

# On Cicero's Interpretation of *Katastematic* Pleasure in Epicurus

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The standard interpretation of the concept of *katastematic* pleasure in Epicurus has it referring to “static” states from which feeling is absent. We owe the prevalence of this interpretation to Cicero's account of Epicureanism in his *De Finibus Bonorum Et Malorum*. Cicero's account, in turn, is based on the Platonic theory of pleasure. The standard interpretation, when applied to principles of Epicurean hedonism, leads to fundamental contradictions in his theory. I claim that it is not Epicurus, but the standard interpretation that generates these errors because the latter construes pleasure in Epicurus according to an *attitudinal* theoretical framework, whilst the account of pleasure that emerges from Epicurean epistemology sees it as *experiential*.

## Introduction

Of the many hedonists that litter the history of western philosophy, Epicurus is one of the best known. His fame, however, is largely the product of attacks leveled against his system, rather than being born of an appreciation of his philosophy. The primary reason, I claim, for the prominence of negative accounts of Epicurean hedonism in the literature is the influence of Cicero's interpretation of Epicurean pleasure in his *De Finibus Bonorum Et Malorum (De Finibus)*.<sup>1</sup> In this work, Cicero objects to a number of features of Epicurean ethics, but he singles out the concept of *katastematic* pleasure as being the most dubious. Today, the “standard interpretation” (Splawn, 2002:474) of pleasure in Epicurus, and in particular, of *katastematic* pleasure, is, in its fundamentals, the same account that Cicero gave. I will argue that this interpretation is wrong because it necessitates an account of *katastematic* pleasure that stands in fundamental contradiction to certain, well-established tenets of Epicurus' epistemological theory.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to this work are taken from the Rackham translation in the Loeb classic library edition (1914). Bracketed numbers refer to book and section numbers respectively.

To ground the ensuing discussion, we can begin by looking at what Epicurus himself had to say about *katastematic* pleasure. This will not take us long. Of Epicurus' own reputed three hundred plus works, there remains only 40 aphorisms known as the "Basic Doctrines", a further collection of 81 aphorisms, the "Vatican Sayings", of which items from the Basic Doctrines form about a quarter, three letters, and some fragments from a major work, *On Nature*, that have been excavated from under the hardened volcanic mud at Heraculaneum beneath Mount Vesuvius. In none of these does Epicurus mention *katastematic* pleasure specifically. We are left to rely on a quote allegedly taken from Epicurus' *On the Telos*, which appears in book ten of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Great Philosophers (Lives)*. It reads: "Peace of mind (*ataraxia*) and freedom from pain (*aponia*) are pleasures which imply a state of rest (*katastema*); joy and delight are seen to consist in motion and activity (*kinesis*)" (10.138).<sup>2</sup> This quotation, along with various allusions to similar concepts in Epicurus' *Letter to Menoecous*, are thought to support the idea that *katastematic* pleasures are to be equated with *ataraxia* and *aponia*, and that they are somehow different to *kinetic* pleasures, which arise in activity.

The evidence here, however, is so scant that, on its own, it precludes any definitive interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure in Epicurus. Yet one interpretation emerged 250 years after Epicurus' death, and it has become dominant. This interpretation — which is sometimes called the "standard interpretation"<sup>3</sup> — we owe to Cicero. In book one of his *De Finibus*, Cicero, through an Epicurean spokesperson, gives a detailed account of Epicureanism, which he then, in book two, attacks point for point. In both books, Cicero makes the concept of *katastematic* pleasure central. Indeed, much of his refutation of Epicureanism hinges on what he sees as the implausibility of the concept. I think Cicero gets Epicurus wrong because the assumptions about the nature of pleasure that he brings to his interpretation of Epicurus incline him to inaccurately characterise *katastematic* pleasure. Cicero disregards important differences between his preferred philosophical system and Epicureanism, which, had he examined them, may have led to his producing a more accurate account of the latter. Let us look now at Cicero's interpretation and the principles upon which it is based.

## Cicero's Interpretation

Cicero's interpretation and subsequent refutation of Epicurus, as stated above, both centre on the viability of *katastematic* pleasure. This is apparent in the opening remarks of book two of *De Finibus*. Cicero, firstly, suggests that a discussion between he and his Epicurean spokesperson, Torquatus, would be well served if they were to agree on a definition of pleasure. Torquatus replies that such a definition

<sup>2</sup> All references to this work are taken from the Hicks translation in the Loeb classic library edition (1925). Bracketed numbers refer to book and section numbers respectively.

