

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 16, 2025 at 9:23 AM

I have been thinking since I read [post #8](#) about exactly why I am not entirely comfortable with it.

## [Quote from Patrikios](#)

The modern medical evidence strongly supports Epicurus' ancient insight that katastemic pleasure (stable well-being) represents our optimal biological state.

So another visual (instead of a jar) could be a flowing stream. Nature gives us pleasure to guide our optimal, healthy flow; and pain appears when we are flowing past our natural boundaries. This is not a perfect analogy, but a different way of guiding our thoughts and actions.

I think the reason I would not recommend this as a primary response to Cicero is as follows.

To go back to the beginning, Cicero's challenge was this:

## 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?*

And my elaboration was this:

*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)?" 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."*

So in that context, Cicero is appealing to the broad spectrum of people - the vast majority, I would say - who are confused as to how "absence of pain" can be seen to equal "the greatest good." And in common discussion, the "greatest" good is the thing that every other action is taken for purposes of gaining. And thus the question is "how can one identify the greatest good as absence of pain?"

And as a result, to say that "katastemic pleasure (stable well-being) represents our optimal biological state" is not an answer that most people will accept as reasonable.

And they will not accept it as a reasonable answer for reason given by Plutarch in our other recent discussion on "That Epicurus Makes a Pleasant Life impossible." "Optimal biological state" and "stable well-being" does not explain what the person is doing with that optimal state. To have it is nice, but can hardly serve as a description of the best life.

And so Plutarch very reasonably in my mind protests as follows:

*"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."*

All the talk about "stability" and "optimal biological states" in the world cannot respond adequately to this argument. Nor do I think Epicurus rested his argument by talking about "optimal biological states." I think writers on Epicurus today are guilty of vastly underselling Epicurus by ignoring how the Epicureans actually spent their lives engaged with philosophical arguments and experiencing normal active pleasures that are identified with motion, rather than just with 'rest." Joy and delight are far more motivational than living day after day in a state that can easily be caricatured as that of a potted plant. There are plenty of Epicurean texts and Epicurean examples that illustrate this, and so we should not stop before we give the full explanation.

As Torquatus put it to Cicero,

*[40] XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten*

*them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance."*

When Cicero and Plutarch focus on "absence of pain" as if it were a full description of Epicurus goal (rather than a technical explanation of the philosophical limit) they strip Epicurus of the entire field of active pleasures, and thereby create a caricature that no regular person of common sense is going to accept as reasonable.

Of course I am not criticizing the quotations that provided in post 8, because that analysis has a philosophical context in which they are completely appropriate.

But in setting out to understand the completeness of Epicurean philosophy, we should not play into the hands of its worst enemies. We should not grant Cicero's and Plutarch's accusations that the phrase "absence of pain" suffices without elaboration gives us the whole story. Formulations that imply that Epicurus taught that action is desirable only for purposes of arriving at a "state" perpetuate just such a problem. Regardless of the scientific perspective on "optimal biological states," Epicurus didn't teach a particular choice of pleasure (even a "flowing stream" as a destination. Instead, Epicurus taught pleasure as the guide for every moment of the journey, both mental and bodily, *during which we will at times deliberately choose pain*, with the general feeling of "happiness" being totally in the eye of the person living that journey.

Flowing streams and completely full jars are useful philosophical depictions of conceptual issues. However the complete picture must explain how nature leads us to feel that variations in pleasure are also desirable, and how at times it is entirely appropriate for flowing streams to become raging torrents. If we are going to explain Epicurus' full teaching persuasively, we can't give in to formulations that make it look like Epicurus taught that that Nature is "wrong" in making both pleasures of action and of attitude essential components of the best life.