

De Finibus Book I

Written by Marcus Tullius Cicero, (106 - 45 BCE)

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[Notes by Hendricks]

In this text Cicero discusses several philosophical theories popular in Rome at the time, and offers criticisms of them. He puts the defense of these views in the voices of other characters (friends from his youth who were dead at the time of writing), and the criticisms in his own. Book I is focused on Epicurus' view, defended by a character named Torquatus. It starts with Torquatus defending Epicurus against someone who is critical of Epicureanism.

Ellipses (three dots: ...) mark places where Hendricks took out some words or paragraphs. Hendricks has also added some paragraph breaks that are not in the original, to make reading a bit easier.

BOOK I: An explanation and defense of Epicurus' view

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IX. "I will start then," he said, "in the manner approved by the author of the system himself, by settling what are the essence and qualities of the thing that is the object of our inquiry; not that I suppose you to be ignorant of it, but because this is the logical method of procedure. We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the End to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be that Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil.

This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict. Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to *prove* that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. ... Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature. What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance? ...

X. "... I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or

desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure.

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XI. "... At present I shall proceed to expound the essence and qualities of pleasure itself, and shall endeavor to remove the misconceptions of ignorance and to make you realize how serious, how temperate, how austere is the school that is supposed to be sensual, lax, and luxurious.

The pleasure we pursue is not that kind alone which directly affects our physical being with a delightful feeling—a positively agreeable perception of the senses; on the contrary, the greatest pleasure according to us is that which is experienced as a result of the complete removal of pain. When we are released from pain, the mere sensation of complete emancipation and relief from uneasiness is in itself a source of gratification. But everything that causes gratification is a pleasure (just as everything that causes annoyance is a pain). Therefore the complete removal of pain has correctly been termed a pleasure.

For example, when hunger and thirst are banished by food and drink, the mere fact of getting rid of uneasiness brings a resultant pleasure in its train. So generally, the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place. Epicurus consequently maintained that there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain. But complete absence of pain Epicurus considers to be the limit and highest point of pleasure; beyond this point pleasure may vary in kind, but it cannot vary in intensity or degree. ...

XII. "The truth of the proposition that pleasure is the ultimate good will most readily appear from the following illustration. Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection—and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement.

Suppose on the other hand a person crushed beneath the heaviest load of mental and of bodily anguish to which humanity is liable. Grant him no hope of ultimate relief in view; also give him no pleasure either present or in prospect. Can one describe or imagine a more pitiable state? If then, a life full of pain is the thing most to be avoided, it follows that to live in pain is the highest evil; and this position implies that a life of pleasure ultimate good. In fact the mind possesses nothing in itself upon which it can rest as final. Every fear, every sorrow can be traced back to pain; there is no other thing besides pain which is of its own nature capable of causing either anxiety or distress.

"Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the *telos*, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the Chief Good is to live happily.

XIII. "Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name, and do not understand the true demands of nature. If they will consent to listen to Epicurus, they will be delivered from the grossest error. Your school dilates on the transcendent beauty of the virtues; but were they not productive of pleasure, who would deem them either praiseworthy or desirable? We esteem the art of medicine not for its interest as a science but for its conduciveness to health; the art of navigation is commended for its practical and not its scientific value, because it conveys the rules for sailing a ship with success. So also Wisdom, which must be considered as the art of living, if it effected no result would not be desired; but as it is, it is desired, because it is the artificer that procures and produces pleasure. ...

The great disturbing factor in man's life is ignorance of good and evil; mistaken ideas about these frequently rob us of our greatest pleasures, and torment us with the most cruel pain of mind. Hence we need the aid of Wisdom, to rid us of our fears and appetites, to root out all our errors and prejudices, and to serve as our infallible guide to the attainment of pleasure. Wisdom alone can banish sorrow from our hearts and protect us from alarm and apprehension; put yourself to school with her, and you may live in peace, and quench the glowing flames of desire.

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Nothing could be more useful or more conducive to well-being than Epicurus' doctrine as to the different classes of the desires. One kind he classified as both natural and necessary, a second as natural without being necessary, and a third as neither natural nor necessary; the principle of classification being that the necessary desires are gratified with little trouble or expense; the natural desires also require by little, since nature's own riches, which suffice to content her, are both easily procured and limited in amount; but for the imaginary desires no bound or limit can be discovered.

XIV.

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"The same principle will lead us to pronounce that Temperance also is not desirable for its own sake, but because it bestows peace of mind, and soothes the hear with a tranquilizing sense of harmony. For it is Temperance that warns us to be guided by reason what we desire and avoid. Nor is it enough to judge what it is right to do or to leave undone; we also need to abide by our judgment. Most men however lack tenacity of purpose; their resolution weakens and succumbs as soon as the fair form of pleasures meets their gaze, and they surrender themselves prisoners to their passions, failing to foresee the inevitable result. Thus for the sake of pleasure at once small in amount and unnecessary, and one which they might have procured by other means or even denied themselves altogether without pain, they incur serious disease, or loss of fortune, or disgrace, and not infrequently become liable to the penalties of the law and of the courts of justice.

Those on the other hand who are resolved so to enjoy their pleasures as to avoid all painful consequences therefrom, and who retain their faculty of judgment and avoid being seduced by pleasure into course that they perceive to be wrong, reap the very highest pleasure by forgoing pleasure. Similarly also they often voluntarily endure pain, to avoid incurring greater pain by not doing so. This clearly proves that Intemperance is not undesirable for its own sake, while Temperance is desirable not because it renounces pleasures, but because it procures greater pleasures.

