

"They Mistake For Pleasure The Mere Absence of Pain" - Thomas Jefferson

Post by "Cassius" of May 16, 2018 at 7:13 PM

"They mistake for happiness the mere absence of pain" We have had several threads lately relevant to the argument as to whether reason or the emotions take precedence in Epicurean philosophy. If you're not familiar with it, and if you continue to be surprised at the Epicurean answer, be sure to check out Thomas Jefferson's famous HEAD AND HEART letter which I will submit to you follows Jefferson's Epicurean understandings. He's not criticizing Epicurus in the passage I quote - he's SUPPORTING Epicurus. The full letter is too long to post here in this thread but be sure to read far enough to see which gets the upper hand. Here is an excerpt from the conclusion but please read the whole letter:

Heart. "... Let the gloomy Monk, sequestered from the world, seek unsocial pleasures in the bottom of his cell! Let the sublimated philosopher grasp visionary happiness while pursuing phantoms dressed in the garb of truth! Their supreme wisdom is supreme folly: and they mistake for happiness the mere absence of pain. Had they ever felt the solid pleasure of one generous spasm of the heart, they would exchange for it all the frigid speculations of their lives, which you have been vaunting in such elevated terms."

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-10-02-0309>

Post by "Cassius" of December 28, 2021 at 1:29 PM

As I post this new comment to an old thread we're in the process of revisiting the "absence of pain" issue in several threads, and in looking at the list of old threads the title of this one caught my eye.

We didn't explore this quote at the time, but at some point in the future I would expect someone to do that. In the meantime I would particularly recommend Jefferson's "Head and Heart" letter to recent additions to our forum, especially [Kalosyni](#) and others who are exploring this topic. You have to first get your bearings on what is going on in the letter before you can fully appreciate it, but by the time you get to the end I think you'll appreciate that Jefferson does a good job of giving both sides of the "head vs heart" (a good proxy for Stoic/Platonic/Aristotelian vs Epicurean") debate.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/445-they-mistake-for-pleasure-the-mere-absence-of-pain-thomas-jefferson/>

And I think you'll agree that he comes down firmly, and for very good reasoning, on the side you would expect. (At least, the side you'd expect if you're read Jefferson's [letter to William Short](#).)