of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your life-long attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of *Metrodorus*." Such were the terms of his will.