

# Epicurean Attitudes Toward Emotion

Post by "Cassius" of March 10, 2020 at 7:28 AM

I don't know how many times we are asked something about "Epicurean techniques" for achieving happiness. Many of these questions come from people who have recently been toying with Stoicism, and I think in a significant number of cases they are really asking:

***"How do I manage my emotions to keep them from getting the best of me?"***

That's a large part of the reason that as soon as they find out that Stoicism is all about the "suppression" of emotion, and the treating of emotion as an enemy of the best life, that many people are quickly out the door of the Porch.

Probably the first part of the education process is to show these people that Epicurus held feeling - the feeling of pleasure, which includes pleasurable emotions - as the goal of life, and that emotion is not the enemy. As Diogenes Laertius recorded about the Epicurean, in contrast to the non-Epicurean:

***He [the Epicurean wise man] will be more deeply moved by feelings, but this will not prove an obstacle to wisdom.***

But after that, can we assemble some thoughts from other aspects of Epicurean philosophy that will help in describing the Epicurean attitude toward emotions? I hesitate to use the term "management" of emotion, but maybe that is not far from accurate. Ultimately, this issue is probably a subset of the analysis voiced by Torquatus in On Ends, when he laid out the basic theory to Cicero.

Can we substitute "pleasurable emotion" for "pleasure" in this text?

Quote

No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?

On the other hand, we denounce with righteous indignation and dislike men who are so beguiled and demoralized by the charms of the pleasure of the moment, so blinded by desire, that they cannot foresee the pain and trouble that are bound to ensue; and equal blame belongs to those who fail in their duty through weakness of will, which is the same as saying through shrinking from toil and pain. These cases are perfectly simple and easy to distinguish. In a free hour, when our power of choice is untrammelled and when nothing prevents our being able to do what we like best, every pleasure is to be welcomed and every pain avoided.

But in certain emergencies and owing to the claims of duty or the obligations of business it will frequently occur that pleasures have to be repudiated and annoyances accepted. The wise man therefore always holds in these matters to this principle of selection: he rejects pleasures to secure other greater pleasures, or else he endures pains to avoid worse pains.

It might be a start to say that "pleasurable emotion" is the goal, and the guide, while "pursuing pleasure rationally" with maximized pleasure remaining always the goal, is the technique.

But there's a lot more that can be said, and I'm starting this thread to see what we can develop.