

CONTENTS

Introduction vii

On the Greatest Good and Evil 3

Book 1

The Allure of Epicureanism 5

Book 2

The Problems with Pleasure 65

Book 3

The Virtues of Stoicism 117

Book 4

The Limits of a Stoic Life 161

Notes 211

BOOK 1

The Allure of Epicureanism

Cicero introduces the topic of his book.

[12] I think I've laid out that whole issue of the greatest good and evil pretty thoroughly in this book, where I've tried to focus not just on what seems plausible to me, but also on the doctrines of the individual philosophical systems. [13] And to begin with what is easiest, let's have the Epicurean school up first, since a lot of people know it very well.

*In a conversation with Cicero and Triarius,
Torquatus explains the Epicurean view.¹*

[29] First of all, he said, I'll approach the topic in the manner approved by the founder of our

BOOK 1

sit id de quo quaerimus, non quo ignorare vos arbitrer, sed ut ratione et via procedat oratio. Quaerimus igitur quid sit extremum et ultimum bonorum, quod omnium philosophorum sententia tale debet esse, ut ad id omnia referri oporteat, ipsum autem nusquam. Hoc Epicurus in voluptate ponit, quod summum bonum esse vult, summumque malum dolorem, idque instituit docere sic:

[30] omne animal, simul atque natum sit, voluptatem appetere eaque gaudere ut summo bono, dolorem aspernari ut summum malum et, quantum possit, a se repellere, idque facere nondum depravatum ipsa natura incorrupte atque integre iudicante. Itaque negat opus esse ratione neque disputatione quam ob rem voluptas expetenda, fugiendus dolor sit: sentiri haec putat, ut calere

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

school: I'll define the object of our inquiry, exactly what kind of thing it is—not because I think you don't know, but so that my speech can proceed in a rational and methodical fashion. So, we're trying to discover what the last and final good is, the one that all philosophers think has to be the goal of everything else, while itself it has no goal of its own. Epicurus says that this is pleasure; according to him, this is the greatest good, while the greatest evil is pain. And this is how he makes his case:

[30] as soon as it is born, every animal pursues pleasure and rejoices in it as in the greatest good, and it avoids pain as the greatest evil and pushes it away from itself as much as it can. And it does so when it is as yet unspoiled, with its natural judgment uncorrupted and unimpaired. Epicurus says that there is no need for reasoning or argument why pleasure should be sought and pain

BOOK 1

ignem, nivem esse albam, dulce mel, quorum nihil oportere exquisitis rationibus confirmare, tantum satis esse admonere. Interesse enim inter argumentum conclusionemque rationis et inter mediocrem animadversionem atque admonitionem: altera occulta quaedam et quasi involuta aperiri, altera prompta et aperta indicari. Etenim quoniam detractis de homine sensibus reliqui nihil est, necesse est quid aut ad naturam aut contra sit a natura ipsa iudicari. Ea quid percipit aut quid iudicat, quo aut petat aut fugiat aliquid, praeter voluptatem et dolorem?

[31] Sunt autem quidam e nostris qui haec subtilius velint tradere et negent satis esse quid bonum

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

avoided: it's something we perceive with our senses, just as we perceive that fire is hot, snow white, and honey sweet. None of these things needs to be shored up with clever reasoning, you only need to point them out. For there is, according to Epicurus, a difference between rational arguments and syllogisms on the one hand and everyday observations and experiences on the other. The former disclose things that are abstruse and hidden, as it were, while the latter point out matters that are out in the open and obvious. And since there is nothing left when you take away someone's sense perception, it is nature itself that must decide what is either according or contrary to nature. And what criterion does nature perceive and use to judge what to pursue and what to avoid, other than pleasure and pain?

[31] But there are some Epicureans who prefer to make this point in a more sophisticated

BOOK 1

sit aut quid malum sensu iudicari, sed animo etiam ac ratione intellegi posse et voluptatem ipsam per se esse expetendam et dolorem ipsum per se esse fugiendum. Itaque aiunt hanc quasi naturalem atque insitam in animis nostris inesse notionem, ut alterum esse appetendum, alterum aspernandum sentiamus. Alii autem, quibus ego assentior, cum a philosophis compluribus permulta dicantur cur nec voluptas in bonis sit numeranda nec in malis dolor, non existimant oportere nimium nos causae confidere, sed et argumentandum et accurate disserendum et rationibus conquisitis de voluptate et dolore disputandum putant.

