

Episode 298 - TD26 - Facts And Feelings In Epicurean Philosophy - Part 1"

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2025 at 6:54 AM

Dave that's a great question and I'm not the best to answer it, but there's a lot written about this period in Cicero's life, when he was essentially in forced political retirement (due to opposing Julius Caesar) and in bad personal circumstances (his daughter dying in childbirth). He explains a lot of this himself in his various works as his motivation for wanting to engage in something to help get his mind off his problems, and I've seen it observed that this seems to make sense in that while he was certainly interested in philosophy previously, he hadn't written extensively before that period.

So, who was Cicero trying to convert to his Platonic belief that eternal virtues are the highest good? Was he succeeding in his goal? And is that the reason he kept at it, sensing that he was winning the game?

Remember that the form of Platonism Cicero saw himself a part of was arguably more skeptical than Plato's own form, so he may have seen himself not as arguing exactly what the highest good "is" as much as he was opposing the Epicurean (and Stoic) confidence that they themselves held the correct position. But yes he clearly sided more with the Stoics that virtue is the highest good. As for me I am not sure that he thought he was succeeding. He seems to have been very negative about the situation "[Oh the times! Oh the morals!](#)" and he'd already seen many of his friends dead in the loss of Pompeii and the battle of Pharsalia. I'd say at this point he was trying to (1) console himself that he was right despite the bad turn of events, and (2) rally whoever among the Senatorial class was still around to listen to him.

And I'd say his effectiveness is the reason that his works were preserved by the Judeo-Christians, who saw in them justification for their political suppression of dissent.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

One foundation of good writing that I learned over time is that as a writer, you must know your audience. You shape your premise and your theme based on the audience who will read the work.

As Dewitt wrote, Cicero could not have misrepresented Epicurus so well if he had not understood Epicurus so thoroughly.

In my view, Cicero -- correctly -- identified that to describe "absence of pain" as pleasure is totally unsatisfactory and will never be acceptable to ordinary people who are not aware of the philosophical explanation that the person in "absence of pain" is not engaged in inactive

nothingness, but is actually engaging in normal and pleasurable mental and physical activities unaccompanied by any pains.

I would equate this difficulty to the "the sun is the size it appears to be." That phrase appears laughably ridiculous unless attended with the explanation that the point is not to assert a particular size, but to assert that the size is in fact determined by the senses, rather than by abstract calculations which have not been grounded in reality.

To any audience of normally educated people, all you have to do is strip "absence of pain" of its explanation, and Epicurean philosophy becomes ridiculous. Cicero and Plutarch and Seneca and others did exactly that. They gave the Epicurean slogans detached from the Epicurean explanations in physics and canonics, and thereby they wrote the narrative that has prevailed ever since. And the worst part is that many of today's friends of Epicurus continue to do exactly the same thing, burying the philosophy deeper rather than doing anything to recover the explanation.

It is deadly to Epicurean philosophy to interpret "absence of pain" as inactivity.