

Episode 294 - TD24 - Distinguishing Dogs From Wolves And Pleasure From Absence of Pain

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2025 at 4:00 PM

Welcome to Episode 294 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. Last week we started on Cicero's attack against calling "Absence of Pain" pleasure in [Section XVIII](#), and we will continue that examination and provide our responses.

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/67347516/media>

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2025 at 4:58 PM

Working on editing this episode, and it is long and has a lot going on in it, so I better make this comment while it is on my mind:

One of the questions from Cicero that we address specifically is this one:

Quote

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?

From the context I think it is pretty clear that what Cicero is saying is something like "OK I will spot you that being in pain is the greatest evil, but I still challenge you on this -- just because I remove that evil, that does mean that i am in immediate possession of the greatest good (pleasure)?"

I see this as a persuasive argument because most people are going to think that just because I remove a thorn from my toe, my toe is not therefore immediately in the greatest good (pleasure). My toe feels better when it is in a warm bath and being massaged, so you Epicurus are being ridiculous to argue that removing the thorn immediately places my toe in the *greatest* pleasure.

So that challenge demands an answer, and I think the most persuasive answer has to include another visual analogy rather than just the assertion that "absence of pain is the greatest pleasure" or "when one has no pain one has no further need for pleasure."

And as for me, the best picture analogy that I know from the texts that I can cite with authority is that of the vessel being filled in the opening of Lucretius Book Six:

[Quote from Lucretius 6:09](#)

For when he saw that mortals had by now attained well-nigh all things which their needs crave for subsistence, and that, as far as they could, their life was established in safety, that men abounded in power through wealth and honours and renown, and were haughty in the good name of their children, and yet not one of them for all that had at home a heart less anguished, but with torture of mind lived a fretful life without any respite, and was constrained to rage with savage complaining, he then did understand that it was the vessel itself which wrought the disease, and that by its disease all things were corrupted within, whatsoever came into it gathered from without, yea even blessings; in part because he saw that it was leaking and full of holes, so that by no means could it ever be filled; in part because he perceived that it tainted as with a foul savor all things within it, which it had taken in.

To me therefore, the best analogy is to look at the question of "the highest pleasure" as referring conceptually to one's entire life (either over the whole lifespan or at a moment in time) and analogizing that life to a vessel or jar. The person who does not approach the question through Epicurean philosophy has a leaky jar, and thinks that it requires constant pouring in of new pleasure because of those leaks.

The correct philosophy allows one to see that an unlimited quantity of liquid is not required, because once you seal the leaks through correct philosophy, you find that the jar can be filled to the top (rather easily, in fact) and that once filled, you need no more liquid (pleasure) poured into it, because the jar cannot be filled any further past "full."

So yes, Cicero, a correct philosophy tells us that when we succeed in sealing the leaks and filling the jar with pleasures, we are immediately therefore in possession of the greatest pleasure, because the jar (our life) is full and cannot be filled further.

And there is no magic transformation from "a jar full of pleasures" to "absence of pain." The label "absence of pain" is a mental assessment that the jar is full of pleasures of mind and body, and that the jar contains no mixture of pain, because all pain has been dispelled.

I am sure there are probably other word pictures that can be painted. The first examples I could document from the text would be that of Chrysippus' hand, and of the example of comparing the host pouring wine to the guest drinking it, both of which are preserved by Cicero.

If anyone is aware of other analogies from the texts to which we can point, please add them here. There are probably others in Lucretius (plain vs ornate blanket, multiple opportunities for sex, plain food vs fancy food) but I am not sure that those are quite as clear as the vessel analogy in book six. Many of the "satisfaction" analogies apply, but I think those are more open to someone asking why the more luxurious option is not in fact preferable when it is available. The "vessel" analogy and the examples given by Cicero seem to me to be somewhat less open to "what about" questions.

Comparing a life to any single jar is also open to "well I want a bigger jar" but a concrete object like a jar seems to be an easier way to get agreement as to the terms of the hypothetical. And of course some people object to any and all use of hypotheticals, but maybe calling them "analogies" makes them easier to accept. 😊

Post by "Bryan" of August 11, 2025 at 5:52 PM

I always have in mind this quote of Metrodorus (from Plutarch in Non Posse 1091 A):

"This very thing is the good: escaping the bad - because it is not possible for the good to be placed anywhere, when nothing painful or distressing is further withdrawing."

Full physical contentment is consistently and naturally achieved through our body's internal processes when we have the necessary provisions of food and shelter.

Similarly, full mental contentment can be maintained by recognizing the ease with which physical contentment can be obtained and by cultivating gratitude for this success.

