

# Current Series - Summarizing Epicurean Answers to Academic Questions

Post by “Cassius” of January 30, 2026 at 10:15 AM

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As I write this on January 30 we are planning to proceed with Episode 319 as an opening introduction to Cicero's Academic Questions. I note however that in Episode 318 we read and commented to the end of Tusculan Disputations, but we did not attempt to provide an overview of the full book. We'll need some time to put together notes and thoughts before we devote an episode to that, and the purpose of this thread is to make some notes to get us ready. As a start, here is an outline of what we need to summarize in one final Tusculan Disputations episode. Everyone should feel free to make comments in this thread as the following outline is a pretty good summary of some very major issues:

## Epicurean Answers To Tusculan Questions

### I. Book One: On Death

**A. The basic question posed by the student:** Is death an evil?

**B. Cicero's proposed answer from the Academic Skeptic/Stoic perspective:** Death is not an evil because either the soul survives death and continues to exist (perhaps in a better state), or death brings complete annihilation of consciousness, in which case there is no sensation and therefore no capacity for misery.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in favor of this position:**

- If the soul is immortal, death liberates it to contemplate truth and ascend to celestial regions
- If death brings total extinction, there is no feeling or consciousness remaining to experience evil
- The insignificance of earthly pleasures we lose makes death less fearful
- Many historical figures would have been better off dying earlier, avoiding greater evils
- Fear of death stems from superstition about underworld punishments, which are merely myths

**C. The answer to the question as provided by Epicurus as Cicero presents it:** "When we exist, death is not present; when death is present, we do not exist." Therefore [death is nothing to us](#), since when death arrives we no longer have any sensation or existence to be affected by it.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in opposition to Epicurus:**

- If death is truly nothing, why does Epicurus spend so much effort discussing and preparing for it?
- The Epicurean position seems to make the preparation for death unnecessary
- Epicurus's emphasis on pleasure makes his dismissal of death as "nothing" seem inconsistent
- The teaching appears to trivialize death rather than addressing it philosophically
- Epicurus relies too heavily on the annihilation view without considering soul immortality

**D. The Correct Epicurean response to this question:**

1. Death ends all sensation, so there is literally nothing to fear about the state of being dead
2. The "symmetry argument": we didn't suffer before birth, so why fear non-existence after death?
3. Fearing death interferes with present happiness, which is the actual evil
4. Understanding the nature of the soul (as atomic and mortal) eliminates superstitious fears
5. A life well-lived according to nature's limits makes death acceptable whenever it comes

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## II. Book Two: On Physical Pain

**A. The basic question posed by the student:** Is pain the greatest of all evils?

**B. Cicero's proposed answer from the Academic Skeptic/Stoic perspective:** Pain is not the greatest evil (infamy is worse) and can be overcome through fortitude, patience, and mental strength. The wise person's virtue enables them to endure physical suffering without losing happiness.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in favor of this position:**

- Avoiding infamy is more important than avoiding pain (student admits this)
- Historical examples show brave individuals enduring extreme pain for noble causes
- Mental attitude significantly affects how pain is experienced
- Training in virtue builds capacity to resist pain
- If pain were the greatest evil, no one could be happy, since anyone might experience it

**C. The answer to the question as provided by Epicurus (as Cicero presents it):** Epicurus claims the wise person under torture can say "How little I regard it!" and be happy even while being burned or tortured. Pain is managed by the maxims: "If severe, it is short; if long-lasting, it is bearable."

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in opposition to Epicurus:**

- This seems absurd coming from one who calls pain the greatest evil
- It's inconsistent to define good as pleasure yet claim happiness under torture
- If pain is the supreme evil, the wise person should do anything to avoid it, including shameful acts
- Epicurus's position makes happiness impossible since anyone can experience pain
- The claim that severe pain is always brief is empirically false

**D. The Correct Epicurean response to this question:**

1. Mental pleasures can be used to counterbalance physical pains - memory of past and anticipation of future goods
2. The wise person's understanding of nature provides mental pleasure that outweighs bodily distress
3. Severe pains are typically brief; chronic pains are usually bearable and allow for happiness
4. There are many other sources of pleasure - including friendship, philosophical inquiry, and other pleasures that are generally readily available, which can provide pleasures that sustain happiness through pain
5. There are many practical paths for making sure that our actions generate more pleasure than pain

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### **III. Book Three: On Mental Pain**

**A. The basic question posed by the student:** How can mental distress and grief be alleviated?

**B. Cicero's proposed answer from the Academic Skeptic/Stoic perspective:** Grief is an irrational "disease of the soul" caused by false judgment that something bad has occurred. It should be eliminated entirely through reason, recognition that misfortunes are common to humanity, and understanding that grieving accomplishes nothing.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in favor of this position:**

- Grief can be postponed in times of danger, showing it's under rational control
- Grief is often performed for social expectations rather than genuine feeling
- Understanding that misfortune is universal helps put personal loss in perspective

- Anticipating possible calamities prepares the mind and reduces their impact
- The truly wise person recognizes that only vice is worth grieving over

**C. The answer to the question as provided by Epicurus (as Cicero presents it):** The cure for grief is to call the mind away from dwelling on troubles and redirect it toward contemplating pleasures and good things.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in opposition to Epicurus:**

