

Episode 299 - TD27 - Was Epicurus Right That There Are Only Two Feelings - Pleasure And Pain?

Post by "Cassius" of September 15, 2025 at 6:22 PM

As i am editing I can point out that this week we focus on the second of three challenges Cicero raised in Section XX of part 3 of Tusculan disputations. - that Epicurus is wrong that there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain.

This challenge is common to both Cicero and Plutarch, and it's important for us to think about all possible responses because a lot rides on it.

We phrased the question in terms of "What was Epicurus's justification for dividing feeling into only two categories- pleasure and pain? Why not three, or thirty, or three hundred, giving names to many more types or categories of experiences? Where do we find the basis for this classification?"

Here's on of the places Cicero states his complaint, in section III-XX. [¶](#)

Quote

It may be said, What! do you imagine Epicurus really meant this, and that he maintained anything so sensual? Indeed I do not imagine so, for I am sensible that he has uttered many excellent things and sentiments, and delivered maxims of great weight. Therefore, as I said before, I am speaking of his acuteness, not of his morals. Though he should hold those pleasures in contempt, which he just now commended, yet I must remember wherein he places the chief good. For he was not contented with barely saying this, but he has explained what he meant: he says, that taste, and embraces, and sports, and music, and those forms which affect the eyes with pleasure, are the chief good. Have I invented this? have I misrepresented him? I should be glad to be confuted; for what am I endeavouring at, but to clear up truth in every question? Well, but the same man says, that pleasure is at its height where pain ceases, and that to be free from all pain is the very greatest pleasure. Here are three very great mistakes in a very few words. One is, that he contradicts himself; for, but just now, he could not imagine anything good, unless the senses were in a manner tickled with some pleasure; but now he says that to be free from pain is the highest pleasure. Can any one contradict himself more? The next mistake is, that where there is naturally a threefold division, the first, to be pleased; next, to be in pain; the last, to be affected neither by pleasure nor pain: he imagines the first and the last to be the same, and makes no difference betwixt pleasure and a cessation of pain. The last mistake he falls into in common with some others; which is this: that as virtue is the most desirable thing, and as philosophy has been investigated with a view to the attainment of it, he

has separated the chief good from virtue. But he commends virtue, and that frequently; and indeed C. Gracchus, when he had made the largest distributions of the public money, and had exhausted the treasury, nevertheless spoke much of defending the treasury. What signifies what men say, when we see what they do? That Piso, who was surnamed Frugal, had always harangued against the law that was proposed for distributing the corn, but when it had passed, though a man of consular dignity, he came to receive the corn. Gracchus observed Piso standing in the court, and asked him, in the hearing of the people, how it was consistent for him to take corn by a law he had himself opposed? "It was," said he, "against your distributing my goods to every man as you thought proper; but, as you do so, I claim my share." Did not this grave and wise man sufficiently show that the public revenue was dissipated by the Sempronian law? Read Gracchus's speeches, and you will pronounce him the advocate of the treasury. Epicurus denies that any one can live pleasantly who does not lead a life of virtue; he denies that fortune has any power over a wise man: he prefers a spare diet to great plenty, and maintains that a wise man is always happy. All these things become a philosopher to say, but they are not consistent with pleasure. But the reply is, that he doth not mean that pleasure: let him mean any pleasure, it must be such a one as makes no part of virtue. But suppose we are mistaken as to his pleasure, are we so too as to his pain? I maintain therefore the impropriety of language which that man uses when talking of virtue, who would measure every great evil by pain?