

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 21, 2025 at 4:30 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

To put my confusion in other terms: I feel I have all the pieces scattered in my mind, but am having trouble putting them together concisely and cleanly.

Bless you Rolf because you have just illustrated how much of a problem this is and how many people are finding it hard to "get it" in regard to this issue. You've been here for months and been asking questions and reading and you are extremely quick and yet this still bothers you.

Sometimes I think that some of us don't appreciate nearly enough the extent of this problem.

There is nothing more important we can do than hammer on this issue over and over again.

I expect that what you are doing is what most normal people are doing in the brief period that they entertain Epicurus before discarding him.

They take "absence of pain" in a way that is to them literal - they feel pain of body or mind, and they think that Epicurus means "find any way possible to anesthetize yourself from those pains and you automatically assume to the bliss of the gods."

That's what I hear when I read:

If the animals have satiated all of their desires/removed all of their pain, should they not sit around and do nothing at that point?

Not if their goal is the fullness of pleasure in all of the many ways that are accessible to us. No one ever said that all pleasures are the same. As stated in [PD09](#), pleasures vary in intensity, duration, and parts of the body (and mind) affected.

Do you really think that Epicurus himself saw no difference between the pleasure of trimming his fingernails and the pleasure of (for example) sex or music or dancing or intense engagement in philosophic exchange?

I doubt you think he saw no difference between those things, and yet you feel compelled to take "absence of pain" as if everything condenses down into a state of anesthesia where you feel nothing.

I'd wager there's a connection between this and your prior flirtation with anti-natalism --and I'd look for a commonality in the issue of one's basic evaluation of whether the most important aspect of life is pleasure or suffering.

I'm not going to argue with someone (I'm talking in the abstract, not to you) who is fully persuaded that life is suffering and misery and they'd rather themselves had never been born or anyone else either. That's a highly negative view of life and I know that some people's life experiences can seem to justify that conclusion.

But there is no fate or necessity of supernatural force that requires such a conclusion, and many many people find ways out of terrible situations to conclude that life is definitely worth living, just as Epicurus described how life is desirable and made similar statements in the letter to Menoecus and throughout his work.

Plutarch and Cicero and the religious enemies of Epicurus have latched onto the "absence of pain" discussion to turn Epicurus' entire philosophy upside down, and sad for me to say but it seems like today it's almost as negative a force as Buddhism or similar eastern attitudes which emphasize suffering as the driving focus of life.

We're in a period of depression and cynicism where those attitudes have taken over the world, but that's not going to last. The depressed and cynical generations that are spoiled from their luxuries and no longer have any idea what is required to maintain happiness are going to pass away, and in the rubble they leave behind younger people are going to see that happiness requires effort and focus and a positive outlook on life.

it bothers me that so many good people are being flushed down the drain along with those who should know better but don't, and I think the right response is the kind of attitude Diogenes of Oinoanda showed in describing the majority of society as like sick sheep catching disease from one another.

"Absence of pain" has a philosophical context and a clear explanation as the description of a life which is so full of pleasures that there is no longer any room in that life for any pains. But that does NOT mean life drained of all positive active joyful and delightful activities of body and mind. It means just the opposite - it means a life full of those things.

And it's the height of outrageousness that the forces which advocate "tranquility" above pleasure have been so successful in persuading even young people that "absence of pain" implies a state that is indistinguishable from "nothingness."

[Quote from Rolf](#)

"Animals don't just sit and do nothing after they've eaten, drank, slept. They fly around and play and sing."

Why is this not a good argument against the Epicurean view of pleasure/absence of pain? If the animals have satiated all of their desires/removed all of their pain, should

they not sit around and do nothing at that point?

Is it because boredom is a pain? Is it because they're working to ensure that their pleasure continues and protect themselves against future pains? Is it because pleasure still feels good (and is still the good) even when we have no need of more?

I understand that absence of pain = fullness of pleasure, since the feelings are only two. I understand that "absence of pain" does not exist as some platonic ideal, but is a term pointing to real-world experiences. However, my cogs are still a little stuck on the logic of why we should or want to pursue further pleasures once our hunger and thirst are satiated. I feel I understand the concept but am having trouble holding it succinctly in my mind.