

Episode 295 - Plutarch's Absurd Interpretation of Epicurean Absence of Pain

Post by "Cassius" of August 14, 2025 at 6:53 AM

There are 31 sections in this text, and to help organize the discussion here is a single sentence condensing each one. Links are to the Perseus edition:

1. [1](#) Colotes has written a book "That It Is Impossible To Live According to the Tenets of The Other Philosophers" and this will be in response.
2. [2](#) The speakers will respond to the Epicureans' name-calling against the other philosophers, and prove that it impossible to live pleasantly according to the philosophy of Epicurus.
3. [3](#) The Epicureans base their claim to pleasure in the body, a "poor, rotten, and unsure" thing that experiences more pains than pleasures, both in terms of intensity and duration, and yet Epicurus has made "the removal of all that pains the common definition of pleasure."
4. [4](#) Epicurus' emphasis on mental pleasure is of no avail to him, because when he talks about mental pleasures he focuses on memory of bodily pleasures, and these are only an empty shadow - a dream - a fume - of the body's pleasure.
5. [5](#) Mental pleasures cannot rid us of bodily pains, as we see from the fact that the Epicureans themselves suffered diseases such as strangury, gripes, consumptions and dropsies; and life in this condition cannot really be pleasant, as they claim.
6. [6](#) Just like the Epicureans claim that the unjust man lives in fear of punishment, they too must live in fear of bodily pain.
7. [7](#) It is ridiculous for the Epicureans to argue that when all pain is driven out there is no further room for pleasure, and that to be without pain makes them equal to the gods -even the brute animals sing and fly about after they have satisfied their longings, and Epicurus would deny us even that!
8. [8](#) Those things that we require for life do not deserve the name of good, nor even the name of pleasure, any more than does a rogue's freedom from being in jail, and even brute animals are free from the worries of hell or gods - and yet Epicurus praises such freedom so highly!
9. [9](#) The bodily pleasures and memories of them are but slight, and have nothing in them that is great and considerable like that which comes from the contemplative and active and heroic aspects of life.

10. [10](#) The pleasures of the body, or memories of our dead friends, are nothing in comparison with the pleasures of the mind that come from contemplating Homer or Xenophon.
11. [11](#) The Epicureans chase away the pleasures of mathematics and history and geometry and music and the like, and these are far more pleasurable than the pleasures of the body.
12. [12](#) Epicurus bids us to set sail and fly from these greater pleasures of liberal arts, mathematics, poets, and especially history, which was derided by Metrodorus, in favor of grosser pleasures of the body.
13. [13](#) Epicurus was particularly hypocritical in disdaining the discussion or study of music and poetry, since he himself said that the wise man will love the music of public events.
14. [14](#) Given that we have both a mind and a body, it is ridiculous for Epicurus to place the good entirely in the body, and say that the mind has no good of its own.
15. [15](#) The pleasures of food and of drink and of the body are nothing in comparison to the pleasures of actions taken, such as by the heroic deeds of great men of the past.
16. [16](#) The pleasures of the stomach and the body that Epicurus finds so elating are nothing in comparison with the pleasures of the active and engaged life that Epicurus rejects.
17. [17](#) The pleasures of food and of the body are far surpassed by the pleasures of being brave and generous and honorable, and this is shown by what people choose to do in the short time left to them if they know they are about to die.
18. [18](#) Thus no one will believe Epicurus when he claims that he bore up to his final pains by thinking about his former bodily pleasures, and even Epicurus admits there are pleasures in fame, which is why he spent so much time writing books and exclaiming about how wise he was.
19. [19](#) Epicurus was illogical and hypocritical in casting away the fame and pleasure that comes from holding public office, and serving one's country, as that is far greater than private pleasures such as eating and drinking.
20. [20](#) Epicurus deprives us of the pleasures that come from knowing that the gods are in control and provide for us in our misfortunes and in death.
21. [21](#) Yes we should root out superstition but we must retain our faith in providence, because the joy and hope that comes from a true belief in god is much better than the bad things that come from improper fear and dread of the gods.
22. [22](#) It is much better and more productive to rely on the kind and powerful gods than it is to place your hopes in your friends, who are weak and will die.
23. [23](#) Epicurus's claim that our troubles will be short, or manageable, or that death will take us from them is no answer at all to the problems of life in comparison to relying on the gods.

24. [24](#) The argument so far is not complete; we must address what Epicurus' rejection of the gods really means.
25. [25](#) Since Epicurus said that fear of punishment is a bad thing, and it helps men refrain from doing evil if they fear punishment from the gods, men would be better off if they were **more** superstitious so that they feared the gods and punishment after death even more than they do, and thus refrained from doing evil.
26. [26](#) Men get more pleasure thinking the dead continue to exist after death.
27. [27](#) The belief that we cease to exist at death is demoralizing and dispiriting and thus prevents us from enjoying life.
28. [28](#) Taking away belief in immortality takes away the sweetest joy that most people have, as they lose the hope of a better life and seeing their friends again in the hereafter.
29. [29](#) Taking away life after death not only demoralizes the unfortunate and deprives them of hope for better after death, but it harms the fortunate, as it depresses them to know that they will lose the good things that they now have.
30. [30](#) To call not being in existence a good is to be ungrateful to existence.
31. [31](#) ***"So large a field and one of so great pleasures Epicurus wholly cuts off, when he destroys ... the hopes and graces we should derive from the Gods, and by that extinguishes both in our speculative capacity the desire of knowledge, and in our active the love of glory, and confines and abases our nature to a poor narrow thing, and that not cleanly neither, to wit, the content the mind receives by the body, as if it were capable of no higher good than the escape of evil."***