

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2025 at 8:27 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

You can't have it both ways, and both Plutarch and Cicero seem to ascribe both debauchery and ascetism to the Epicurean school. It can't be both, and so it comes across as stereotyping, hyperbole, or caricature.

Yes, great point. If you're going to be consistent you can either criticize the Epicureans for pursuing gross and debauched pleasures, or criticize them for being ascetic in their view of pleasure, but you can't logically criticize them for both.

And when you try to accuse them of both, you expose yourself to the question: "*Are you lying to me when you accuse them of asceticism, or are you lying when you accuse them of debauchery?*"

Given that their sublime Plato specifically endorses "noble lying," I'd wager that both are lies, and I would also wager it to be a lie when Cicero accuses Epicurus of never endorsing the pleasures of literature, history, current events, and poetry:

[Quote from On Ends Book 1:VII](#)

What pleasure do you, O Torquatus, what pleasure does this Triarius derive from literature, and history, and the knowledge of events, and the reading of poets, and his wonderful recollection of such numbers of verses? And do not say to me, Why all these things are a pleasure to me. So, too, were those noble actions to the Torquati. Epicurus never asserts this in this manner; nor would you, O Triarius, nor any man who had any wisdom, or who had ever imbibed those principles. And as to the question which is often asked, why there are so many Epicureans—there are several reasons; but this is the one which is most seductive to the multitude, namely, that people imagine that what he asserts is that those things which are right and honourable do of themselves produce joy, that is, pleasure. Those excellent men do not perceive that the whole system is overturned if that is the case. For if it were once granted, even although there were no reference whatever to the body, that these things were naturally and intrinsically pleasant; then virtue and knowledge would be intrinsically desirable. And this is the last thing which he would choose to admit.

Cicero's argument there needs more examination. I take it Cicero is arguing that Epicurus could not admit that mental pleasures are desirable apart from the body because to do so would be to admit that the mind can generate pleasure apart from the body, and Epicurus insists that all pleasures are bodily, so to admit that the mind can generate pleasure (implicitly by itself) would be to overturn the whole system.

At least one answer to that, however, is that Epicurus' point is that both the body and mind are material, and that the problem is the Platonists et al. trying to insist that the mind can exist or do things without the body. Epicurus never denies that it is perfectly appropriate and acceptable to talk at some times about the activities of the body and at other times about the activities of the mind. Epicurus simply denies that the mind can exist without the body, and so the pleasures of both go hand in hand and require each other.

Does anyone see Cicero as arguing something else beyond what is addressed by that response? Or are there better ways to respond to what Cicero argues in the last part of that passage?