

How Would Epicurus Analyze The Faulkner Quotation: "Between Grief And Nothing, I'll Take Grief"

Post by "Cassius" of September 14, 2024 at 8:30 PM

I can't believe I had never heard this quote from Faulkner before, but I think I heard it for the first time today in that great intellectual movie "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

Apparently it comes from William Faulkner, and no doubt it has a context in his writing (which at this moment I don't know).

Regardless of the context, it occurs to me to make an interesting question to discuss in Epicurean terms. We might even rephrase it for better Epicurean application:

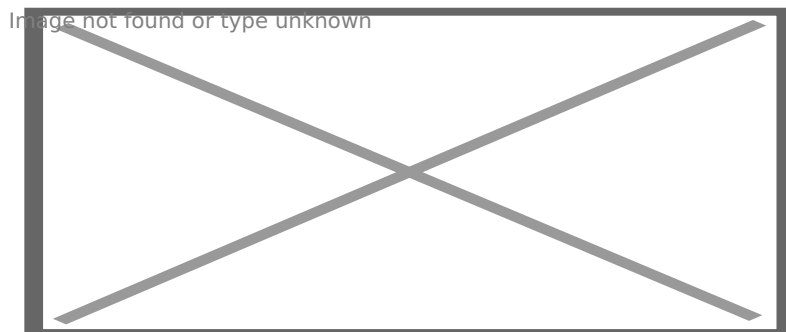
"Between pain and nothing, I'll take pain."

Do we think that Epicurus would say that?

My first thought would require a lot of explanation, so I'll reserve it for now, but I think this would make a good topic for a thread.

Could you imagine Epicurus saying "Between pain and nothing, I'll take pain?"

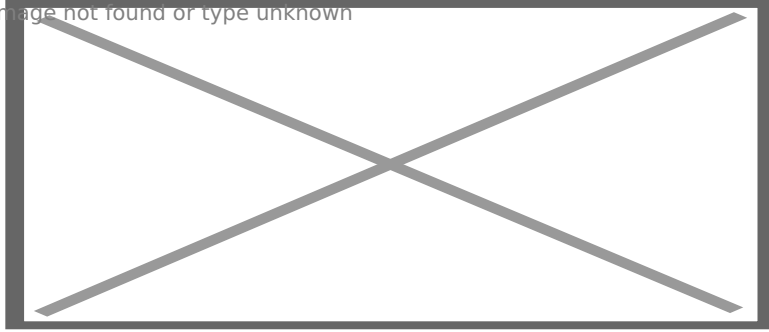
If so, why? If not, why not?



[BETWEEN GRIEF AND NOTHING, I'LL TAKE GRIEF](#)

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[I'll take grief.](#)

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Post by “Don” of September 14, 2024 at 9:31 PM

...when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be.—Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing I will take grief.

Harry Wilbourne, in (Ch. 9) "Wild Palms"; p. 324 (Faulkner's italics)

The full context appears to be about forgetting someone you care about. The grief is better than the nothing, than the absence of the person's memory. I could easily think of contexts that Epicurus might lean toward that sentiment.

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Plutarch, That Epicurus actually makes a pleasant life impossible, 28, p. 1105D: If then, "the memory of a dead friend is pleasant on every count" as Epicurus said, we need no more to make us see the great delight that they renounce when, although they suppose that they can receive and capture the apparitions and likenesses of dead companions {in dreams?} – images that have neither mind nor feeling – they do not think they will ever again meet those friends themselves, or ever again see a dear father or dear mother or perhaps a gentle wife, and have not even the hope of such company.

Cf. Seneca, Letters to Lucilius, 63.7: Thinking of departed friends is to me something sweet and mellow.

Post by “Joshua” of September 15, 2024 at 3:35 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4046-how-would-epicurus-analyze-the-faulkner-quotations-between-grief-and-nothing-i-ii/>

[Here](#) is Tennyson on the same theme. The question is somewhat lacking in definition; what is the context of the pain? And what is meant by nothing?

In the broadest terms, 'nothing' must mean death. This is because there is no neutral or middle ground between pleasure and pain; if you aren't experiencing pain, then you are either experiencing pleasure or not experiencing anything.

