

Does The Wise Man Groan and Cry Out When On The Rack / Under Torture / In Extreme Pain?

Post by "Cassius" of October 28, 2019 at 9:06 AM

EMINENT PHILOSOPHERS

BY

DIOGENES LAËRTIUS.

LITERALLY TRANSLATED

By C. D. YONGE, B.A.

can he hinder himself in his progress towards wisdom. That the wise man, however, cannot exist in every state of body, nor in every nation. That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. That the wise man will only feel gratitude to his friends, but to them equally

whether they are present or absent. Nor will he groan and howl when he is put to the torture. Nor will he marry a wife whom the laws forbid, as Diogenes says, in his epitome of the Ethical Maxims of Epicurus. He will punish his servants,

EPICURUS

THE EXTANT REMAINS

WITH SHORT CRITICAL APPARATUS

TRANSLATION AND NOTES

BY

CYRIL BAILEY, M.A.

*Jowett Fellow and Classical Tutor of
Balliol College, Oxford*

Only the wise man will show gratitude, and will constantly speak well of his friends alike in their presence and their absence. Yet when he is on the rack, then he will cry out and lament. The wise man will not have intercourse with

Post by "Cassius" of June 17, 2025 at 8:27 AM

I see that I started a thread on this six years ago but it did not get developed. This is a question that we discussed in the podcast recorded on 6/15, so if anyone has any comment on whether

Yonge could be correct, let me know and I will record some new commentary before the podcast is released.

It appears that the translators other than Yonge seem to take the position that Epicurus said that the wise man WILL cry out under torture, but it's not 100% clear to me that it's beyond doubt that that's what Epicurus would have said.

It seems to me that there is a strong analogy between being under torture and being under the extreme pain of kidney disease, and we know that Epicurus took the time to say that he was still happy while in that condition. But there's nothing recorded as to Epicurus himself groaning or crying out from pain.

Now Cicero himself says that there are times when you are exerting yourself that you will groan/cry out, much in the way that athletes do, so I can see that one angle on this is that it makes sense to groan or cry out when that accomplishes something. But on the other hand if it accomplishes nothing but giving vent to pain/fear/frustration, then I could see it having negative effects on yourself and your friends around you.

I can see as a general rule that it makes sense to say that a truly happy man does not lose his happiness just because he is experiencing severe pain for a time. But it seems to me much harder to state a general rule of "no" or "yes" as to whether or not to groan cry out.

Should we consider the possibility that Yonge has it right and the others have it wrong?

I'd especially appreciate the help of our usual Greek researchers such as [Bryan](#) and [Don](#) and @Eikadistes on this question.

Post by “Don” of June 17, 2025 at 9:35 AM

FWIW

[Epicurean Sage - Torture](#)

Hicks: Even on the rack the wise man is happy. Yonge: That even if the wise man were to be put to the torture, he would still be happy. It's important to...

sites.google.com

Post by “Cassius” of June 17, 2025 at 10:26 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1244-does-the-wise-man-groan-and-cry-out-when-on-the-rack-under-torture-in-extreme-pa/>

Thanks Don, that's the kind of analysis we need. At this point I'm still not 100% convinced either way, though. Certainly the wise man is more affected by his emotions than others are, but i'm not sure it follows automatically that the wise man will cry out in pain, or for how long.

Not that i am a wise man, but I know I say "ouch" when I get hit with a paper cut or something unexpected.

Maybe the issue is the subtlety of "lament" or "groan" in the sense of long extended "woe is me" wailing, which is what Cicero seems to be focusing his criticism on in Tusculan Disputations in a discussion that seems to involve funeral rites. While it's natural to "cry out" when we get a sharp pain without prior warning, it's probably not a good idea to "wail" or "lament" continuously when your gout flairs up for hours or days or weeks at a time, or when you are mourning the loss of a loved one.

At the moment that direction is probably the way I would slice the issue. Exclamations for brief and unexpected pain, but after a time you get control of yourself and focus the mind on overcoming the pain.

Post by “Cassius” of June 17, 2025 at 10:49 AM

Here's the section of Part 2 of Tusculan Disputations to which I am referring. Cicero says that making certain sounds can be helpful at times, but his criticism seems to be against extended "lamentation." Of course the part of the claim he that we avoid lamentation because it is "noble" to do so is largely inadmissible in Epicurean terms, but there are practical implications as well that are more acceptable. At any rate, this context might help explain what the issue is all about.