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2025 at 5:56 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

because it is not possible for the good to be placed anywhere, when nothing painful or distressing is further withdrawing."

Thanks for that one -- it seems to me now that has totally escaped my prior notice. It may not be a specific picture standing alone without more, but it's DIRECTLY on point.

.... another reason "we" need to pay more attention to Plutarch's material.

Post by “Cassius” of August 11, 2025 at 8:15 PM

Here's a note which will unfortunately probably not make sense until the episode is released, but I want to come back to it:

Near the end of the episode Joshua and I read two sections from "Academnic Questions" in which Cicero (actually his hero Antiochus) is criticizing use of the sorites method of argument. Within that passage there is a section that also criticizes the Dialecticians. It gets pretty subtle as to which side Cicero is on, but I gather that what is probably going on here is that Cicero is in fact criticizing the claims of Dialectics (such as I gather the Stoics was making) as sufficient to find truth. In other words, I am taking this as Cicero taking the side of Skepticism, and criticizing the claims even of the dialecticians to establish truth through wordplay. That would likely be a criticism with which the Epicureans would agree, but of course from this skeptical point of view Cicero/Antiochus is arguing against anyone's claim to know anything with confidence.

If upon hearing the episode some hears a different point, please let me know. Here are the two sections from which we were quoting:

Posts one and three in this thread:

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

Post by “Cassius” of August 12, 2025 at 1:35 PM

Episode 294 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. Today our episode is entitled: "Distinguishing Dogs From Wolves And Pleasure From Absence of Pain"

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/67347516/media>

Post by “Bryan” of August 13, 2025 at 12:00 AM

This was great all around! The quote from DeWitt on "Epicurus' innovation" is excellent -- as was your treatment of the sorites topic! Thank you.

Post by “Patrikios” of August 15, 2025 at 3:25 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Cassius

from reading Christos Yapijakaris I find this.

Quote

*"The Epicureans called εὐστάθεια (**eustatheia**, "stability") the psychosomatic balance (τὸ τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ψυχῆς εὐσταθὲς κατάστημα), which today we call **homeostasis** (ὁμοιόστασις), and considered it the basis of true happiness. They recognized empirically the stress that disturbed psychosomatic homeostasis as an agitation of the psyche or a painful feeling of the body and used a number of mental and affective techniques (including the tetrapharmakos) to manage stress at its onset, so that it does not evolve into the particularly troublesome conditions of anxiety and/or depression, which may become chronic psychosomatic disorders with significant social consequences."*

[Epicurean Stability (eustatheia): A Philosophical Approach of Stress Management, C. Yapijakis & G. P. Chrousos]

From my other reading on homeostasis, I summarize these findings thusly.

When we achieve ataraxia (mental tranquility), we prevent the release of:

- Cortisol (stress hormone)
- Excessive adrenaline and noradrenaline
- Pro-inflammatory cytokines
- Excess glutamate (which can cause neurotoxicity)

Similarly, when we maintain aponia (absence of physical pain), we reduce:

- Substance P (pain neurotransmitter)
- Inflammatory prostaglandins
- Stress-induced histamine release

- Excessive oxidative compounds

Yapjikis demonstrates that these biochemical reductions through ataraxia and aponia lead to:

1. Better immune system function
2. Reduced cellular aging
3. Improved cardiovascular health
4. Enhanced neuroplasticity

The modern medical evidence strongly supports Epicurus' ancient insight that katastemic pleasure (stable well-being) represents our optimal biological state.

So another visual (instead of a jar) could be a flowing stream. Nature gives us pleasure to guide our optimal, healthy flow; and pain appears when we are flowing past our natural boundaries. This is not a perfect analogy, but a different way of guiding our thoughts and actions.

Thanks for the insight from the LT team!☐☐

Post by “Cassius” of August 16, 2025 at 9:23 AM

I have been thinking since I read [post #8](#) about exactly why I am not entirely comfortable with it.

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

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So another visual (instead of a jar) could be a flowing stream. Nature gives us pleasure to guide our optimal, healthy flow; and pain appears when we are flowing past our natural boundaries. This is not a perfect analogy, but a different way of guiding our thoughts and actions.

I think the reason I would not recommend this as a primary response to Cicero is as follows.

To go back to the beginning, Cicero's challenge was this:

Quote

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?

And my elaboration was this:

From the context I think it is pretty clear that what Cicero is saying is something like "OK I will spot you that being in pain is the greatest evil, but I still challenge you on this -- just because I remove that evil, that does mean that i am in immediate possession of the greatest good (pleasure)?" So that challenge demands an answer, and I think the most persuasive answer has to include another visual analogy rather than just the assertion that "absence of pain is the greatest pleasure" or "when one has no pain one has no further need for pleasure."