In Tennyson's case, we can regard the pain as transactional; 'The pleasure I had in spending time with you is worth the cost of the pain I'm now feeling over your loss.' I would hope (contra Plutarch) that the study of philosophy would help one to manage that grief and reduce that pain. Either way, in this transactional sense, 'nothing' doesn't actually mean nothing; it simply means the loss of something or someone.

So there are actually two questions;

1.) Would Epicurus choose a life of pain over death?

- Accounts differ. Principal doctrine 4 suggests that pain is mostly manageable. As it says elsewhere, 'there is more reason for joy than for vexation.' However, Torquatus complicates things in this passage:

"It is schooled to encounter pain by recollecting that pains of great severity are ended by death, and slight ones have frequent intervals of respite; while those of medium intensity lie within our own control: we can bear them if they are endurable, or if they are not, we may serenely quit life's theater, when the play has ceased to please us."

2.) Would Epicurus support the view that it is "better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all"?

- Yes! Not because he wants to live with the pain, but because a major focus of his work was in managing and reducing mental pain. The death of his closest friend Metrodorus must have been a hardship to him, but he did not for that reason denounce friendship; it was just the opposite. He praised friendship as an 'immortal good'.

Principal Doctrine 27: *"Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends."*

Post by “Cassius” of September 15, 2024 at 6:56 AM

Those are two good posts!

I'm still not clear at all as to the original intent of the statement - as to how broadly it was to be applied.

But taking the words out of context and deciding how they might or might not be reasonably applied sounds like a helpful exercise.

So one important application is what Don raises in terms of making the question one of memory of a loved one, which is picked up in point 2 of Joshua's post, which reminds me that we've discussed that "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" before here on the forum. (I'll find the link). And I think when I find that link we'll find that it discusses this point as made in Chapter 10 of A Few Days In Athens too.

Joshua's point 1 is the broader question that seems harder to answer without taking the time to clarify the premises of what is essentially a hypothetical question. Point 2 seems easier to answer (probably with the "yes" that we don't forgo things like friendship even though we know all friendships eventually come to an end, with the death of one or both). Point 1 can't be answered without drilling down to exactly what is meant by "grief" or "pain." I would say that if we mean "unrelenting and total grief/pain to the exclusion of ALL other experiences," then Epicurus would choose death, because we can exit the play when it truly and fully ceases to please us. But such a hypothetical isn't consistent with normal life, and so the normal answer is that Epicurus would choose to live precisely because he knows that pain is generally endurable if long or short if intense. and that absent exceptional circumstances, it is a very small person who has many reasons for ending his own life.

Here's the link to the prior post. Unfortunately the link to the Facebook post is dead, and it's just a single post rather than a thread ("on better to have loved and lost than never to have loved"):

Post

[Query: "Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Would Epicurus have agreed or disagreed? Why?](#)

A very smart woman in Greece wrote this. Maybe she will post it herself at some point but until then:

As you placed this issue, Epicurus would answer to it, like this: I do not answer in such kind of dilemmas to agree or disagree.

I prefer to post here again, a comment that I have written to another thread and some months ago.

On the matters of : 1) Eros as sexual desire and 2) love as friendship

Two different concepts and meanings : the first (1) is complex, inexplicable and unreason the second...