<sup>3</sup> See C. Splawn (2002).

is unnecessary because everybody knows what pleasure is. Cicero claims, then, that either he or Epicurus himself is incapable of common understanding for their ideas on the subject are very different. Cicero, of course, thinks Epicurus is in error; he writes: "...I venture to assert that Epicurus himself does not know what pleasure is, but is in two minds about it...the universal opinion is that pleasure is an active stimulation..." (*De Finibus*, 2:ii 6) Torquatus complains that Epicurus would accept this characterisation. Cicero agrees, but reminds Torquatus that Epicurus also held bare painlessness — or *katastematic* pleasure — to be a pleasure, indeed the *greatest* pleasure. And it is commonly understood, according to Cicero, that mere painlessness is different from active stimulation (*De Finibus*, 2:iii 7–9). This opening

Marcus Tullius Cicero, by B. Thorvaldsen as copy from roman original, in Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen

passage is revealing in that it points to Cicero's underlying assumptions. His assertion that it is universally agreed that the word pleasure refers solely to "active stimulations", and not to stable states, was prejudiced, I believe, by his philosophical allegiance to the New Academy (Introduction to *De Finibus*, 1925:xi). The New Academy, in turn, took its account largely from the founder of the original Academy, Plato. By looking at the core aspects of Plato's theory of pleasure, I think we can further clarify the character of Cicero's attack against Epicurean hedonism.

The fullest account of pleasure in Plato is given in the *Philebus*. In this dialogue, Plato has Socrates claim: "This is the general formula: when the natural state of a living organism...is destroyed, that destruction is pain; conversely, when such organisms return to their own true nature, this reversion is invariably, pleasure" (32b).<sup>4</sup> This makes clear the Academic idea that pleasures are *motions* between depleted and satisfied states. But this is not a full statement of Plato's conception of pleasure. Later in the *Philebus*, a more precise account emerges in which pleasure is taken to be the *perception* of a motion of replenishment (38a–40e). Understanding pleasure in Plato, therefore, also requires that we have a basic understanding of his account of perception. In the *Philebus*, perception is taken to be a presentation to consciousness of a complex of memory, sensation and feeling that, in rational beings, manifests as a judgement,<sup>5</sup> which is written, by a metaphorical "scribe in the soul", and a picture,

<sup>4</sup> All references to this work are taken from Hackforth (1945).

<sup>5</sup> "Judgement" here should be taken to refer not just to statements of belief but also to "propositional"

which is painted by a “painter in the soul” (39a). So, in a pleasant perception, when we are pleased at, for instance, satisfying our thirst with a drink of water, the perception of that pleasure necessarily involves a *cognitive attitude*,<sup>6</sup> being inscribed in the mind to that effect. This overview of pleasure in Plato is, of course, too brief. Still, these points are fundamental and largely uncontroversial. It therefore seems very likely that Cicero, as a member of the New Academy, would have assumed the necessity of both the *replenishment element* and the *attitudinal element* in any plausible account of pleasure, and in determining the implausibility of any other account, he would have used these elements as reference points.

We can see precisely this influence in Cicero’s interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure. *Katastematic* pleasures are characterised, according to this interpretation, by the absence of feeling as a result of their being devoid of motion (“static”) (*De Finibus*, 2:iv 14–v 19). The reasons for Cicero’s construal of *katastematic* pleasure as “bare painlessness” are linked to the elements of Plato’s account with which we finished the preceding paragraph. Firstly, because pleasures for the Academy are invariably perceptions of *replenishment*, the *kinetic* brand of Epicurean pleasure, i.e. the active pleasures, give Cicero the scope to account for *all* the psychological phenomena he thinks deserving of the name. But in book one, Cicero is offering what he claims is an accurate *interpretation* of Epicurus, so he must give some account of *katastematic* pleasure. He consequently sets *katastematic* pleasure in opposition to the “active stimulations” described in Epicurean terms as *kinetic* pleasures and casts them as “static”. The second reason for Cicero’s distinctive interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure relates to the *attitudinal* element of the Platonic model. On that model, as we saw, pleasures are identified with perceptions of motions of replenishment. Given this, the *attitudinal* element of pleasure experience seems intuitively plausible — “active stimulations” of the senses or of the soul alone do not escape the mind’s notice. But where *katastematic* pleasures are taken to be motionless, unfelt states, cognitive attitudes cannot merely be an element in the experience of them; rather, they must be taken to *wholly* constitute them. This is because, in the Platonic perceptual system, with reference to which Cicero was constructing his interpretation, only “feeling” and “judgement” *evaluate* the perceptual representation.<sup>7</sup> It follows, therefore,

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expressions of attitudes. This is evidenced by the fact that in the section from which this passage is taken, Socrates is trying to convince Protarchus that pleasures may be true or false just as opinions (judgements) may be (see Frede [1985]).