[32] Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste natus error sit voluptatem accusantium doloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

fashion and say that it's not enough to claim that what is good and evil is determined by sense perception; our rational mind, too, can grasp that pleasure is to be sought for its own sake and pain to be avoided. So they maintain that our minds have a natural and inborn notion by which we know to seek out the one and reject the other. But others (and I'm in agreement with them) reckon that we shouldn't be too confident in our case, given that many philosophers have marshaled many arguments why pleasure shouldn't count as a good and pain as an evil. Therefore, they think that in discussing pleasure and pain, we need to offer proof, stringent arguments, and well-calibrated reasoning.

[32] But so that you can understand where people who accuse pleasure and praise pain get their wrong ideas, I'm going to be completely thorough and explain what has been said by

BOOK 1

vitae dicta sunt explicabo. Nemo enim ipsam voluptatem quia voluptas sit aspernatur aut odit aut fugit, sed quia consequuntur magni dolores eos qui ratione voluptatem sequi nesciunt. Neque porro quisquam est qui dolorem ipsum, quia dolor sit, amet consectetur adipisci velit, sed quia non numquam eiusmodi tempora incidunt ut labore et dolore magnam aliquam quaerat voluptatem. Ut enim ad minima veniam, quis nostrum exercitationem ullam corporis suscipit laboriosam, nisi ut aliquid ex ea commodi consequatur? Quis autem vel eum iure reprehenderit qui in ea voluptate velit esse quam nihil molestiae consequatur, vel illum qui dolorem eum fugiat quo voluptas nulla pariatur?

[33] At vero eos et accusamus et iusto odio dignissimos ducimus qui blanditiis praesentium voluptatum deleniti atque corrupti quos dolores

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

Epicurus, that discoverer of truth and, so to speak, architect of the happy life. No one disdains, hates, or avoids pleasure simply because it is pleasure, but because those who don't know how to pursue pleasure in a rational way end up in a lot of pain. Likewise, no one loves, pursues, or seeks out pain simply because it is pain, but because not infrequently one finds oneself in circumstances where one pursues some great pleasure by means of toil and pain. To use a banal example, who of us would undertake any strenuous physical exercise except to get some benefit from it? But who can rightly blame someone who wants to experience the kind of pleasure that doesn't lead to any trouble, or otherwise someone who avoids the kind of pain that doesn't cause any pleasure?

[33] By contrast, we blame and rightly consider worthy of the greatest disapproval those who—pampered and corrupted by the seductions

BOOK 1

et quas molestias excepturi sint obcaecati cupiditate non provident, similique sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollitia animi, id est laborum et dolorum fuga. Et harum quidem rerum facilis est et expedita distinctio. Nam libero tempore, cum soluta nobis est eligendi optio cumque nihil impedit quo minus id quod maxime placeat facere possimus, omnis voluptas assumenda est, omnis dolor repellendus. Temporibus autem quibusdam et aut officiis debitis aut rerum necessitatibus saepe eveniet ut et voluptates repudiandae sint et molestiae non recusandae. itaque earum rerum hic tenetur a sapiente delectus, ut aut reiciendis voluptatibus maiores alias consequatur aut perferendis doloribus asperiores repellat.

(...)

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

of present pleasures—fail to anticipate what pains and annoyances they’re creating for themselves, blinded as they are by their desires. Likewise, we fault those who abandon their duties out of a weakness of spirit—that is, in order to avoid toil and pain. And the difference between those two scenarios can be very easily explained. When we are at leisure and free to choose, and when there is nothing to prevent us from doing what we would most like to do, then every pleasure should be taken, every pain rejected. But in certain circumstances, when duty calls or some necessity arises, it will often happen that we have to reject pleasures and undergo trouble. And in this situation, wise people will have to make a choice, so that by rejecting some pleasures, they can achieve other and greater ones, or by going through some pains, they can avoid worse ones.

(. . .)

BOOK 1

[37] Non enim hanc solam sequimur quae suavitate aliqua naturam ipsam movet et cum iucunditate quadam percipitur sensibus, sed maximam voluptatem illam habemus quae percipitur omni dolore detracto. Nam quoniam, cum privamur dolore, ipsa liberatione et vacuitate omnis molestiae gaudemus, omne autem id quo gaudemus voluptas est, ut omne quo offendimur dolor, doloris omnis privatio recte nominata est voluptas. Ut enim, cum cibo et potione fames sitisque depulsa est, ipsa detractio molestiae consecutionem affert voluptatis, sic in omni re doloris amotio successionem efficit voluptatis.