Cassius

May 21, 2015 at 4:32 PM

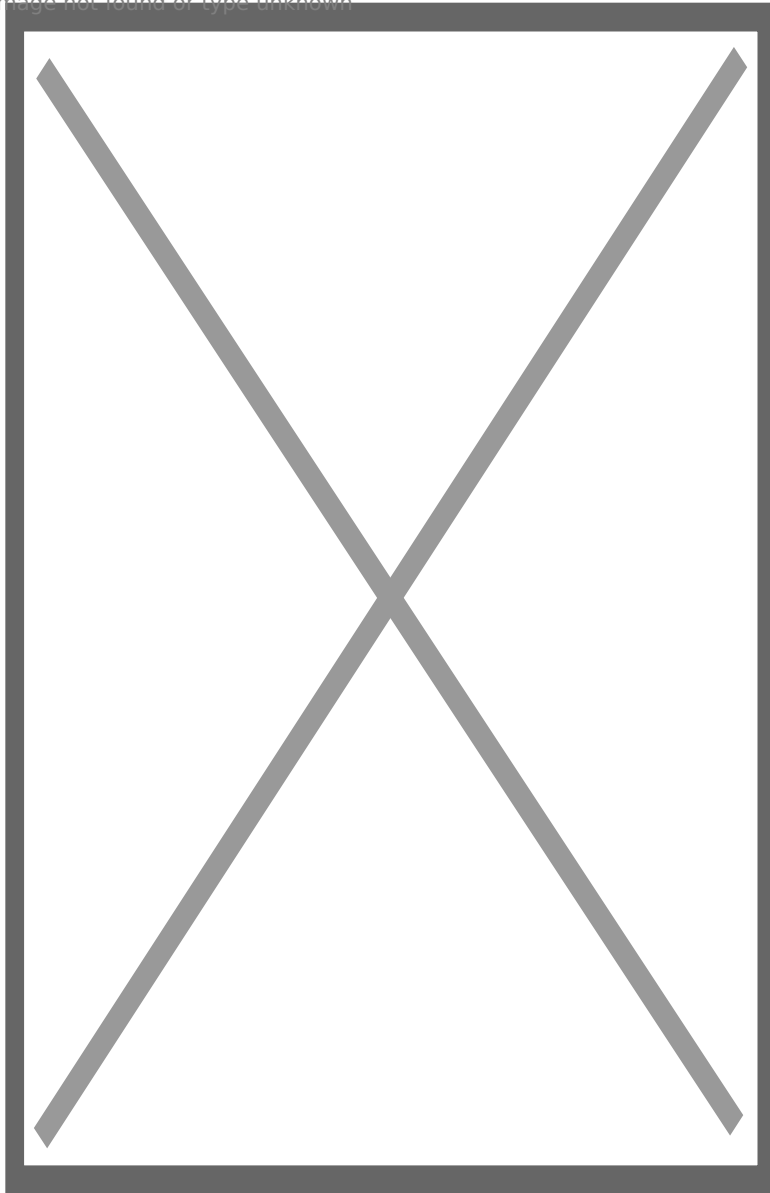
Post by “Don” of September 15, 2024 at 8:04 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I'm still not clear at all as to the original intent of the statement - as to how broadly it was to be applied.

Only way to find that out is to read Faulkner's *Wild Palms* 😊 (also published as *If I Forget Thee, O Jerusalem*)

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[If I forget thee, Jerusalem : the wild palms | WorldCat.org](#)

'Between grief and nothing I will take grief'. In New Orleans in 1937, a man and woman embark on a headlong flight into the wilderness of illicit passion,...
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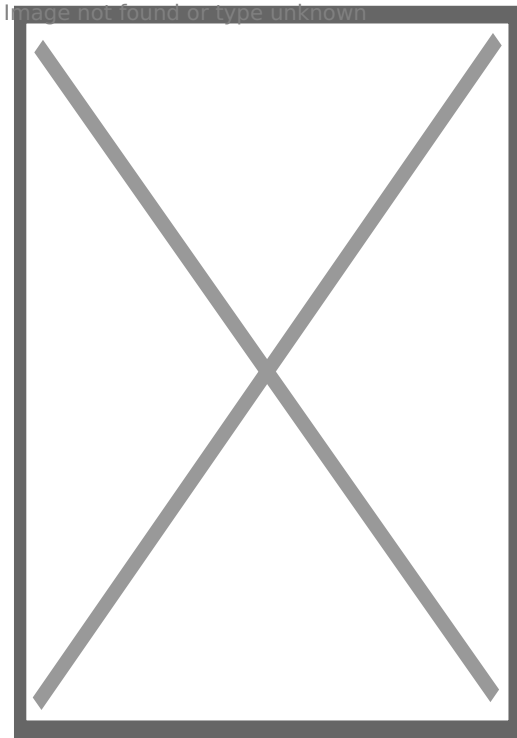
Quote from Publisher's description

Summary:'Between grief and nothing I will take grief'. In New Orleans in 1937, a man and woman embark on a headlong flight into the wilderness of illicit passion, fleeing her husband and the temptations of respectability. In Mississippi ten years earlier, a convict sets forth across a flooded river, risking his one chance at freedom to rescue a pregnant woman. From these separate stories Faulkner composes a symphony of deliverance and damnation, survival and self-sacrifice, a novel in which elemental

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danger is juxtaposed with fatal injuries of the spirit.-Publisher's description

See also...



[If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If_I_Forget_Thee,_Jerusalem)
en.wikipedia.org