

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 21, 2025 at 7:40 AM

## [Quote from Rolf](#)

Thanks for your reply Cassius! Would it be accurate to say then that once our basic (natural necessary) desires are satisfied, it is no longer pain or lack that drives us to pleasure but pleasure itself?

I feel this sort of relates to the question I posed a little while ago about why we should pursue unnecessary desires if necessary desires are enough. Epicurus was, among other things, a researcher of human behaviour. Why is it that we still pursue superfluous pleasurable sensations once we have reached the limit of pleasure (absence of pain)?

To be very clear, I don't disagree with the conclusions here. But the fact that the clock displays the correct time is not enough for me - I must know how it ticks!

That's the best possible attitude Rolf. I've seen so many people start and then drop the study of Epicurus, and I am convinced this is the main problem. Most people don't seem willing to question the authorities on how the "authorities" say Epicurus' view of happiness works, so they only hear an upside down version and give up trying to make sense of it to find out how it really ticks. They get tired of anesthesia, which is all that is offered in the word "tranquility," and they eventually walk away.

And as I have said before, if I thought what your question suggests about "absence of pain" was the correct interpretation of Epicurus, I would shut down this forum in an instant.

*Would it be accurate to say then that once our basic (natural necessary) desires are satisfied, it is no longer pain or lack that drives us to pleasure but pleasure itself?*

To this I would say that it is ALWAYS pleasure that drives us to pursue pleasure. Pain can be viewed as the absence of pleasure just like pleasure is the absence of pain.

Your question displays exactly why there is so much fixation on the "natural and necessary" categorization. People act as if Epicurus said that all you need is a little air and bread and water and you ARE living like a god. What he said was that HE was able to compete with the gods even if that was all HE had, but what HE was suggesting HE could do does not mean that any particular Tom, Dick, Benjamin, or Mohammed on the street would see the same result with only bread and water and air.

In the case of Epicurus, HE was able to say that it as a greatly happy day for HIM even when he was dying a very painful death because HE could stack against that pain the memory and thoughts of what HE had accomplished and experienced in HIS life to that point. Would you compare the happiness that you have experienced from philosophy to date (including your period of anti-natalism) as such an ecstatic experience that you would whoop and holler and exclaim that this memory mad it worth staying alive even as your kidneys were exploding? Would a child in war zone reasonably be able to say that with only bread and water and air he was living a life worthy of the gods?

I don't think so, and I don't think Epicurus would say so.

*Why is it that we still pursue superfluous pleasurable sensations once we have reached the limit of pleasure (absence of pain)?*

Because all pleasure is desirable, and none of it is *superfluous as long as we are able to experience it*. As we have been discussing recently the way Metrodorus stated it is that the reason we need no more pleasure after we reach "absence of pain" is that there is no more room for those pleasures in our lives, because our experience is already full of pleasures! It's not that additional pleasure is not desirable, but that under the hypothetical we do not have the capacity to experience any additional pleasure. And that's because our experience is already full of pleasures of every kind, mental and bodily, and there is no "empty spot" - no extra time or attention - into which to inject new pleasurable experiences.

Is your experience full to the brim when you have a little water and air and water? Mine is not, and I hope to live a significant number of additional time and experience more pleasures that I can reasonably hope to experience.

In the case of Epicurus on his last day, given his circumstances and what he had accomplished, calling yourself happy is very reasonable, because Epicurus understood what he had accomplished and how his time was coming to an end because his body was wearing out. But are you in your 20's satisfied that all you need for the rest of your life is bread, water, air, sleep ---- and rinse and repeat that cycle and nothing else for the next 80 years?

Of course not! You want to experience all the mental and bodily pleasures that your particular situation (health, abilities, etc.) allows you to experience! Why would any reasonable person choose to look at everything above a subsistence level of existence as "superfluous"!?!?

But that's exactly what the "frenemies" of Epicurus have succeeded in making you think is Epicurean philosophy. It's detestable that this has become an accepted manner of thinking.

This now commonly accepted view of Epicurus (that he deprives us of singing and dancing and having fun) is an ATTACK on Epicurus. Yet many defenders of Epicurus have ACCEPTED this sarcastic argument of Plutarch and tried to turn it into a strength!

What dolts they are -- Plutarch and Cicero both gave them enough credit to think that any person of normal common sense hearing their argument would run like the wind from a

philosophy that drains all joy and delight out of life. But what happened? Plutarch's and Cicero's sarcasm was over the years EMBRACED (after the true Epicureans had been suppressed) to the point where it has now become the majority modern accepted interpretation of Epicurus!!!

To me the antidote starts back with tracing back where these arguments came from in the first place, and why they proved effective.

Epicurus was always focused on PLEASURE, and he made very clear that his definition of pleasure includes all common pleasures. Full stop - no ranking of pleasures on an absolute scale as some "always" better than others.

The major innovation that Epicurus added to the view of pleasure was to expand it to include all mental and bodily experiences that are not painful. And he did so for a reason that is the very opposite of those who despair about life and about children and who chose to focus on suffering.

Epicurus said that life itself is desirable and pleasurable, given how short it is, and that we should view it as our most valuable possession and make the most out of it that we can.

But does that mean that all any random mystical anti-natalist has to do is drug himself into a stupor to the point he doesn't feel anything mental or bodily, and by that action he becomes as happy as a god?

Heck no - such a person remains the same miserable creature he was before he drugged himself out of existence.

It is possible for someone (like Epicurus) to compete with a god, even in austere conditions, because as Epicurus said he found his joy in the study of nature, and in Epicurus' case he knew what he had accomplished. His friends were numbered in whole cities and as a result of his work he had come to be living in what has to be interpreted as relatively wealthy circumstances. People who are destitute don't own multiple properties and multiple slaves and have admiring women and students and friends surrounding and supporting them up to their last breath.

So the ultimate proof of the error of the view Plutarch has promoted is that EPICURUS HIMSELF DID NOT LIVE LIKE THAT! Epicurus was as capable as any philosopher of embracing hypothetical examples, and using hyperbole such as living on bread and water, to dramatize and illustrate philosophical points.

But how did Epicurus actually live? All you have to do is read his will to realize that Epicurus did NOT live a life from which singing and dancing and joy and delight had been banished.

But that interpretation of "absence of pain" is an argument Plutarch thinks some people are stupid enough to fall for. And the bitter truth is that people have proved that they are far more stupid than Plutarch gave them credit for being! Plutarch must be laughing in his grave to realize that he's helped destroy Epicurean philosophy - not by convincing people that it *deprives* them of pleasure they could otherwise have, but by convincing them that Epicurean

philosophy isn't about pleasure at all!