

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

Post by "Cassius" of September 17, 2025 at 12:04 PM

Don -- Yes that circle represents another model. Like any other model I would expect that the author of the model would say that it is grounded in reality, so I would say the original question remains.

For example, all of those headings around the circumference are labels that the model-writer has assigned based on his or her experience. Would it be any *less* legitimate to assign them differently?

So the question that I underlies the whole discussion is: What is the *authority* or *foundation* of this or any other model?

Are both Epicurus' model (with no middle ground) and the majority model (with a middle ground) equally legitimate in terms of evidence, differing only in conceptual labelling?

Epicurus obviously thought that it made sense to use a model in which there is no middle ground. Plato, Cicero, *et al.* prefer a model in which there is a middle ground. Is there really a difference in real-world evidence that says that one model conforms with reality more than does the other?

Now obviously I think the Epicurean model provides a far superior method of analysis. By affirming that there is a bright line between pleasure and pain you can make everything fall on one side or the other and see much more clearly that even non-stimulated situations are pleasure or pain. But i also think it is important to state that this is a model that our minds need to comprehend, and not leave it to speculation that there might be some kind of natural law or evidence or force that compels us to say that this model is "true to the evidence" while the other model is "false to the evidence."

As Joshua stated several times in the episode, I think Epicurus and we agree that pleasure and pain are highly subjective, even in terms of likes and dislikes as to food. So who are we to say to Cicero "No you wrong - when you're not in stimulative pain or pleasure, you must still use the same terms (pain or pleasure) to describe the condition that you are in."

Cicero and Plutarch are leaving out that what Epicurus is not saying "You're missing the obvious - when you think you are in neutral you are the same as if you're eating the best steak of your life!"

Instead, what Epicurus is doing is stating a conceptual framework that allows us to analyze the full problem more productively. Epicurus isn't exactly saying to the world: "No, when you're not

being stimulated one way or the other, you may not realize it, but you're still being stimulated." The world says that's not true because they know the difference between numbness and eating the best steak they've ever had.

What seems to be in issue is labeling rather than evidence. And what we're arguing about with Cicero as to what to label is what constitutes a healthy state of peak performance of mind and body.

The problem facing us is that the view that "all you have to do is remove pain and you are in the greatest pleasure possible." That's being taken by some as a statement that you can reach the highest pleasure possible by numbing your mind and body as with a drug.

I think we're saying pretty much the opposite - that you want your mind and body to be MORE sensitive to what's going on in them and whether they are healthy or not. In the case of Chrysippus' hand the assertion is that the hand is in its normal operating condition, which in the case of the limited abilities of a hand a statement of peak condition. In the case of the mind, however, the mind isn't in peak condition unless it understands how the universe operates, that we aren't subject to supernatural gods or punishment/reward by supernatural forces after death, and that we can have the confident expectation of remaining in that condition.

That latter condition of the mind is the opposite of "emptying" or "numbing" the mind so as to allegedly automatically achieve its peak pleasure. That peak performance of the mind is going to require understanding of the nature of things (as listed above) which requires intellectual effort.

And it seems to me that in order to explain the model it is helpful to make clear that what we're talking about isn't that the general public has defective senses, but rather what they are missing is a conceptual model that is required for the proper understanding of the best life.