[38] Itaque non placuit Epicuro medium esse quiddam inter dolorem et voluptatem; illud enim ipsum quod quibusdam medium videretur, cum omni dolore careret, non modo voluptatem esse,

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

[37] And we don't just pursue the kind of pleasure that with a certain sweetness speaks directly to our nature and is perceived by the senses with delight. Instead, we consider the greatest pleasure the one we experience once all pain has been removed. For when we are freed from pain, we rejoice in this very liberation and the freedom from discomfort. But since everything in which we rejoice is pleasure (just as everything that hurts us is pain), the absence of all pain is rightly called pleasure. So, for example, when food and drink drive away hunger and thirst, the removal of discomfort itself leads to pleasure. Similarly, in every situation the departure of pain causes the arrival of pleasure.

[38] And this is why Epicurus doesn't think there is an intermediate state between pain and pleasure. For what some people believe is such an intermediate state—namely, the absence of

BOOK 1

verum etiam summam voluptatem. Quisquis enim sentit quem ad modum sit affectus, eum necesse est aut in voluptate esse aut in dolore. Omnis autem privatione doloris putat Epicurus terminari summam voluptatem, ut postea variari voluptas distinguique possit, augeri amplificarique non possit.

[39] At etiam Athenis, ut e patre audiebam facete et urbane Stoicos irridente, statua est in Ceramico Chrysippi sedentis porrecta manu, quae manus significet illum in hac esse rogatiuncula delectatum:

Numquidnam manus tua sic affecta, quem ad
modum affecta nunc est, desiderat?

—Nihil sane.

At, si voluptas esset bonum, desideraret.

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

pain—that isn't just pleasure, but indeed the greatest pleasure. All people who are aware of their current experience must by necessity be either in pleasure or in pain. And Epicurus thinks that the greatest pleasure cannot be extended beyond the removal of all pain; afterward, you can come up with variations of pleasure, but you can't increase it any further.

[39] But my father—cleverly and wittily making fun of the Stoics—told me that in the Kera-meikos in Athens, there is a statue of Chrysippus.² He is sitting there with his hand stretched out, a reference to the following little dialogue, in which he used to delight:

Your hand, in its present state, does it desire anything?

—Nothing at all.

But if pleasure were a good, it would desire pleasure.

BOOK 1

—Ita credo.

Non est igitur voluptas bonum.

Hoc ne statuam quidem dicturam pater aiebat, si loqui posset. Conclusum est enim contra Cyrenaios satis acute, nihil ad Epicurum. Nam si ea sola voluptas esset quae quasi titillaret sensus, ut ita dicam, et ad eos cum suavitate afflueret et illaberetur, nec manus esse contenta posset nec ulla pars vacuitate doloris sine iucundo motu voluptatis. Sin autem summa voluptas est, ut Epicuro placet, nihil dolere, primum tibi recte, Chrysippe, concessum est nihil desiderare manum, cum ita esset affecta, secundum non recte, si voluptas esset bonum, fuisse desideraturam. Idcirco enim non desideraret, quia quod dolore caret id in voluptate est.

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

—I think so.

Therefore, pleasure is not a good.

As my father said: not even a statue would talk like this if it could speak! It's a pretty good argument against the Cyrenaics, but it has no force against Epicurus.³ Yes, if there existed only the kind of pleasure that tickles the senses, as it were, by flooding them with sweetness, then neither the hand nor any other body part would be satisfied by the absence of pain without the presence of the delightful stimulation of pleasure. But if, as Epicurus says, the greatest pleasure consists in experiencing no pain, then, Chrysippus, we'll concede your first point, that the hand in its present state doesn't desire anything. But you're wrong on the second point, that if pleasure were a good, the hand would desire pleasure. No: it would not desire anything,

BOOK 1

[40] Extremum autem esse bonorum voluptatem ex hoc facillime perspici potest. Constituamus aliquem magnis multis perpetuis fruente[m] et animo et corpore voluptatibus nullo dolore nec impediēte nec impendente: quem tandem hoc statu praestabiliorem aut magis expetendum possumus dicere? Inesse enim necesse est in eo qui ita sit affectus et firmitatem animi nec mortem nec dolorem timentis, quod mors sensu careat, dolor in longinquitate levis, in gravitate brevis soleat esse, ut eius magnitudinem celeritas, diuturnitatem allevatio consoletur. [41] Ad ea cum accedit ut neque divinum numen horreat nec praeteritas voluptates effluere patiat[ur] earumque assidua recordatione laetetur, quid est quod huc possit, quo melius sit, accedere?

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

because whatever is free from pain is in fact in pleasure.

