

Episode 293 - TD23 - Cicero Accuses Epicurus Of Evasion In Calling "Absence of Pain" A "Pleasure"

Post by "Cassius" of July 30, 2025 at 11:30 PM

Welcome to Episode 293 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world.

Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

This week we continue our series covering Cicero's "Tusculan Disputations" from an Epicurean viewpoint.

Today we continue in Part 3, which addresses anger, pity, envy, and other strong emotions. Today we'll continue into [Section XVI](#), where we compare Epicurus' views on dealing with grief to those of other schools.

For reference, here are the sections where Cicero really attacks Epicurus and we're attempting to marshal the best responses. We have much more to pull out of seventeen before we turn to eighteen:

III-XVII.¶

Should Pythagoras, Socrates, or Plato, say to me, Why are you dejected, or sad? Why do you faint, and yield to fortune, which, perhaps, may have power to harass and disturb you, but should not quite unman you? There is great power in the virtues; rouse them if they chance to droop. Take fortitude for your guide, which will give you such spirits, that you will despise everything that can befall man, and look on it as a trifle. Add to this temperance, which is moderation, and which was just now called frugality, which will not suffer you to do anything base or bad—for what is worse or baser than an effeminate man? Not even justice will suffer you to act in this manner, though she seems to have the least weight in this affair; but still, notwithstanding, even she will inform you that you are doubly unjust when you both require what does not belong to you, inasmuch as though you who have been born mortal, demand to be placed in the condition of the immortals, and at the same time you take it much to heart that you are to restore what was lent you. What answer will you make to prudence, who informs

you that she is a virtue sufficient of herself both to teach you a good life, and also to secure you a happy one? And, indeed, if she were fettered by external circumstances, and dependent on others, and if she did not originate in herself and return to herself, and also embrace everything in herself, so as to seek no adventitious aid from any quarter, I cannot imagine why she should appear deserving of such lofty panegyrics, or of being sought after with such excessive eagerness. Now, Epicurus, if you call me back to such goods as these, I will obey you, and follow you, and use you as my guide, and even forget, as you order me, all my misfortunes; and I will do this the more readily from a persuasion that they are not to be ranked amongst evils at all. But you are for bringing my thoughts over to pleasure. What pleasures? pleasures of the body, I imagine, or such as are recollected or imagined on account of the body. Is this all? Do I explain your opinion rightly? for your disciples are used to deny that we understand at all what Epicurus means. This is what he says, and what that subtle fellow, old Zeno, who is one of the sharpest of them, used, when I was attending lectures at Athens, to enforce and talk so loudly of; saying that he alone was happy who could enjoy present pleasure, and who was at the same time persuaded that he should enjoy it without pain, either during the whole or the greatest part of his life; or if, should any pain interfere, if it was very sharp, then it must be short; should it be of longer continuance, it would have more of what was sweet than bitter in it; that whosoever reflected on these things would be happy, especially if satisfied with the good things which he had already enjoyed, and if he were without fear of death, or of the Gods.

III-XVIII.¶

You have here a representation of a happy life according to Epicurus, in the words of Zeno, so that there is no room for contradiction in any point. What then? Can the proposing and thinking of such a life make Thyestes grief the less, or Æetes's, of whom I spoke above, or Telamon's, who was driven from his country to penury and banishment? in wonder at whom men exclaimed thus:—

Is this the man surpassing glory raised?

Is this that Telamon so highly praised

By wondering Greece, at whose sight, like the sun,

All others with diminish'd lustre shone?

Now, should any one, as the same author says, find his spirits sink with the loss of his fortune, he must apply to those grave philosophers of antiquity for relief, and not to these voluptuaries: for what great abundance of good do they promise? Suppose that we allow that to be without pain is the chief good? yet that is not called pleasure. But it is not necessary at present to go through the whole: the question is, to what point are we to advance in order to abate our grief? Grant that to be in pain is the greatest evil; whosoever, then, has proceeded so far as not to be in pain, is he, therefore, in immediate possession of the greatest good? Why, Epicurus, do we

