

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

Post by "Cassius" of August 28, 2025 at 6:46 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I'm imagining someone laying down on a sun lounger, hands behind their head, saying "it doesn't get better than this".

I think that is *one* possible interpretation, certainly. But I'd push back on this example simply because it seems to be the default example that everyone jumps to suggest -- that the best experience in life is "taking it easy" and I don't think that is a healthy attitude. Aren't you in your 20's? At that age you have your whole life ahead of you, and would normally be making plans for what you want to "do" with your life, rather than the way you will "relax" during those times you are resting. I'm not trying to be too specific but I presume you know what I mean. "Resting" at the end of a journey is certainly a good thing, but so is the journey itself. Epicurean circles which perpetuate the notion that "rest" is the goal of life are playing right into the hands of Cicero and Plutarch and anyone else who for reasons of their own want to pigeonhole Epicureans into a "wallflower" category.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

And this is why simply absence of thirst/hunger etc. isn't enough to definitively say someone has reached the limit of pleasure. Am I on the right track?

That's the way I see it. Just like in Plutarch's examples it make no sense to eat or drink a little just to the point of getting rid of thirst and hunger, and then sit comatose until the desires for food and drink come back again. An Epicurean wouldn't live to eat (or drink) any more than to pursue any other "virtue" - the purpose of eating and drinking is to keep your body healthy so that you can then do more with it. Unless, that is, a particular person wants to admit, "Yes, I think the life of a cow would be lovely, and I'd be more than happy to graze in the fields all day staring at the ground."

Again, I am not knocking the pleasures of eating and drinking. I am knocking the idea that Epicurus held that these are more important to life than the other pleasures that we pursue after we eat and drink our fill. These "other pleasures" of mind and body are the real battleground in the argument.

Yes you "can" compete with gods for at last a time with only bread and water. But is that really the way you want to confine yourself to doing it?

[Quote from Rolf](#)

As for Chrysippus' hand: How can it be said that the hand had reached the limit of pleasure if a hand massage would've been even more intensely pleasurable than the healthy resting state?

The answer is the contrast between "limit" and "intensity." Those are not the same thing. We're defining the limit of pleasure as 100% pleasure - pure pleasure - the state of experience when there is no pain mixed in. That observation tells you nothing about the duration, intensity, or parts of the body affected by the particular pleasures you are engaged in, and those are very different. Your question about the jar full of water and the jar full of chocolate milk is right on point. Both are pleasurable, but on occasion one of them can be much more pleasurable than the other. PDO3 refers to the limit of "quantity" of pleasure, not the limit of intensity, or duration, or part of the body affected. If you stretch the analogy beyond the point it was intended to make you cease making a valid point and start making a terrible one. All pleasures are pleasure, but all pleasures are not equally pleasurable. The very idea of stating a specific set of pleasures that should be the goal of every human being is an upside-down and perverse way of looking at the question, but that's exactly the way monotheists want to proceed in everything. They want to think that there is a central power, a divine god, that sets out "one way" that everyone should follow. And that's just hogwash. Nature and the feeling of pleasure are not so restrictive as to conform to and comply with Abrahamic theology.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

If you could take a look at this when you get a spare moment, it would be a big help!

The reason I haven't responded to that already is I am not sure how to pick out pieces of what you're written. If you'd like to ask specifics I could more easily address them. For the moment I'd say that any time there is an implication that one pleasure is absolutely "better" than another for everyone, you've got an abstraction that is going to bite you just like "virtue" bites the Stoics.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

One jar full of water, the other full of chocolate milk. Both jars are full of pleasure: Water is great, it quenches your thirst! But chocolate milk is sure a lot tastier

Yes, as above, I think that's an example that helps flesh out where the jar analogy stops being useful and starts being harmful, if and when it is presumed that everyone has the same jar and wants to fill it in the same way. That's just not correct and not a part of the philosophic issue.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Another question: Would you say that absence of pain as the limit of pleasure is more of a theoretical goal? In the same way that the gods can be seen as mental ideal? Or is it something we're expected to achieve on a day to day basis?

It is a theoretical goal but that is not to say it is a useless abstraction, as we've been discussing. A starting point here is that everyone wants the "best" life. But what is the meaning of "best?" Think about it for very long and if you're not a monotheist you'll realize there is no single best for everyone. But even then the question remains, what can you say about "best" other than that there is nothing better than best? Yes it's wordplay, but it's a logical question. There's can't be anything better than best. And if you're going to suggest that "pleasure" is the best life, then you've got to have an answer to the question of "what's the best life of pleasure? " And the answer to that question is that the best life of pleasure is one that is completely full of pleasure with no portion of that life being pain. I don't think we'd be discussing "absence of pain" at all were it not for this question and the need to construct a logical answer to it. And this is not speculation, it's spelled out by Plato in [Philebus](#) and in other places by other people, including clear statements to this effect by Seneca, and the references we've been discussing that Cicero has preserved through Torquatus that make no sense in any other way.