The key part: *For as the engines you throw stones or darts with, throw them out with the greater force the more they are strained and drawn back; so it is in speaking, running, or boxing, the more people strain themselves, the greater their force. Since, therefore, this exertion has so much influence—if in a moment of pain groans help to strengthen the mind, let us use them; but if they be groans of lamentation, if they be the expression of weakness or abjectness, or unmanly weeping, then I should scarcely call him a man who yielded to them.*

More context:

Quote

For the body has a certain resemblance to the soul: as burdens are more easily borne the more the body is exerted, while they crush us if we give way; so the soul by exerting itself resists the whole weight that would oppress it; but if it yields, it is so pressed, that it cannot support itself. And if we consider things truly, the soul should exert itself in every pursuit, for that is the only security for its doing its duty. But this should be principally regarded in pain, that we must not do anything timidly, or dastardly, or basely, or slavishly, or effeminately, and above all things we must dismiss and avoid that Philoctetean sort of outcry. A man is allowed sometimes to groan, but yet seldom; but it is not permissible even in a woman to howl; for such a noise as this is forbidden, by the twelve tables, to be used even at funerals. Nor does a wise or brave man ever groan, unless when he exerts himself to give his resolution greater force, as they who run in the stadium make as much noise as they can. The wrestlers, too, do the same when they are training; and the boxers, when they aim a blow with the cestus at their adversary, give a groan, not because they are in pain, or from a sinking of their spirits, but because their whole body is put upon the stretch by the throwing out of these groans, and the blow comes the stronger.

II-XXIV.¶

What! they who would speak louder than ordinary, are they satisfied with working their jaws, sides, or tongue, or stretching the common organs of speech and utterance? the whole body and every muscle is at full stretch, if I may be allowed the expression, every nerve is exerted to assist their voice. I have actually seen the knees of Marcus Antonius touch the ground when he was speaking with vehemence for himself, with relation to the Varian law. For as the engines you throw stones or darts with, throw them out with the greater force the more they are strained and drawn back; so it is in speaking, running, or boxing, the more people strain themselves, the greater their force. Since, therefore, this exertion has so much influence—if in a moment of pain groans help to strengthen the mind, let us use them; but if they be groans of lamentation, if they be the expression of weakness or abjectness, or unmanly weeping, then I should scarcely call him a man who yielded to them. For even supposing that such groaning could give any ease, it still should be considered, whether it were consistent with a brave and resolute man. But, if it does not ease our pain, why should we debase ourselves to no purpose? for what is more unbecoming in a man than to cry like a woman? But this precept which is laid down with respect to pain is not confined to it; we should apply this exertion of the soul to everything else. Is anger inflamed? is lust excited? we must have recourse to the same citadel, and apply to the same arms; but since it is pain which we are at present discussing, we will let the other subjects alone. To bear pain, then, sedately and calmly, it is of great use to consider with all our soul, as the saying is, how noble it is to do so, for we are naturally desirous (as I said before, but it cannot be too often repeated) and very much inclined to what is

honourable, of which, if we discover but the least glimpse, there is nothing which we are not prepared to undergo and suffer to attain it. From this impulse of our minds, this desire for genuine glory and honourable conduct, it is that such dangers are supported in war, and that brave men are not sensible of their wounds in action, or if they are sensible of them, prefer death to the departing but the least step from their honour. The Decii saw the shining swords of their enemies when they were rushing into the battle. But the honourable character and the glory of the death which they were seeking, made all fear of death of little weight. Do you imagine that Epaminondas groaned when he perceived that his life was flowing out with his blood? No; for he left his country triumphing over the Lacedæmonians, whereas he had found it in subjection to them. These are the comforts, these are the things that assuage the greatest pain.

Post by “TauPhi” of June 17, 2025 at 2:32 PM

It doesn't matter how wise a person is. No-one is capable of controlling the nature of pleasure and pain. We can learn how to efficiently gravitate towards or from these feelings but we can't change their nature. Pleasure is always pleasure. Pain is always pain. The same way we can't control the nature of our senses. We can use the sense of sight for seeing but it doesn't matter how wise we get, we can never learn to control the nature of sight and use it for hearing.

Claiming that a wise person in extreme pain does not cry out or groan is like claiming that a wise person in extreme pain can see things with their ears. No-one has ability to rule over the faculties of feelings and senses.

It would be nice if we all were Rambos and when tortured with electrocution to the point where there's electricity shortage in the whole village, we would merely behave like we had mild morning constipation. Unfortunately, when exposed to extreme pain (that is pain that overwhelms completely and removes the ability to reason) no-one is Rambo. Wise or not, everyone behaves like a wild beast facing unbearable pain.

