

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

Post by "Don" of August 16, 2025 at 12:26 AM

Cassius really has done a great service in this outline. Kudos to you.

I also think it's important to put Plutarch into context temporally:

- Epicurus 341-270 BCE
- Colotes c. 320 – after 268 BCE
- Cicero (for additional context): 106 - 43 BCE
 - Cicero was writing his philosophical works around 150 years before Plutarch.
- Plutarch c. 40 - c. 120s CE

Plutarch is complaining about a work written by someone (Colotes) who lived around 350 years before him!! Don't forget in all this Colotes has been dead a loooong time before Plutarch started whining about his work. This also shows the stature in which Colotes work was obviously held, likely among the Epicurean school, for it to have survived intact for Plutarch to complain about it. Colotes' work was probably composed around the 270s BCE. Plutarch was writing around the 100 CE.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

I decided to go over to Plutarch's *Against Colotes* and see what Colotes actually said (well, said according to Plutarch) and what were some of his responses. I find it amusing that Plutarch says that (Impossible 2) he will show that "it is impossible to live a pleasurable life according to their tenets," but Colotes evidently contended that it was impossible to live, no qualifiers, according to the other philosophers. Colotes was saying one couldn't live one's life. In *Against Colotes*, Plutarch says "And our parents indeed have, with the assistance of the Gods, given us our life; but *to live well comes to us from reason*, which we have learned from the philosophers, *which favors law and justice*, and restrains our concupiscence. Now *to live well is to live sociably*,

friendly, temperately, and justly; of all which conditions they leave us not one, who cry out that man's sovereign good lies in his belly, and that they would not purchase all the virtues together at the expense of a cracked farthing, if pleasure were totally and on every side removed from them."

I don't think Epicurus or Colotes would deny that living pleasurably entails law, justice, sociability, friendliness, temperance, and acting justly. Heck. One of the PDs says this outright. Plutarch (and Cicero) have to set up a straw man to "take down" Epicurus.

In *Against Colotes* (AC, from here on out), Plutarch says "the Epicureans reproach the other philosophers, that by their wisdom they bereave man of his life; whilst the others on the contrary accuse them of teaching men to live degenerately and like beasts." Again, straw man.

Colotes appears to be going hard against the Skeptics. Plutarch quotes him as saying 'These deny that there is a man, a horse, a wall; but say that they themselves (as it were) become walls, horses, men,' or 'are impressed with the images of walls, horses, or men.' Colotes is striking hard at those who say a man, a horse, a wall don't exist. If they take that position, they literally can't live.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

No Epicurean ever said mental pleasures rid one of bodily pains. The strangury etc are obvious jabs against Epicurus. Epicurus never said his pain went away. He said he could do battle with it with his memories of, basically, a life well-lived. His memories gave him joy in the midst of pain. Plutarch's being a jerk.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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!

Epicurus doesn't deny us anything. While we need to make prudent choices of what to pursue and from what to flee (and I use 'flee' on purpose just to poke [Cassius](#) a little 😊), pleasure is good and Epicurus doesn't deny variations in pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

LOL!! "And who could take greater satisfaction either *in eating when a-hungry or drinking when a-dry amongst the Phaeacians*, than in going over Ulysses's relation of his own voyage and rambles? And what man could be better pleased *with the embraces of the most exquisite beauty*, than with sitting up all night to read over what Xenophon hath written of Panthea, or Aristobulus of Timoclea, or Theopompus of Thebe?" Personally, I'd take eating and drinking among the Phaeacians and the embraces of beauty... unless one is in the mood for Ulysses or Xenophon. Epicurus doesn't lay down dictates on this kind of choice. Whichever would lead to more pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

"The bare contemplating and comprehending of these now engender in the learners both unspeakable delights and a marvellous height of spirit." Plutarch, my man, you're describing taking pleasure in something! LOL "comparing with these the fulsome debauchees of victualling-houses and stews" Straw man alert!!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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.

Plutarch quotes Metrodorus: "Wherefore let it never disturb you, if you know not either what side Hector was of, or the first verses in Homer's Poem, or again what is in its middle." If one knows or doesn't know what's in the Iliad, it need not disturb them... Don't worry about a cadre of snooty elite philosophers who want to look down their nose at you for not knowing it.

That's enough for now. I'll come back and put some notes in for the other sections possibly later. I'm just getting a bunch of sour grapes from Plutarch and his ilk, setting up straw men and knocking them down.