

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2025 at 2:35 AM

It seems to me that Plutarch in Section 7 does a particularly persuasive job of setting up the question clearly, and I see no way around a direct and pointed confrontation.

Plutarch is correct that even the "brute animals" do not deny themselves additional pleasure like singing and playing after they have fulfilled their basic needs such as for food and water. *And yet Epicurus supposedly advocated that humans should pursue nothing but the most basic satisfaction of necessary needs, and then timidly refrain from any further enjoyment whatsoever as dangerous to our tranquility?*

Plutarch was in a position to know the truth, so he is either shamelessly lying, or - if he were deemed to be correct - I would never recommend anyone have anything to do with Epicurean philosophy.

Plutarch is shamelessly lying, and probably for the same reason as Cicero. He hates Epicurean philosophy and he has no problem spinning noble lies in the service of what he probably sincerely but mistakenly thinks is the best interest of his readers.

And yet the criticism Plutarch makes here is *not rejected* by many so-called friends of Epicurus today. Many self-designated advocates for Epicurus actually accept and embrace Plutarch's accusation as the proper interpretation of what Epicurus was teaching, and defend it as a wise position.

Paraphrasing Cicero's comment as to Plato, I'd rather adopt Plutarch's philosophy than have as my guide "Epicureans" who would embrace such a low standard of pleasure. And I don't for a second believe that the widespread adoption of Epicurean views by the ancient Romans and Greeks occurred because the Epicureans actually embraced the kind of view that Plutarch is describing.

I am convinced that the truth is that the ancient Romans and Greeks understood Epicurus to be advocating pleasure as a wide term embracing all mental and physical activities which are not painful. Epicurus' innovation in advocating that pleasure is the goal of life (rather than virtue or piety or any other word) was to hold that all experiences in life are either pleasurable or painful. On that basis, Epicurus concludes that if any mental or physical experience is not painful, then we should consider it to be included under the definition of pleasure. And even *painful* mental and physical activities are to be chosen when they lead ultimately to more pleasure than pain.

Under Epicurus' viewpoint minimizing pain means exactly the same thing as maximizing pleasure, but Cicero and Plutarch and many others recognized that if you strip out from Epicurean philosophy the premise that all experiences are to be categorized as either pleasurable or painful, then the result will look like minimizing pain is a goal in itself. Minimizing pain as a goal in itself can be made to look very much like minimizing pleasure, and once you have convinced someone that this was what Epicurus was teaching, you have ripped the heart out of Epicurus' teachings. You will have created a zombie that will see its mission as to search out and destroy whatever is left of Epicurean philosophy.

The truth is that the texts amply support the conclusion that Epicurus' single test of whether to pursue a particular desire for pleasure is not basic survival through minimalism and asceticism. The true test is whether under all the circumstances you rationally evaluate that pursuing any particular course will lead you to more pleasure than pain. And strong positive emotions like joy and delight are what truly motivates humans, just like they motivate the animals that Cicero and Plutarch look down upon.

Quote

They therefore assign not only a treacherous and unsure ground of their pleasurable living, but also one in all respects despicable and little, if the escaping of evils be the matter of their complacence and last good. But now they tell us, nothing else can be so much as imagined, and nature hath no other place to bestow her good in but only that out of which her evil hath been driven; as Metrodorus speaks in his book against the Sophists. So that this single thing, to escape evil, he says, is the supreme good; for there is no room to lodge this good in where nothing of what is painful and afflicting goes out. Like unto this is that of Epicurus, where he saith: The very essence of good arises from the escaping of bad, and a man's recollecting, considering, and rejoicing within himself that this hath befallen him. For what occasions transcending joy (he saith) is some great impending evil escaped; and in this lies the very nature and essence of good, if a man attain unto it aright, and contain himself when he hath done, and not ramble and prate idly about it. Oh the rare satisfaction and felicity these men enjoy, that can thus rejoice for having undergone no evil and endured neither sorrow nor pain! Have they not reason, think you, to value themselves for such things as these, and to talk as they are wont when they style themselves immortals and equals to Gods?—and [p. 168] when, through the excessiveness and transcendency of the blessed things they enjoy, they rave even to the degree of whooping and hollowing for very satisfaction that, to the shame of all mortals, they have been the only men that could find out this celestial and divine good that lies in an exemption from all evil So that their beatitude differs little from that of swine and sheep, while they place it in a mere tolerable and contented state, either of the body, or of the mind upon the body's account. For even the wiser and more ingenious sort of brutes do not esteem escaping of evil their last end; but when they have taken their repast, they are disposed next by fulness to singing, and they divert themselves with swimming and flying; and their gayety and sprightliness prompt them to entertain themselves with attempting to

counterfeit all sorts of voices and notes; and then they make their caresses to one another, by skipping and dancing one towards another; nature inciting them, after they have escaped evil, to look after some good, or rather to shake off what they find uneasy and disagreeing, as an impediment to their pursuit of something better and more congenial.