Yonge most likely made a mistake. Hicks, Bailey, Mensch, White and Lesniak (Polish translation) all translate the fragment in favour of groaning and screaming.

Post by “Bryan” of June 17, 2025 at 2:57 PM

I agree with your line of thinking TauPhi, but Cicero does seem supported by others in his representation:

Plutarch, Non Posse, 1099D:

"Not even one of us would believe Epíkouros that - while dying amid the greatest pains and illnesses - he was counterbalancing with the memory of pleasures formerly fully enjoyed. Someone would more likely perceive the representation of his appearance in the [ocean's] disturbed depth and surge than a memory of pleasure smiling gently amid such throbbing and bodily torment!"

We also have Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, 92.25:

"Does it not seem equally unbelievable that someone placed in the greatest torments should say 'I am blessed'? and yet this statement was heard in the very workshop of pleasure 'most blessed' Epíkouros said 'is this indeed: this day I am living' - even while on one side difficulty of urination was tormenting him, and on the other side the incurable pain of an ulcerated stomach."

And (although I shared this recently) Marcus Aurelius , Meditations, 9.41, quoting Epíkouros: "In my illness, my conversations were not about the feelings of my little body → nor was I chatting about such things to those who visited but, while studying nature, I continued with the prior topics, even while in that very state, [*studying*] how the mind - although participating in such movements [*occurring*] within my little bit of flesh - remains untroubled, while preserving its own good."

Post by “TauPhi” of June 17, 2025 at 3:26 PM

Thanks, [Bryan](#) . All these examples indicate that Epicurus was still capable of reasoning. That means he wasn't in extreme pain. Extreme pain cuts you off from yourself, ie. you have no control over what you think or do. It's like you decide to stop breathing for a moment. All is good. You're in control but after a short while your body will force you to breathe whether you like it or not. Extreme conditions lead to extreme measures and 'emergency mode' of our bodies has very little interest in our acquired wisdom.

Post by “DaveT” of June 17, 2025 at 3:46 PM

I've followed this discussion, but I don't understand why discussions of human behavior *in extremis* (at the point of death) are relevant to the average person. It sounds like argument for argument's sake. I don't intend to be argumentative, but why should we care how a person's prior state of happiness affects them moments before death? Is that supposed to prove anything about the value of living well?

Post by “kochiekoch” of June 17, 2025 at 3:55 PM

If the question is whether a wise man will cry out in pain under extreme conditions like being on the rack. Does he have a choice?

Post by “Cassius” of June 17, 2025 at 4:59 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

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I think your question helps point to the answer. I agree, the Epicureans would NOT have engaged in an *in extremis* debate unless for the sake of making a larger point. Nor do I think Cicero would. There are deeper issues at stake about the meaning of happiness and under what terms, if any, it can be lost.

Post by “Cassius” of June 17, 2025 at 8:20 PM

And I think the same mistaken estimation of Epicurus ' views of "happiness" is why Cosma Raimondi apparently failed to recognize that Epicurus was taking the same position as the Stoics took, albeit with drastically different definitions of the term "happiness."

It's going to take a lot of adjustment in the minds of many people who think that Epicurus' highest priority was to exclude every pain from life, and that their way to happiness is to live minimally and ascetically so as to never let any pain intrude.

Instead, it appears to me that the fragments we have remaining on this issue point the way to seeing that Epicurus fully recognized that all pain cannot be removed from life in practice, and that in fact he was prepared to find happiness even during periods of great mental and physical pain.

We all know that it was important to Epicurus to emphasize that the goal is happiness rather than "virtue," but this understanding blows a hole in the superficial analysis that happiness is to be found in finding some kind of ambiguous "absence of pain." It points to a much deeper analysis of how pleasure and pain form the basis of happiness. As Diogenes of Oinoanda said, the question is not "what is the means to happiness" but "What is happiness?" And many writers on Epicurus have never really articulated what happiness really means and how it doesn't equate to "absence of pain."

Quote

Fragment 32:

If, gentlemen, the point at issue between these people and us involved inquiry into «what is the means of happiness?» and they wanted to say «the virtues» (which would actually be true), it would be unnecessary to take any other step than to agree with them about this, without more ado. But since, as I say, the issue is not «what is the means of happiness?» but «what is happiness and what is the ultimate goal of our nature?», I say both now and always, shouting out loudly to all Greeks and non-Greeks, that pleasure is the end of the best mode of life, while the virtues, which are inopportunately messed about by these people (being transferred from the place of the means to that of the end), are in no way an end, but the means to the end.