[40] And that pleasure is the greatest good can be easily understood from the following scenario. Let's picture someone who in mind and body is enjoying a great many uninterrupted pleasures without any pain either present or on the horizon. What state could we call preferable to this or more desirable? For by necessity a person in this condition is also firm of spirit and fears neither pain nor death: death, because it lacks sense perception; pain, because if it lasts for a long time, it is typically light, and if it is severe, it tends to be short (so short duration is the upside of severity, lightness the upside of long duration). [41] And if, in addition, the person neither shudders at the thought of the divine nor allows past pleasures to evaporate, but instead keeps rejoicing in their memory, what else

BOOK 1

Statue contra aliquem confectum tantis animi corporisque doloribus quanti in hominem maximi cadere possunt, nulla spe proposita fore levius aliquando, nulla praeterea neque praesenti nec expectata voluptate: quid eo miserius dici aut fingi potest? Quodsi vita doloribus referta maxime fugienda est, summum profecto malum est vivere cum dolore; cui sententiae consentaneum est ultimum esse bonorum eum voluptate vivere. Nec enim habet nostra mens quicquam aliud ubi consistat tamquam in extremo, omnesque et metus et aegritudines ad dolorem referuntur, nec praeterea est res ulla, quae sua natura aut sollicitare possit aut angere.

[42] Praeterea et appetendi et refugiendi et omnino rerum gerendarum initia profiscuntur aut a voluptate aut a dolore. Quod cum ita sit,

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

could be added to this to make their condition even better?

On the other side, let's posit someone consumed by the greatest mental and physical pains that can happen to a human being, without any hope that things could ever get better, and furthermore without any pleasure, either present or anticipated. What could we describe or imagine that would be more miserable than this? And if a life full of pain is thus to be avoided at all costs, then indeed living in pain is the greatest evil. From this it follows that the greatest good is living in pleasure. For our mind cannot imagine anything beyond this: all fears and anxieties have to do with pain, and other than that, there is nothing that can distress or upset us in its own right.

[42] In addition, our motivations for seeking or avoiding things, or for doing anything at all, arise from either pleasure or pain. And since this

BOOK 1

perspicuum est omnis rectas res atque laudabilis eo referri ut cum voluptate vivatur. Quoniam autem id est vel summum bonorum vel ultimum vel extremum—quod Graeci τέλος nominant—, quod ipsum nullam ad aliam rem, ad id autem res referuntur omnes, fatendum est summum esse bonum iucunde vivere.

Id qui in una virtute ponunt et splendore nominis capti quid natura postulet non intellegunt, errore maximo, si Epicurum audire voluerint, liberabuntur. Istae enim vestrae eximiae pulchraeque virtutes nisi voluptatem efficerent, quis eas aut laudabilis aut expetendas arbitraretur? Ut enim medicorum scientiam non ipsius artis sed bonae valetudinis causa probamus, et gubernatoris ars, quia bene navigandi rationem habet, utilitate non arte laudatur, sic sapientia, quae ars vivendi putanda est, non expeteretur si nihil efficeret: nunc expetitur quod est tamquam artifex conquirendae

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

is so, it is obvious that all right and praiseworthy actions are directed at living in pleasure. And since the greatest, last, or final good (what the Greeks call the *telos*) is what is directed at nothing else, while all things are directed at it, therefore it must be admitted that the greatest good is to live pleasurably.

Those who think the greatest good consists in virtue as such and—deluded by such a splendid word—don't understand what nature demands would be freed from this huge error if only they would listen to Epicurus.⁴ Those amazingly beautiful virtues of yours, who would consider them laudable or choice-worthy if they didn't bring about pleasure? We appreciate the knowledge of doctors not for the sake of science but for the sake of good health, and the skill of a helmsman who knows how to steer well is praised on account of its practical usefulness,

BOOK 1

et comparandae voluptatis. [43] (Quam autem ego dicam voluptatem, iam videtis, ne invidia verbi labefactetur oratio mea.) Nam cum ignorance rerum bonarum et malarum maxime hominum vita vexetur, ob eumque errorem et voluptatibus maximis saepe priventur et durissimis animi doloribus torqueantur, sapientia est adhibenda quae et terroribus cupiditatibusque detractis et omnium falsarum opinionum temeritate derepta certissimam se nobis ducem praebeat ad voluptatem.