use any evasions, and not allow in our own words the same feeling to be pleasure, which you are used to boast of with such assurance? Are these your words or not? This is what you say in that book which contains all the doctrine of your school; for I will perform, on this occasion, the office of a translator, lest any one should imagine that I am inventing anything. Thus you speak: "Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses; nor can it possibly be said that the pleasures of the mind are excited only by what is good; for I have perceived men's minds to be pleased with the hopes of enjoying those things which I mentioned above, and with the idea that it should enjoy them without any interruption from pain." And these are his exact words, so that any one may understand what were the pleasures with which Epicurus was acquainted. Then he speaks thus, a little lower down: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men, what would be the remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures, unless they meant to give us nothing but words? I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me, that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above." What follows is much the same, and his whole book on the chief good everywhere abounds with the same opinions. Will you, then, invite Telamon to this kind of life to ease his grief? and should you observe any one of your friends under affliction, would you rather prescribe him a sturgeon than a treatise of Socrates? or advise him to listen to the music of a water-organ rather than to Plato? or lay before him the beauty and variety of some garden, put a nosegay to his nose, burn perfumes before him, and bid him crown himself with a garland of roses and woodbines? Should you add one thing more, you would certainly wipe out all his grief.

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/67276714/media>

Post by "Cassius" of August 6, 2025 at 8:57 AM

In this episode Joshua makes some important points about Cicero's contrasting of the life of Lucius Balbus (representing the Epicurean life) and that of Marcus Regulus (representing the life of virtue).

This is an illustration that will have many uses in the future so I set up a separate thread to discuss it in more detail:

Thread

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4649-episode-293-td23-cicero-accuses-epicurus-of-evasion-in-calling-absence-of-pain-a/>

[Cicero's Comparison of the Life of Lucius Balbus \(Pleasure\) Against That Of Marcus Regulus \(Virtue\)](#)

In this week's podcast Joshua discusses this following section from On Ends, in which Cicero claims that Marcus Regulus (who died under torture) was happier than that of Lucius Balbus (who as far as we know died continuing to experience pleasures).

This is worth examination further so we can focus in on the relative meaning of the word "happy" as Cicero is using it to describe the two people - specifically as to the nature of the "pleasure" involved. In this Yonge translation, Cicero is recorded...



Cassius

August 6, 2025 at 8:55 AM

Post by "Cassius" of August 6, 2025 at 3:34 PM

Episode 293 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today our episode is entitled: "Cicero Accuses Epicurus Of Evasion In Calling Absence of Pain A Pleasure"

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/67276714/media>

Post by "Don" of August 7, 2025 at 2:37 PM

In his letter to Idomeneus, Epicurus calls his last day "blessed" (makarion). And "But the cheerfulness (χαῖρον khairon) of my mind, which arises from the recollection of all our philosophical contemplations, counterbalances all these afflictions." (Yonge's translation with amending "our" instead of "my philosophical...") khairon is a form of the word used for the kinetic pleasure of "joy" khara. And Epicurus doesn't say the "joy" *outweighs* or *conquers* the pain of his condition. The word used is ἄντιπαρατάσσομαι (antiparatassomai) which conveys "holding one's ground against, and in drawing up troops in battle order, side by side, ready to do battle against an enemy." He can do battle with the physical pain with the kinetic "joy" he can experience.

I just wanted to emphasize that the pain never goes away. Epicurus experiences every bit of the pain, but he can do battle with it by recollections of the good times he had and the

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satisfaction of how he lived his life.

Post by “Don” of August 7, 2025 at 2:38 PM

I agree wholeheartedly with [Joshua](#) 's sentiments that Cicero, of all people, had Peri Telos sitting on his desk to read in full! 😭😓😡

Post by “Rolf” of August 9, 2025 at 2:59 PM

Great episode! I look forward to the continuation next week.

The comparison between the “heap of sand” analogy and “absence of pain” is interesting. Would you mind explaining it a bit more?

Post by “Rolf” of August 9, 2025 at 3:12 PM

Quote

And Epicurus is telling you, don't use these false analogies and false ideals of virtue as being the remedy for pain. Just look at it realistically and realize that life has both pains and pleasures, and it is the pleasures that make life worthwhile. It is not your dreaming up some ideal system of virtue that makes life worthwhile. It is what nature gave you through pleasure that makes life worthwhile.

I'm particularly fond of the way you phrased this, Cassius. Too many people, myself included, fall into the trap of “dreaming up ideal systems of virtue” in order to make their lives feel worthwhile. And yet, the thing that really does make our lives worthwhile, pleasure, is right in front of our faces the whole time!

