

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 22, 2025 at 7:03 AM

This thread is going to become a primary resource for arguments about absence of pain, so I want to include here one of the major sections by DeWitt bearing on this, from Chapter 12 of his book under the subheading "The Unity of Pleasure":

## Quote

Though we certainly fall short of possessing the whole argument of Epicurus, there is ample evidence upon which to construct the skeleton of a case. The Feelings, as usual, are the criterion. It may be recalled how he proved life itself to be the greatest good by pointing out that the greatest joy is associated with the escape from some dreadful destruction. By a similar argument, even if not extant, it could be shown that the recovery of health is a positive pleasure when the individual has recently survived a perilous illness. It would be a positive pleasure also to be freshly relieved from the fear of death and the gods through the discovery of the true philosophy.

To substantiate this drift of reasoning it is not impossible to quote a text: "The stable condition of well-being in the flesh and the confident hope of its continuance means the most exquisite and infallible of joys for those who are capable of figuring the problem out." [Usener 68]

This passage marks a distinct increase of precision in the analysis of pleasure. Its import will become clear if the line of reasoning already adumbrated be properly extended: let it be granted that the escape from a violent death is the greatest of joys and the inference must follow that the possession of life at other times cannot rank greatly lower. Similarly, if the recovery from a dangerous illness be a cause for joy, manifestly the possession of health ought to be a joy at other times. Nevertheless the two pleasures differ from one another and it was in recognition of the difference that Epicurus instituted the distinction between kinetic and static pleasures. The difference is one of intensity or, as Epicurus would have said, of condensation. At one time the pleasure is condensed, at another, extended. In other words the same pleasure may be either kinetic or static. If condensed, it is kinetic; if extended, it is static.

There is a catch to this reasoning, however; it holds good only "for those who are capable of figuring the problem out." This marks Epicurus as a pragmatist, insisting upon the control of experience, including thought. His reasoning about kinetic and static pleasures is sound, but human beings do not automatically reason after this

fashion; they fail to reason about the matter at all. Although they would spontaneously admit the keenest joy at recovery from wounds or disease, they forget about the blessing of health at other times. Hence it is that Epicurus insists upon the necessity of being able to reason in this way. Moreover, this reasoning must be confirmed by habituation. The same rule applies here as in the case of "[Death is nothing to us.](#)" It is not enough to master the reasons for so believing; it is also necessary to habituate one's self to so believe. [Diogenes Laertius, 10.124] This is pragmatism.

There is also another catch to this line of reasoning. The conclusion clashes with the teaching of Aristippus and Plato and it also violates the accepted usage of language. It was not usual to call the possession of health a pleasure and still less usual to call freedom from pain a pleasure. It was this objection that Cicero had in mind when he wrote: "You Epicureans round up people from all the crossroads, decent men, I allow, but certainly of no great education. Do such as they, then, comprehend what Epicurus means, while I, Cicero, do not?" [Cicero, *De Finibus*, 2.4.12-13] The common people of the ancient world, however, for whom Platonism had nothing attractive, seem to have accepted Epicurean pragmatism with gladness. Cicero, being partial to the aristocratic philosophy and having no zeal to promote the happiness of the multitude, chose to sneer.

The irritation which Cicero simulates in the above passage was beyond doubt genuine with those from whom the argument was inherited. They had been nettled by the phraseology of Epicurus, who was mocking Plato. The words "those who are capable of figuring the problem out" are a parody of Plato's *Timaeus* 40d, where the text reads "those who are incapable of making the calculations" and the reference is to mathematical calculations of the movements of the celestial bodies, which "bring fears and portents of future events" to the ignorant. Baiting the adversary was a favorite sport of Epicurus.

Epicureans at a later time were in their turn subjected to incessant baiting by Stoic opponents, and it may have been these who tried the reduction to the absurd by means of a ridiculous example. If those who are not in a state of pain are in a state of pleasure, "then the host who, though not being thirsty himself, mixes a cocktail for a guest is in the same state of pleasure as the guest who is thirsty and drinks the said cocktail." [Cicero, *De Finibus*, 2.5.17]

Cicero, however, had his tongue in his cheek and knew that this was mere dialectical sparring, intended rather to disconcert the opponent than to refute him. He was partial to the New Academy and to Stoicism, both of which tended to turn argumentation into a game and thus make it an end in itself. They could not fail to be intolerant of the procedures of pragmatism, of which action is the primary object and not logomachy.

This extension of the name of pleasure to freedom from fear and pain was not the sole achievement of the new analysis. In popular thought, the correctness of which Plato

assumed, pleasures were classified according to the parts of the body affected, eating, drinking, sexual indulgence, philosophical thinking. In respect also of this conventional classification Epicurus exhibited finer discrimination. He not only discerned that the pleasure associated with one organ is brief and intense while that associated with other parts is moderate and extended but also observed that certain pleasures, like that of escaping a violent death, affect the whole organism.

The next step in this new analysis was to declare that this fact of extension or intension was of no fundamental importance. The high value assigned to this principle is indicated by its promulgation as Authorized Doctrine 9: "If every pleasure were alike condensed in duration and associated with the whole organism or the dominant parts of it, pleasures would never differ from one another." Positively stated, the meaning would be that pleasure is always pleasure; it is of no consequence that some pleasures are associated with the mind, others with the stomach, and others with other parts, or that some affect the whole organism and others only a part, or that some are brief and intense, others moderate and extended. In other words, it makes no difference that some pleasures are static and others kinetic. Pleasure is a unit. This unity could be expressed in ancient terminology by saying that all pleasure was a kind of motion, *kinesis* or *motio*, the ancient equivalent of reaction.

To put the colophon upon this topic it should be added that three Authorized Doctrines, Nos. 8, 9, and 10, deal with pleasure and all three imply the quality of unity. The eighth stresses the fact that the evil attaches solely to the consequences; all pleasures are alike in being good: "No pleasure is evil in itself but the practices productive of certain pleasures bring troubles in their train that by many times outweigh the pleasures themselves."

The ninth Doctrine has been quoted above. In it the item about "condensed pleasure" was pounced upon by Damoxenus of the New Comedy as a good cue for merrymaking; quite aptly he allowed a cook to dilate upon it.[Fragment 2, pages 349-350 (Kock)] Some five centuries afterward the frivolous Alciphron testified to the longevity of the theme by assuming it to be still good for a laugh.[Usener, 432]

The tenth Doctrine, last of the three, serves to shift all ethical condemnation from pleasures themselves to the consequences: "If the practices productive of the pleasures of profligates dispelled the fears of the mind about celestial things and death and pains and also taught the limit of the desires, we should never have fault to find with profligates, enjoying pleasures to the full from all quarters, and suffering neither pain nor distress from any quarter, wherein the evil lies." Such declarations afforded to enemies of Epicurus a means of besmirching his name, but he was absolutely honest; he did not evade the logical implications of his principles; he flaunted them. By disposition he was a teaser; he drew enjoyment from the squirming of the piously orthodox.

A variation of the same teaching appears in an isolated saying. "I enjoy the fullness of pleasure living on bread and water and I spit upon the pleasures of a luxurious diet, not on account of any evil in these pleasures themselves but because of the discomforts that follow upon them." [Usener, 181] The net effect of these pronouncements is to put all pleasures in a single class, all being good, irrespective of extension or condensation or of the organ affected or of approval or disapproval, which attach only to consequences. This is an instance where Epicurus exhibited deeper insight than Plato in the latter's own field, discerning the one in the many.

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