

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

Post by "Don" of September 17, 2025 at 11:54 PM

## [Quote from Cassius](#)

Torquatus is making these statements very "flatly," He's speaking almost literally "The absence of pain is pleasure - in fact it's the highest pleasure." And I'd say that Epicurus is doing the same thing in the letter to Menoeceus. There's an explanation for the different perspectives, but I don't think we are yet articulating that explanation as Epicurus would.

On Ends, I. 38 *Itaque non placuit Epicuro medium esse quiddam inter dolorem et voluptatem; illud enim ipsum, quod quibusdam medium videretur, cum omni dolore careret, non modo voluptatem esse, **verum etiam summam voluptatem. quisquis enim sentit, quem ad modum sit affectus, eum necesse est aut in voluptate esse aut in dolore.** omnis autem privatione doloris putat Epicurus terminari summam voluptatem, ut postea variari voluptas distinguque possit, augeri amplificarique non possit.*

*I. 38 Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, **a pleasure of the highest order. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel pleasure or pain.** But complete absence of pain Epicurus considers to be the limit and highest point of pleasure; beyond this point pleasure may vary in kind, but it cannot vary in intensity or degree.*

That line there: *A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel pleasure or pain.* That's the essence of Epicurus' "contention" - or pointing out the facts, if I may - that if you're alive you're either feeling pleasure or pain.

The absence of pain then, by definition, means totally filled with pleasure.

The obstacle seems to be Epicurus choice of *hedone* in Greek, translated literally as *pleasure* in English and translated literally as *voluptas* in Latin. I will grant that Epicurus expanded what even his contemporaries well before Cicero thought *hedone* was. But it seems to me he had no better word to convey what he was getting at. I would say a "better" choice of words in English may have been "positive" and "negative" feelings but those connotations didn't really exist in Epicurus' language. The closest to "positive" is *θετικός* but that has more a "fit" argument or "affirmative" not positive in the sense of a "positive" feeling as we understand it. If we take that

alternative tack, Epicurus is saying the absence of all negative feeling yields the highest limit of all positive feeling. Okay, that could still be misconstrued, but it at least uses more complementary words.

*I. 39 sin autem summa voluptas est, ut Epicuro placet, nihil dolere,*

*I. 39 Whereas if, as Epicurus holds, the highest pleasure be to feel no pain, ...*

But can mortals actually achieve no pain at all in any amount? I remain skeptical of this. Diogenes Laertius writes that the Garden taught that [X.121] *Two sorts of happiness can be conceived, the one the highest possible, **such as the gods enjoy**, which cannot be augmented, the other admitting **addition and subtraction of pleasures**.* And I would add "the addition and subtraction of pains." It is the theoretical limit of pleasure (No Pain) that allows it to contend with "Virtue" (don't get me started) to be the Summum Bonum/Telos.

*I. 57 O praeclaram beate vivendi et apertam et simplicem et directam viam! cum enim certe nihil homini possit melius esse quam vacare omni dolore et molestia perfruique maximis et animi et corporis voluptatibus, videtisne quam nihil praetermittatur quod vitam adiuvet, quo facilius id, quod propositum est, summum bonum consequamur? clamat Epicurus, is quem vos nimis voluptatibus esse deditum dicitis; non posse iucunde vivi, nisi sapienter, honeste iusteque vivatur, nec sapienter, honeste, iuste, nisi iucunde.*

*I. 57 "Here is indeed a royal road to happiness — open, simple, and direct! For clearly man can have no greater good than complete freedom from pain and sorrow **coupled with** the enjoyment of the highest bodily and mental pleasures. Notice then how the theory embraces every possible enhancement of life, every aid to the attainment of that Chief Good which is our object. Epicurus, the man whom you denounce as a voluptuary, cries aloud that no one can live pleasantly without living wisely, honourably and justly, and no one wisely, honourably and justly without living pleasantly.*

That "coupled with" to me sounds like joining katastematic and kinetic pleasure: complete freedom from pain and sorrow (ataraxia and aponia) + the **enjoyment** of the greatest bodily and mental pleasures (kharis and euphrosyne) . perfrūor = to enjoy fully or thoroughly.

It's getting late and I'm starting to ramble. Consider this food for thought. Until tomorrow.