

Defense of all mental pleasure and pain being based in the body.

Post by “wbernys” of May 21, 2026 at 11:19 PM

Hello all, I have long been curious about this apparently orthodox claim from Torquatus that all pleasures and pains are ultimately based in the body:

Quote

“Again, we aver that mental pleasures and pains arise out of bodily ones (and therefore I allow your contention that any Epicureans who think otherwise put themselves out of court; and I am aware that many do, though not those who can speak with authority).”

I imagine the orthodox Epicureans had sophisticated ways of defending this thesis. Philodemus in particular, whom Torquatus praises, strikes me as exactly the sort of careful thinker who may have accepted something like this view and had good ways to defend it. So I started thinking about how such a position could be defended against common objections as an Epicurean.

The main objection comes from cases that seem purely “mental”: taking pride in one’s country prospering (as the Cyrenaics discuss), concern for friends prosperity, post-mortem anxieties, guilt over unjust deeds, and other examples people like Cicero mention. These do not initially appear reducible to bodily pleasure and pain.

But I think it is important to note that when Torquatus speaks of “bodily” pleasures and pains, he means pleasures rooted in sensation generally — sight, sound, touch, and the anticipations and memories connected with them. Mental pleasures would therefore still arise from sensory life, even when mediated through imagination, expectation, or memory.

For example, when we feel pleasure at the prosperity of our country, what exactly delights us? Usually imagery from things like festivals, music, abundance, stability, beauty, peace, and social flourishing — all things tied to pleasant sensory and social experience. These then produce pleasant anticipations and mental images.

The same applies to friendship. A friend flourishing matters partly because it increases the likelihood of future pleasures of companionship: conversation, shared meals, affection, mutual aid, and security. Even absent immediate sensation, the mind takes pleasure in the anticipation and remembrance of such experiences.

One of the controversial points is about Epicurus saying paternal love is not “natural” but is chosen because of a hope to be taken care of when we’re older. But more importantly I imagine Epicurus would point to hopes of seeing delightful sights of seeing children prospering, and

being around for you in your old age, i imagine friendship runs on the same line. But it is still based in hopes of bodily goods, of hopes for future pleasures.

Post-mortem concern can be understood similarly. Disturbing thoughts about loved ones suffering after our death, enemies rejoicing, or one's memory being disgraced all involve distressing anticipations and imagined scenes. Philodemus seems especially helpful here. Some of these concerns may be relatively natural and even socially beneficial — for example, concern for loved ones after one's death may strengthen friendship, which Epicurus regarded as among life's greatest goods. But the distress still ultimately depends upon false beliefs about posthumous harm or perception.

Philodemus gives humorous examples of more vain post-mortem fears: anxiety over being forgotten, or horror at being eaten by fish after dying at sea. He points out that burial or cremation are no less physically gruesome, and yet people treat them differently because of the images associated with them:

Quote

“And what need is there to argue that it is no worse to be devoured by fishes than by maggots and grubs while covered by the earth, or by fire while lying on the earth, at least when the remnant has no perception of either the former or the latter?” (Column 32)

This is a powerful illustration of how apparently “mental” anxieties are still rooted in sensory imagination and anticipated bodily horror. Whether one fears worms, fish, fire, disgrace, or oblivion, the distress comes from imagined experiences that one falsely takes oneself to undergo after death.

Ironically, one of Philodemus' therapies is simply to point out how universal such deaths are. If nearly all humanity undergoes these fates without perception or harm, why be especially distressed by them? [Death is nothing to us](#), and therefore cannot injure us.

The most difficult case is probably guilt or distress over unjust action. But I think even here the same structure appears.

When we imagine the “unjust man,” we usually picture one of two things: either a successful wrongdoer surrounded by cruelty and suffering, or a ruined criminal living in fear and misery.

Even the “successful” unjust man is associated not with pleasant images, but with distressing ones: bloodshed, betrayal, children suffering, fear, destruction, grief, paranoia, and hatred from others. Epicurus may have thought that human beings naturally recoil from such experiences and images. Modern psychology arguably strengthens this point, since exposure to gruesome violence often produces trauma, nightmares, and lasting psychological disturbance even apart from legal punishment or religious guilt. Such as seen in PTSD of soldiers.

The other image of the unjust man is equally miserable, and Torquatus i imagine has this one mainly in mind: imprisonment, exile, social hatred, disease, punishment, fear of discovery, divine terror, or estrangement from family and community. These are again tied to distressing sensory and emotional anticipations. The same sort of distress that is tied to an aversion to the ascetic's fear of becoming a person of "spiritual decay" surrounded by filth, gross sights, squalor, societal hatred, or being actively hated by God in some cases.

So even where pains appear "purely mental," Torquatus will argue that they still arise from bodily life, sensory imagination, memory, anticipation, and our natural aversion to painful and horrifying experiences of sights, sounds, and pictures. And i think this is more persuasive than it's given credit for.

Hope you all like this.