Sapientia enim est una quae maestitiam pellat ex animis, quae nos exhorrescere metu non sinat. Qua praeceptrice in tranquillitate vivi potest

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

not its theoretical understanding. Similarly, people wouldn't strive for wisdom—which should be considered the art of life—if it had no effect; the reason they do try to attain it is because it is, so to speak, the craft of seeking and procuring pleasure. [43] (You know by now what kind of “pleasure” I mean—not to let people's prejudice against the term undermine my speech.) Human life suffers greatly from the fact that people don't know what is good or bad, and because of this ignorance they're often deprived of the greatest pleasures and vexed by the harshest mental pains. Therefore, we must employ wisdom, which removes fears and desires, tears away all our unexamined false opinions, and acts as our surest guide to pleasure.

Wisdom is the only thing that drives sadness from the mind, that prevents us from shuddering in fear. Following the precepts of wisdom, we can

BOOK 1

omnium cupiditatum ardore restincto. Cupiditates enim sunt insatiabiles, quae non modo singulos homines, sed universas familias evertunt, totam etiam labefactant saepe rem publicam. [44] Ex cupiditatibus odia discidia discordiae seditiones bella nascuntur, nec eae se foris solum iactant nec tantum in alios caeco impetu incurrunt, sed intus etiam in animis inclusae inter se dissident atque discordant, ex quo vitam amarissimam necesse est effici, ut sapiens solum amputata circumcisaque inanitate omni et errore naturae finibus contentus sine aegritudine possit et sine metu vivere.

[45] Quae est enim aut utilior aut ad bene vivendum aptior partitio quam illa qua est usus Epicurus? Qui unum genus posuit earum cupiditatum quae essent et naturales et necessariae, alterum quae naturales essent nec tamen necessariae,

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

live in inner peace and extinguish all burning desires. For desires are insatiable and ruin not just individuals but entire families, and often even destabilize the commonwealth. [44] From desires arise hate, quarrels, discord, uprisings, and war. But desires don't just rage outside and attack others with blind aggression; hidden within the mind itself, they're at variance and fight against each other, with the necessary result that life turns into a nightmare. Therefore, only the wise person—the one who has completely cut away every empty opinion and every error, and who is content to remain within the boundaries of nature—is able to live without anxiety and fear.

[45] For what is more helpful or suited to the happy life than the division of desires proposed by Epicurus? He says that the first kind are those pleasures that are both natural and necessary; the second kind those that are natural but

BOOK 1

tertium quae nec naturales nec necessariae. Quarum ea ratio est ut necessariae nec opera multa nec impensa expleantur; ne naturales quidem multa desiderant, propterea quod ipsa natura divitias quibus contenta sit et parabilis et terminatas habet; inanium autem cupiditatum nec modus ullus nec finis inveniri potest. [46] Quodsi vitam omnem perturbari videmus errore et inscientia, sapientiamque esse solam quae nos a libidinum impetu et a formidinum terrore vindicet et ipsius fortunae modice ferre doceat iniurias et omnis monstret vias quae ad quietem et ad tranquillitatem ferant, quid est cur dubitemus dicere et sapientiam propter voluptates expetendam et insipientiam propter molestias esse fugiendam?

[47] Eademque ratione ne temperantiam quidem propter se expetendam esse dicemus, sed

THE ALLURE OF EPICUREANISM

not necessary; and the third those that are neither natural nor necessary. The way this works is that the necessary desires can be fulfilled without much effort or cost; the natural ones don't ask for much either, because nature itself supplies the riches with which it is satisfied, and they're easy to procure and have their limits. The empty desires, by contrast, know no limit or end. [46] So we see that all life is disturbed by error and ignorance, and that wisdom alone frees us from the onslaught of desires and the terror of fears, teaches us to bear patiently the injuries of fortune, and shows us all the paths that lead to peace and tranquility. So why should we hesitate to assert that wisdom is to be sought on account of pleasure, and ignorance to be avoided on account of discomfort?

[47] In the same way, we'll say that not even moderation is to be sought for its own sake, but

BOOK 1

quia pacem animis afferat et eos quasi concordia quadam placet ac leniat. Temperantia est enim quae in rebus aut expetendis aut fugiendis ut rationem sequamur monet. Nec enim satis est iudicare quid faciendum non faciendumve sit, sed stare etiam oportet in eo quod sit iudicatum. Plerique autem, quod tenere atque servare id quod ipsi statuerunt non possunt, victi et debilitati obiecta specie voluptatis tradunt se libidinibus constringendos nec quid eventurum sit provident, ob eamque causam propter voluptatem et parvam et non necessariam et quae vel aliter pararetur et qua etiam carere possent sine dolore tum in morbos gravis, tum in damna, tum in dedecora incurrunt, saepe etiam legum iudiciorumque poenis obligantur.