

# Episode 294 - TD24 - Distinguishing Dogs From Wolves And Pleasure From Absence of Pain

Post by "Cassius" of August 11, 2025 at 4:58 PM

Working on editing this episode, and it is long and has a lot going on in it, so I better make this comment while it is on my mind:

One of the questions from Cicero that we address specifically is this one:

Quote

*Grant that to be in pain is the greatest evil; whosoever, then, has proceeded so far as not to be in pain, is he, therefore, in immediate possession of the greatest good?*

From the context I think it is pretty clear that what Cicero is saying is something like "OK I will spot you that being in pain is the greatest evil, but I still challenge you on this -- just because I remove that evil, that does mean that i am in immediate possession of the greatest good (pleasure)?"

I see this as a persuasive argument because most people are going to think that just because I remove a thorn from my toe, my toe is not therefore immediately in the greatest good (pleasure). My toe feels better when it is in a warm bath and being massaged, so you Epicurus are being ridiculous to argue that removing the thorn immediately places my toe in the \*greatest\* pleasure.

So that challenge demands an answer, and I think the most persuasive answer has to include another visual analogy rather than just the assertion that "absence of pain is the greatest pleasure" or "when one has no pain one has no further need for pleasure."

And as for me, the best picture analogy that I know from the texts that I can cite with authority is that of the vessel being filled in the opening of Lucretius Book Six:

[Quote from Lucretius 6:09](#)

For when he saw that mortals had by now attained well-nigh all things which their needs crave for subsistence, and that, as far as they could, their life was established in safety, that men abounded in power through wealth and honours and renown, and were haughty in the good name of their children, and yet not one of them for all that had at home a heart less anguished, but with torture of mind lived a fretful life without

any respite, and was constrained to rage with savage complaining, he then did understand that it was the vessel itself which wrought the disease, and that by its disease all things were corrupted within, whatsoever came into it gathered from without, yea even blessings; in part because he saw that it was leaking and full of holes, so that by no means could it ever be filled; in part because he perceived that it tainted as with a foul savor all things within it, which it had taken in.

To me therefore, the best analogy is to look at the question of "the highest pleasure" as referring conceptually to one's entire life (either over the whole lifespan or at a moment in time) and analogizing that life to a vessel or jar. The person who does not approach the question through Epicurean philosophy has a leaky jar, and thinks that it requires constant pouring in of new pleasure because of those leaks.

The correct philosophy allows one to see that an unlimited quantity of liquid is not required, because once you seal the leaks through correct philosophy, you find that the jar can be filled to the top (rather easily, in fact) and that once filled, you need no more liquid (pleasure) poured into it, because the jar cannot be filled any further past "full."

So yes, Cicero, a correct philosophy tells us that when we succeed in sealing the leaks and filling the jar with pleasures, we are immediately therefore in possession of the greatest pleasure, because the jar (our life) is full and cannot be filled further.

And there is no magic transformation from "a jar full of pleasures" to "absence of pain." The label "absence of pain" is a mental assessment that the jar is full of pleasures of mind and body, and that the jar contains no mixture of pain, because all pain has been dispelled.

I am sure there are probably other word pictures that can be painted. The first examples I could document from the text would be that of Chrysippus' hand, and of the example of comparing the host pouring wine to the guest drinking it, both of which are preserved by Cicero.

If anyone is aware of other analogies from the texts to which we can point, please add them here. There are probably others in Lucretius (plain vs ornate blanket, multiple opportunities for sex, plain food vs fancy food) but I am not sure that those are quite as clear as the vessel analogy in book six. Many of the "satisfaction" analogies apply, but I think those are more open to someone asking why the more luxurious option is not in fact preferable when it is available. The "vessel" analogy and the examples given by Cicero seem to me to be somewhat less open to "what about" questions.

Comparing a life to any single jar is also open to "well I want a bigger jar" but a concrete object like a jar seems to be an easier way to get agreement as to the terms of the hypothetical. And of course some people object to any and all use of hypotheticals, but maybe calling them "analogies" makes them easier to accept. 😊