Post by “Don” of June 17, 2025 at 10:15 PM

This is why I dislike "happiness" as a translation for ευδαιμονια (eudaimonia). It is a woefully inadequate word choice. The reason I can accept "The wise man will 'be happy' on the rack" is

that it actually says "κὰν στρεβλωθῆ δ' ὁ σοφός, εἶναι αὐτὸν εὐδαίμονα" "Even if the wise one is under torture - stretched on the rack, he is experiencing eudaimonia."

It seems also important to realize that the Greek is not punctuated like the English. The Greek seems to include this whole section:

Even on the rack the wise man is happy. He alone will feel gratitude towards friends, present and absent alike, and show it by word and deed. When on the rack, however, he will give vent to cries and groans.

That middle section about gratitude comes right between the "rack" parts. When on the rack, the wise one may still feel gratitude for their life and for their friends. It's not that they're "happy happy joy joy" on the rack. They can feel gratitude for their life and friends, they can feel satisfied that they've lived their life well. They won't give up their friends even on the rack, they will show their gratitude "by word and deed." Honestly, I don't know if I could do that. I doubt it. But I'm not wise yet. I still have work to do in putting Epicurean principles deep into my bones. Do I still have tingly feelings of an afterlife sometimes in the dark of night? Maybe. Old habits are HARD to break. Do I feel gratitude for my life and my friends and my family? Yes, THAT I can do.

PS. And, of course, the wise one will "give vent to cries and groans" while being tortured!! They're not Stoics. There should not be any question that a human being will cry out of under severe pain. I'm sure Epicurus let out cries when his kidneys were inflamed and he felt like his insides were being twisted in knots. That's just common sense. He felt the pain. It's not like the memories of past good times removed his pain. That's not what the letter says. He was satisfied with his life, knowing it was coming to an end. Between pangs of severe pain, he took satisfaction in a life well lived.

Post by "Cassius" of June 18, 2025 at 6:04 AM

That's another very good observation about reading things together. Which takes us back to some degree to the related question of "How did Cosma Raimondi get this wrong?". Is this point Don just made what he failed to appreciate?

I might recombine these two threads given that they may be more closely related than I anticipated, but for the time being I'll keep them separate and just crossreference. Cosma Raimondi is probably an example of the interpretation problem, but the problem is much bigger than him.

Post by “Cassius” of June 18, 2025 at 8:20 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Even if the wise one is under torture - stretched on the rack, he is experiencing eudaimonia."

I recall in my college philosophy class that the professor generally translated that as having a "good spirit."

It seems like the usage in English of "happy" over time has changed, but regardless of that there's no doubt that a normal person today hearing the word "happy" is going to understand at first glance something much different than what was being talked about by Epicurus and the others as well.

Having a good spirit would also appear to be something of an idiom even then - certainly Epicurus did not consider there to be anything supernatural involved in it, regardless of what Socrates might have implied about having a "daemon" talking to him.

What does that lead to? Probably to the continuous need for up-front and early discussion of what "happiness" really means when describing Epicurean philosophy, just like explanations are needed for "pleasure" and "gods" and "virtue."

Epicurus has probably given us the best example possible by writing that letter on his last day. That makes it unmistakable that happiness does not require total absence of and separation from pain.

Post by “DaveT” of June 18, 2025 at 2:54 PM

I'm enjoying this conversation. As I read and look to apply the lesson to myself, I'm reminded of Thomas Jefferson's language in the American Declaration of Independence that we are entitled to the "Pursuit of Happiness". It's not a static state. To me, the message of Epicurus is to think about what we do as we pursue a contented daily life. Constant awareness is not possible, I think. But doesn't Epicurus teach that we are to be mindful of our short and long term choices? Especially when hard times hit? My dad used to chastise me as a kid when I made the wrong choices, "Just use your head!"

Post by “Cassius” of June 18, 2025 at 3:14 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

I'm reminded of Thomas Jefferson's language in the American Declaration of Independence that we are entitled to the "Pursuit of Happiness". It's not a static state

I think that's exactly right! Certainly happiness can be used to refer to a feeling that exists in the moment, but also happiness can be more of an evaluative judgment as well, and it's important to distinguish which one we are talking about.

Post by “Don” of June 18, 2025 at 3:33 PM

I think it's interesting that The Declaration provided for the means to pursue happiness. It didn't guarantee happiness, just the right to have the opportunity to pursue it.