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2025 at 6:54 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4649-episode-293-td23-cicero-accuses-epicurus-of-evasion-in-calling-absence-of-pain-a/>

[Quote from Rolf](#)

The comparison between the "heap of sand" analogy and "absence of pain" is interesting. Would you mind explaining it a bit more?

The central issue is what is the sorites paradox/syllogism in the first place. Some of this is contained in DeWitt's reference [quoted here](#).

But contrary to the view that the point is that the sorites method of argument is an absurd request for an arithmetical rule on things that everyone understands, I would say that the point is somewhat different.

Words like "heap" and "good" are useful even though they have no mathematical precision, but it needs to be understood that these words lack not only mathematical precision but any intrinsic meaning of their own absent reference to the individual items that are being described in summary.

Epicurus is arguing that "pleasure" as a concept has no meaning apart from the individual instances of pleasure which are contained within the summary term. Of course the concept is very useful as a way to communicate ideas, but Plato and the others are asserting that there is an absolute realm of ideas where there is a "perfect" or "form" of pleasure, and that pleasures are pleasures because they somehow mystically partake in this form or idea.

"Absence of pain" is something similar - it is a concept and not an individual experience. The individual experiences are two - pleasure and pain. Denominating something as "absence of pain" is useful, but in this paradigm "absence of pain" means exactly the same thing as "pleasure" because there are only two possibilities. But not only does "absence of pain" as a concept mean nothing in itself, the rest of the chain is to observe that "pleasure" as a concept means nothing in itself apart from individual instances of feelings of pleasure. The search for "absence of pain" means nothing more or less than the search for "pleasure," and both of those words in quotes mean nothing more than real feelings of real beings at particular times and places.

I would argue that as a concept the word "pleasure" is useful to describe the goal of life, because you need to describe the goal of life in words different from or "virtue" or "piety" or "nothingness" depending on whether you're talking to a Stoic or an Abrahamist or a Buddhist/Hindu. But using the word "pleasure" in that conceptual way is not a full description of a particular experience by a particular person at a particular time and place. For that you need words like "sex" or "drugs" or "rocknroll" or "resting" or eating or drinking or sleeping or reading philosophy or even simply reflecting on your good memories or expectations.

Likewise you could say exactly the same thing as said in that last paragraph about "absence of pain," since in a system of only two options, absence of pain always means pleasure. But

there's another important use for the term "absence of pain" -- to refer to period of time when ALL of the experiences that a person is feeling are pleasurable and not painful. "Total" absence of pain would mean that in that time period you're looking at there are only specific pleasures, and no specific pains, and thus that circumstance cannot be improved. Yes "total absence of pain" is a very broad concept, but it is a concept that describes "the limit of pleasure" -- it provides a description of a situation that cannot be improved, and if you are interested in philosophical arguments (not everyone is) then you want the term "absence of pain" so you can have a definite description of a condition that fulfills the requirements of the logicians. They argue as did Plato and Seneca that in general philosophical terms, something that can be made better cannot by definition qualify as THE good or THE goal of life.

A life in which pain is absent is a term that gave the Epicureans in the past, and us today, a logical description of "the best life" to which we all should aim. We won't succeed in eliminating all pain from our lives any more than Epicurus did. But it's important for those of us who want to have a clear idea of the goal that Epicurus was talking about. And it's important to be clear about the goal not only so we can live better ourselves, but so that we can prevent the Stoics and Buddhists from trying to turn Epicurean philosophy into a tool of their own mistaken ideas.

Post by "Pacatus" of August 9, 2025 at 7:08 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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These ideas are overlapping in two threads -- but, here again, I think you nailed it.

Admin Edit Note 8/11/2025: the [other thread referred to, is here](#).

Post by “Cassius” of August 10, 2025 at 9:21 AM

[Rolf](#) also on the sorites issue, see this extended discussion of it by Cicero from Academic Questions:

Thread

[Epicurus' Response To The Sorites Argument / Paradox](#)

Background note: *(The Sorites paradox (from the Megarian/Stoic tradition) asked: if you remove one grain from a heap, is it still a heap? And another? At what point does it cease to be a heap? Epicurus rejected the entire framework as a linguistic trap rather than a genuine metaphysical problem. His response was characteristically empiricist: the Canon (sensation, prolepsis, feelings) determines what we mean by concepts, and when a question pushes beyond what the Canon can adjudicate, the...*



Cassius

March 18, 2025 at 4:47 PM