XV. "The same account will be found to hold good of Courage. The performance of labors, the undergoing of pains, are not in themselves attractive, nor are endurance, industry, watchfulness, nor yet that much lauded virtue, perseverance, nor even courage; but we aim at these virtues in order to live without anxiety and fear and so far as possible to be free from pain of mind and body. The fear of death plays havoc with the calm and even tenor of life, and to bow the head to pain and bear it abjectly and feebly is a pitiable thing; such weakness has caused many men to betray their parents other friends, some their country, and very many utterly to ruin themselves. So on the other hand a strong and lofty spirit is entirely free from anxiety and sorrow. It makes light of pain, 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. These considerations prove that timidity and cowardice are not blamed, nor courage and endurance praised, on their own account; the former are rejected because they beget pain, the latter coveted because they beget pleasure.

XVI. "It remains to speak of Justice, to complete the list of the virtues; but this admits of practically the same treatment as the others. Wisdom, Temperance and Courage I have shown to be so closely linked with Pleasures that they cannot possibly be severed or sundered from it. The same must be deemed to be the case with Justice.

Not only does Justice never cause anyone harm, but on the contrary it always adds some benefit, partly owing to its essentially tranquilizing influence upon the mind, partly because of the hope that it warrants of a never-failing supply of the things that uncorrupted nature really needs. And just as Rashness, License and Cowardice ever torment the mind, ever awaken trouble and discord, so Unrighteousness, when firmly rooted in the heart, causes restlessness by the mere fact of its presence; and if once it has found expression in some deed of wickedness, however secret the act, yet it can never feel assured that it will always remain undetected.

The usual consequences of crime are, first suspicion, next gossip and rumor, then comes the accuser, then the judge; many wrongdoers have even turned in evidence against themselves, as happened during your consulship. And even if any think themselves well fenced and fortified against detection by their fellow-men, they still dread the eye of heaven, and fancy that the pangs of anxiety night and day gnawing at their hearts are sent by Providence to punish them.

But what can wickedness contribute towards lessening the annoyances of life, commensurate with its effect in increasing them, owing to the burden of a guilty conscience, the penalties of the law and the hatred of one's fellows? Yet nevertheless some men indulge without limit their avarice, ambition and love of power, lust gluttony and those other desires, which ill-gotten gains can never diminish but rather must inflame the more, insomuch that they appear proper subjects for restraint rather than for reformation. Men of sound natures, therefore, are summoned by the voice of true reason to justice, equity and honesty. ...

Hence Justice also cannot correctly be said to be desirable in and for itself; it is so because it is so highly productive of gratification. For esteem and affection are gratifying, because they render life safer and fuller of pleasure. Hence we hold that Unrighteousness is to be avoided not simply on account of the disadvantages that result from being unrighteous, but even far more because when it dwells in a man's heart it never suffers him to breathe freely or know a moment's rest.

"If then even the glory of the Virtues, on which all the other philosophers love to expatiate so eloquently, has in the last resort no meaning unless it be based on pleasure, whereas pleasure is the only

thing that is intrinsically attractive and alluring, it cannot be doubted that pleasure is the one supreme and final Good and that a life of happiness is nothing else than a life of pleasure.

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XX. "There remains a topic that is pre-eminently germane to this discussion, I mean the subject of Friendship. Your school maintains that if pleasure be the Chief Good, friendship will cease to exist. Now Epicurus' pronouncement about friendship is that of all the means to happiness that wisdom has devised, none is greater, none more fruitful, none more delightful than this. ...

I notice that the topic of friendship has been treated by Epicureans in three ways.

(1) Some have denied that pleasures affecting our friends are in themselves to be desired by us in the same degree as we desire our own pleasures. This doctrine is thought by some critics to undermine the foundations of friendship; however, its supporters defend their position and in my opinion have no difficulty in making good their ground. They argue that friendship can no more be sundered from pleasure than can the virtues, which we have discussed already. A solitary, friendless life must be beset by secret dangers and alarms. Hence reason itself advises the acquisition of friends; their possession gives confidence, and a firmly rooted hope of winning pleasure. And just as hatred, jealousy and contempt are hindrances to pleasure, so friendship is the most trustworthy preserver and also creator of pleasure alike for our friends and for ourselves. It affords us enjoyment in the present, and it inspires us with hopes for the near and distant future. Thus it is not possible to secure uninterrupted gratification in life without friendship, nor yet to preserve friendship itself unless we love our friends as much as ourselves.

Hence this unselfishness does occur in friendship, while also friendship is closely linked with pleasure. For we rejoice in our friends' joy as much as in our own, and are equally pained by their sorrows. Therefore the Wise Man will feel exactly the same towards his friend as he does towards himself, and will exert himself as much for his friend's pleasure as he would for his own. ...

(2) Other Epicureans though by no means lacking in insight are a little less courageous in defying the opprobrious criticism of the Academy. They fear that if we hold friendship to be desirable only for the pleasure that it affords to ourselves, it will be thought that it is crippled altogether. They therefore say that the first advances and overtures, and the original inclination to form an attachment, are promoted by the desire for pleasure, but that when the progress of intercourse has led to intimacy, the relationship blossoms into an affection strong enough to make us love our friends for their own sake, even though no practical advantage accrues from their friendship. Does not familiarity endear to us localities, temples, cities, gymnasia and playgrounds, horses and hounds, gladiatorial shows and fight with wild beasts? Then how much more natural and reasonable that this should be able to happen in our intercourse with our fellow-men!

(3) The third view is that wise men have made a sort of compact to love their friends no less than themselves. We can understand the possibility of this, and we often see it happen. Clearly no more effective means to happiness could be found than such an alliance.

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