Post by “Bryan” of June 20, 2025 at 12:28 PM

I am not sure if we have shared this quote as well, but wanted to throw it in to make sure. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 7.13.2-4 (Rackham trans):

"This is why everybody thinks that the happy life must be a pleasant life, and regards pleasure as a necessary ingredient of happiness; and with good reason, since no impeded activity is perfect, whereas Happiness is essentially perfect; so that the happy man requires in addition the goods of the body, external goods and the gifts of fortune, in order that his activity may not be impeded through lack of them. Consequently those who say that, if a man be good, he will be happy even when on the rack, or when fallen into the direst misfortune, are intentionally or unintentionally talking nonsense. But because Happiness requires the gifts of fortune in addition, some people think that it is the same thing as good fortune; but this is not so, since even good fortune itself when excessive is an impediment to activity, and perhaps indeed no longer deserves to be called good fortune, since good fortune can only be defined in relation to Happiness."

Post by "Cassius" of June 20, 2025 at 1:53 PM

Excellent contribution Bryan! So given that Epicurus was likely aware of this statement by Aristotle, which tracks the reasoning of Cosma Raimondi, by the way, what do we make of Diogenes Laertius' and Cicero's statements which seem to stake Epicurus out on the opposite position?

At the moment i am still of the opinion that Epicurus DID say something about the wise man still being happy while under extreme pain, given the statements of Diogenes Laertius and Cicero to that same effect.

I personally then am inclined to conclude that this is going to be more evidence that Epicurus was using words in non-standard ways, and that he did the same to happiness as he did to pleasure and virtue and gods. Clearly if Epicurus held himself to be happy in the midst of last-phase kidney disease, then he is working with a definition of happiness that does not exclude extreme pain. Aristotle and Cosma Raimondi may think that makes no sense, if they are focusing solely on the "stimulative pleasure" side of happiness, but given that Epicurus was expanding the scope of the word "pleasure" I think it's entirely possible that he in fact considered himself to be "happy" and expected his students to understand why.

And that's where I am on "crying out" too. Yes it makes total sense that Epicurus or anyone else would "cry out" when under extreme pain. But on the other hand I do not think it would make sense for Epicurus to compose a book of "Lamentations" to devote his mind to wailing or waxing at length on how much pain he was in.

Leading me to conclude that the best interpretations are probably:

(1) Epicurean happiness does not totally exclude the experience of great pain (mental and bodily). We'll certainly do what is possible to avoid that, but we will bear it by deeming our pleasure to outweigh that pain up until the moment we deem it time to "exit the stage" (because we have rationally concluded that the future will be unavoidably worse);

(2) An Epicurean like any other person going to "cry out" when under torture, but as long as his actions are within his control, an Epicurean won't wail and gnash teeth and compose length lamentations about the pain of life. And in fact an Epicurean will plan ahead to the extent possible to make sure that he does not degenerate into an out-of-control condition before taking events into his own hands.

Post by "Eikadistes" of July 1, 2025 at 8:04 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Here's how I read it:

"But even if the wise were tortured on a rack, they would be happy,⁴ and only the wise will have gratitude for friends both present and absent alike through both word and through deed.⁵ However, when tortured on the rack, at some point they both moan and wail."

I take the **μέντοι** ("*however*") at the beginning of the second sentence to create a thematic opposition against the first proposition that *a wise person maintains happiness while undergoing physical pain*. In this case, I think, it conveys something like, *though an emotionally healthy person will maintain a good attitude, they're still only human, and they will exhibit normative physical responses to stimuli, such as your knee popping when you knock it, or*

yelping when getting burned or stabbed.

This might be a sort of marker about the limits of un-disturbedness. Perhaps both mortals and immortals can achieve a state of robust, mental tranquility, but while immortals are removed from experiencing any painful sensations, mortals are still defined by pain that will eventually kill us.

Post by “Cassius” of July 1, 2025 at 8:50 AM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

This might be a sort of marker about the limits of un-disturbedness.

I think this is correct Eikadistes. What I think we can see in the discussion in Tusculan Disputations is that the Stoics were asserting that the good/wise/happy man is going to have no part of evil, and therefore we cannot ever label pain as evil. Epicurus is willing to call pain evil, but he knows that the happy man will still have times when he experiences pain, so he stresses that we can still be happy even when we are in pain, as in his last days.

Epicurus' view of happiness is therefore much more logical and consistent with human experience than that of the Stoics.