So in that context, Cicero is appealing to the broad spectrum of people - the vast majority, I would say - who are confused as to how "absence of pain" can be seen to equal "the greatest good." And in common discussion, the "greatest" good is the thing that every other action is taken for purposes of gaining. And thus the question is "how can one identify the greatest good as absence of pain?"

And as a result, to say that "katastemic pleasure (stable well-being) represents our optimal biological state" is not an answer that most people will accept as reasonable.

And they will not accept it as a reasonable answer for reason given by Plutarch in our other recent discussion on "That Epicurus Makes a Pleasant Life impossible." "Optimal biological state" and "stable well-being" does not explain what the person is doing with that optimal state. To have it is nice, but can hardly serve as a description of the best life.

And so Plutarch very reasonably in my mind protests as follows:

"Oh the rare satisfaction and felicity these men enjoy, that can thus rejoice for having undergone no evil and endured neither sorrow nor pain! Have they not reason, think you, to value themselves for such things as these, and to talk as they are wont when they style themselves immortals and equals to Gods?—and [p. 168] when, through the excessiveness and transcendency of the blessed things they enjoy, they rave even to the degree of whooping and hollowing for very satisfaction that, to the shame of all mortals, they have been the only men that could find out this celestial and divine good that lies in an exemption from all evil So that their beatitude differs little from that of swine and sheep, while they place it in a mere tolerable and contented state, either of the body, or of the mind upon the body's account. For even the wiser and more ingenious sort of brutes do not esteem escaping of evil their last end; but when they have taken their repast, they are disposed next by fulness to singing, and they divert themselves with swimming and flying; and their gayety and sprightliness prompt them to entertain themselves with attempting to counterfeit all sorts of voices and notes; and then they make their caresses to one another, by skipping and dancing one towards another; nature inciting them, after they have escaped evil, to look after some good, or rather to shake off what they find uneasy and disagreeing, as an impediment to their pursuit of something better and more congenial."

All the talk about "stability" and "optimal biological states" in the world cannot respond adequately to this argument. Nor do I think Epicurus rested his argument by talking about "optimal biological states." I think writers on Epicurus today are guilty of vastly underselling Epicurus by ignoring how the Epicureans actually spent their lives engaged with philosophical arguments and experiencing normal active pleasures that are identified with motion, rather than just with 'rest.' Joy and delight are far more motivational than living day after day in a state that can easily be caricatured as that of a potted plant. There are plenty of Epicurean texts and Epicurean examples that illustrate this, and so we should not stop before we give the full explanation.

As Torquatus put it to Cicero,

[40] XII. Again, the truth that pleasure is the supreme good can be most easily apprehended from the following consideration. Let us imagine an individual in the enjoyment of pleasures great, numerous and constant, both mental and bodily, with no pain to thwart or threaten them; I ask what circumstances can we describe as more excellent than these or more desirable? A man whose circumstances are such must needs possess, as well as other things, a robust mind subject to no fear of death or pain, because death is apart from sensation, and pain when lasting is usually slight, when oppressive is of short duration, so that its temporariness reconciles us to its intensity, and its slightness to its continuance."

When Cicero and Plutarch focus on "absence of pain" as if it were a full description of Epicurus goal (rather than a technical explanation of the philosophical limit) they strip Epicurus of the entire field of active pleasures, and thereby create a caricature that no regular person of common sense is going to accept as reasonable.

Of course I am not criticizing the quotations that provided in post 8, because that analysis has a philosophical context in which they are completely appropriate.

But in setting out to understand the completeness of Epicurean philosophy, we should not play into the hands of its worst enemies. We should not grant Cicero's and Plutarch's accusations that the phrase "absence of pain" suffices without elaboration gives us the whole story. Formulations that imply that Epicurus taught that action is desirable only for purposes of arriving at a "state" perpetuate just such a problem. Regardless of the scientific perspective on "optimal biological states," Epicurus didn't teach a particular choice of pleasure (even a "flowing stream" as a destination. Instead, Epicurus taught pleasure as the guide for every moment of the journey, both mental and bodily, *during which we will at times deliberately choose pain*, with the general feeling of "happiness" being totally in the eye of the person living that journey.

Flowing streams and completely full jars are useful philosophical depictions of conceptual issues. However the complete picture must explain how nature leads us to feel that variations in pleasure are also desirable, and how at times it is entirely appropriate for flowing streams to become raging torrents. If we are going to explain Epicurus' full teaching persuasively, we can't give in to formulations that make it look like Epicurus taught that that Nature is "wrong" in

making both pleasures of action and of attitude essential components of the best life.