

Discussion of the thread - Against Katastematic Supremacy - Pleasure Is A Unified Whole And Not A House Divided - Forum Editorial Policy

Post by "Cassius" of August 4, 2026 at 2:19 AM

When I hear people say they think the texts support identifying the goal with absence of pain, and therefore Epicurus is teaching them to target reducing pain above all, and that whatever pleasures happen to be laying around can be used to achieve the supreme good, I keep wanting to remind them of the statement of the best life by Torquatus:

Quote

Reid: XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slowness to its continuance. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement

Certainly anyone should first want first and foremost to dismiss fears of gods and of death and of unmanageable pain, but do those of you who think "absence of pain" is a complete description of what you need think that those three words fully describe what Torquatus is saying? Does his statement of the goal sound like something you are going to get by focusing solely on reducing every bodily or mental pain *without any consideration to selecting the type of activities that are going to produce in you the greatest bodily and mental pleasures*? Do you really see no difference between an hour spent trimming your toenails vs an hour with your friends at a concert of your favorite music? Do you really expect to achieve pleasures "great, numerous, and constant" by devoting every moment of your time first and foremost to rooting out every small annoyance from life?

And given that what we are doing is trying to articulate a clear philosophy to help people live better, you are honestly comfortable telling people that their overriding objective in life should be "absence of pain?"

For anyone to answer "yes" to that question - remember: You would not be in this case arguing that what some would variously describe as "meditation" or "mimicing a a corpse" is *pleasurable* or a *pleasure*. What the sources are saying is that absence of pain is the *limit* of pleasure, or the *highest* pleasure, or the *greatest* pleasure. Torquatus' thought experiment to imagine the man *surrounded by numerous and vivid pleasures and the rest* clearly to me meet that test. You are saying that your single "absence of pain" description exceeds what Torquatus described?

As I see it, the idea of "absence of pain" as an organizing principle can easily be explained to mean what Torquatus says the highest good to be. To leave it *unexplained* and accept the possibility that it means *focusing your life on eliminating pain and nothing more* is an absolute disaster for anyone who would seek to live that way - which means as an *organizing principle* - and the very opposite of what Epicurus intended as his purpose for discussing "absence of pain."

Speaking of imagining things, can we imagine the possibility that Torquatus might have said the following:

Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual who has absolutely no pain I ask what circumstance can we describe as more excellent than this or more desirable? ... his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

I would say that it is not possible to contend credibly that Torquatus would have said such a thing, and that's exactly why he did not use that as his thought experiment / proof that pleasure is the supreme good.