- This is mere distraction therapy, not genuine philosophical cure
- It doesn't address the root causes of grief in false judgments
- The approach is inconsistent with Epicurean hedonism if we can't agree on what is truly good
- It treats symptoms rather than correcting underlying beliefs
- The Epicurean therapy lacks the systematic rigor of Stoic approaches

**D. The Correct Epicurean response to this question:**

1. Grief arises mostly from false opinions about goods and evils - correcting these false opinions greatly reduces suffering
2. Memory of past pleasures and anticipation of future goods counterbalances mental pain
3. Learning to pursue pleasure rationally reduces occasions for grief
4. Friendship is generally readily available and provides both immediate comfort and long-term resilience against grief
5. Recognizing that many supposed goods (wealth, status) are not what is important in life liberates us from grief over the times they are not available.

## IV. Book Four: On Strong Emotions

**A. The basic question posed by the student:** How should we understand and manage all the perturbations of the soul (emotions/passions)?

**B. Cicero's proposed answer from the Academic Skeptic/Stoic perspective:** All passions are diseases of the soul arising from false judgments about good and evil. They fall into four categories: grief, fear, excessive joy, and immoderate desire. All should be eliminated entirely through recognizing that only virtue is good and only vice is evil.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in favor of this position:**

- Emotions are based on false beliefs about what constitutes good and evil
- Systematic classification reveals the cognitive structure underlying all passions
- Complete elimination of passions leads to true tranquility (apatheia)
- The passionless state allows reason to guide all actions

- Only by viewing virtue as the sole good can one achieve immunity from emotional disturbance

**C. The answer to the question as provided by Epicurus (as Cicero presents it):** Some emotions and desires are natural and necessary, others natural but unnecessary, still others neither natural nor necessary. Only the vain and empty desires should be eliminated.

**1. Major points in opposition to Epicurus:**

- This doesn't go far enough in controlling the passions
- The distinction between types of desires is unclear and subjective
- Allowing "natural" emotions still leaves one vulnerable to disturbance
- The Epicurean approach is too permissive and insufficiently rigorous
- Their emphasis on pleasure actually encourages certain passions

**D. The Correct Epicurean response to this question:**

1. Mental pleasure and pain are not false beliefs but are provided by Nature as guidance for how to live.
2. Limitless and unnecessary pleasures are not required for happiness and in fact produce more pain than pleasure
3. The pursuit of desires without limit (such as for unlimited wealth, power, fame) will bring more pain than pleasure and can easily be eliminated
4. Proper understanding of nature's limits allows us to eliminate excessive fear and desire while still pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain rationally toward the true goal of pleasure.
5. The goal of life is happiness through a predominance of pleasure over pain, not complete elimination of all disturbance and feeling, which are in fact provided by Nature and required for happy living.

## **V. Book Five: Is Virtue Sufficient for Happiness?**

**A. The basic question posed by the student:** Is virtue the only true good, and alone sufficient to produce a happy life, or are there other goods (health, wealth, etc.) which are also necessary?

**B. Cicero's proposed answer from the Academic Skeptic/Stoic perspective:** Virtue is entirely sufficient for happiness under all circumstances. The wise person is happy even in poverty, exile, blindness, pain, and torture. Happiness depends solely on character, not external circumstances, and virtue is the only true good.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in favor of this position:**

- If happiness required external goods, virtue would be discredited as insufficient

- Historical examples show virtuous people happy despite terrible circumstances
- Vice produces misery; therefore virtue (its opposite) must produce happiness
- External goods are indifferent - neither truly good nor evil
- The wise person's happiness is invulnerable to fortune's changes

**C. The answer to the question as provided by Epicurus (as Cicero presents it):**

Pleasure is the supreme good and the goal of life. The wise person is nearly always happy because they can maintain mental pleasure even under adversity, but in this Epicurus is inconsistent because he claims the wise person is always happy while making pleasure depend on circumstances.

**1. Major points cited by Cicero in opposition to Epicurus:**

- Epicurus makes happiness too dependent on external circumstances and fortune
- How can one be happy under torture if pleasure is the good?
- The claim contradicts Epicurus's own definition of good as pleasure
- It's inconsistent to say pain is the greatest evil yet the wise person is happy in pain
- The Epicurean position lacks the logical rigor of the Stoic view

**D. The Correct Epicurean response to this question:**

1. Prudence (practical wisdom) is the greatest virtue and enables the wise person to be happy in nearly all circumstances
2. Mental/spiritual pleasures (friendship, philosophy, memory) far outweigh bodily pleasures or pains
3. The wise person's happiness is secure because he can be confident that he will always be able to obtain pleasures that will outweigh pains, and in the event that pain becomes overwhelming, such pain can be ended by death.
4. A true understanding of the nature of things allows us to see that many of our worst fears (such as about death of capricious gods) are false suppositions, that it is readily possible to secure a life of happiness in which pleasure predominates over pain, and that we need not live forever to experience a happy life.
5. Understanding that the goal of life is happiness through pleasure allows us to see that virtue is necessary for happiness, but that understanding what virtue means is essential, in that virtue is not a set of absolute that is the same for all people in all places and at all times, but that virtue is contextual and is in fact whatever conduct that in practice leads to living happily.