

Article By Dr. Emily Austin - "Epicurus And The Politics Of The Fear Of Death"

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Here's an example from this weeks' podcast text. In [this section of Tusculan Disputations](#) Cicero says, referring to Stoics and those of similar viewpoint who hold that the condition of the mind is all that is important: *What may they not do, who allow nothing to be desirable, nothing to be looked on as good but what is honourable? Let, then, the Peripatetics and old Academics follow my example, and at length leave off muttering to themselves; and openly and with a clear voice let them be bold to say, that a happy life may not be inconsistent with the agonies of Phalaris's bull.*

- Quote

Nor did he take any trouble to provide himself with those remedies which might have enabled him to bear pain; such as firmness of mind, a shame of doing anything base, exercise, and the habit of patience, precepts of courage, and a manly hardiness: but he says that he supports himself on the single recollection of past pleasures, as if any one, when the weather was so hot as that he was scarcely able to bear it, should comfort himself by recollecting that he was once in my country Arpinum, where he was surrounded on every side by cooling streams: for I do not apprehend how past pleasures can allay present evils. But when he says that a wise man is always happy, who would have no right to say so if he were consistent with himself, what may they not do, who allow nothing to be desirable, nothing to be looked on as good but what is honourable? Let, then, the Peripatetics and old Academics follow my example, and at length leave off muttering to themselves; and openly and with a clear voice let them be bold to say, that a happy life may not be inconsistent with the agonies of Phalaris's bull.

The context here is that Cicero is irritated at Epicurus for saying that the wise man is happy even while under torture, because Cicero thinks that Epicureans care about nothing except the pleasures of smooth motion.

It's true that Epicurus doesn't care about anything that does not bring pleasure, but it's not true that Epicurus is happy even while under torture solely because he has the right "attitude" and has learned an intellectual lesson like $A + B = C$.

Epicurus is happy under extreme kidney disease because he actively focuses his attention on a set of pleasures that means more to him (his friends and his pleasure at the study of nature) and this gives him something real to say that he can withstand pain X because he has pleasure Y.

This is more than simply the intellectual knowledge that "when I die I cease to exist." There's nothing intrinsically pleasant about that knowledge at all. If you aren't now or haven't in the past pursued pleasures of mind and body that you do or have enjoy, you have nothing to set against pain.

I think that most people reading this here will agree with this viewpoint, but those who value the mind as divine - like Cicero is saying everyone should - disparage the *active pleasures* of the mind and body - because all they care about is "not being disturbed." And when you elevate "not being disturbed" to the goal of the philosophy then you've lost the entire thread of why "pleasure" is important.

The dead are "not disturbed" but that's not the point of life and it's a huge mistake to make it so, but that is implicit on those who can't articulate a good reason to stay alive, which is what Emily Austin is saying some of our most famous modern writers are doing in discussing Epicurus.