<sup>6</sup> To extend on the previous note: It may be argued here that a “pleasure” is necessarily a *non-cognitive* attitude in so far as it does not express a belief, but rather expresses an attitude. This distinction, however, does not hold for Plato. The judgements that attend our pleasures are “part and parcel of the pleasure *as experienced*” (Hackforth, 1945:78).

<sup>7</sup> Taken in the context of present perceptions, the remaining elements, “sensation” and “memory”, function respectively to represent (as accurately as conditions allow) the world, and to bring to bear judgements resulting from *past* perceptions. “Feelings” which may take on a positive or negative character, emerge from the conjunction of these elements (Hackforth, 1945:72) and “judgements” or *cognitive attitudes* unify all of “sensation”, “memory” and “feelings”.

that if one of “feeling” or “judgement” is removed, the other bears the whole responsibility for the positive or negative appraisal of that perception.

## Problems with the Ciceronian/Standard interpretation

The Ciceronian interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure, which has it referring to *unfelt*, static states, leads to (at least) one fundamental contradiction when applied to Epicurean ethical theory. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus refers to painlessness as constituting the *telos*, he writes: “...the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and disturbance, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled” (2006, [www.epicurus.net/en/menoceus](http://www.epicurus.net/en/menoceus)). Later in the same letter, however, Epicurus also claims: “Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make *feeling* the rule by which to judge of every good thing”. If we accept the Ciceronian interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure, these passages, taken together, become problematic. If *katastematic* pleasure is the *telos*, i.e. “the end of all our actions”, and is at the same time *unfelt*, then it is difficult to see why Epicurus would want to make *feeling* “the rule by which to judge of every good thing”.

I believe that the interpretation committing Epicurus to this very fundamental error is mistaken. Now, in most cases, the misinterpretation of one philosopher by another would be largely inconsequential — we could merely uncover its errors and disregard it. But in this case, things are different. Cicero's interpretation, probably owing to the dearth of other ancient sources, has been inordinately influential. Even today, interpretations of Epicurus that include the rudiments of the Ciceronian account are standard. Jeffery Purinton's analysis of Epicurean pleasure in his article “Epicurus on the *Telos*” (1993) exemplifies the tendency to accept Cicero unchallenged. In the following passage Purinton adopts the Ciceronian notion that *katastematic* pleasure is *unfelt*, he writes: “...it is not necessarily the case that the mind will rejoice when it focuses on the presence of *painlessness* in the flesh. For the flesh does not report that this painless state is good...(katastematic pleasures) don't *feel* like anything” (1993:302) (author's italics). Purinton is consequently forced to construe *katastematic* pleasure as being wholly constituted by a *cognitive attitude* which appraises that condition as pleasant (1993:302). And, though he attempts to present a more sympathetic account of Epicurean hedonism than does Cicero, Purinton winds up with a similar set of problems and seeming contradictions.

How, then, to show that the standard interpretation is mistaken? There are two ways to go. Firstly, we might extend our challenge to Cicero's credibility as an expositor of Epicureanism by appeal to factors that bear indirectly on his interpretation. For instance, we might suggest that Cicero's polemic intent in book two of *De Finibus* so biased his interpretation in book one that the latter cannot be trusted — we

might, that is, say that book one is a setup. Alternatively, we might try to show that Cicero's interpretation of Epicurus conflicts with the other uncontested aspects of the Epicurean system to such an extent that it is improbable that Cicero is correct. In their work, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (1983), Gosling and Taylor make one of the few challenges to the standard interpretation by way of the first of the above methods (pp. 345–413). I have neither the space nor the expertise to attempt anything similar here. Nevertheless, I think a more effective objection to the standard interpretation can be mounted using the alternative method. Namely, I think the standard interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure can be shown to conflict with clearly established, and widely agreed upon aspects of Epicurean epistemology.

To begin defending this claim we need, first, to make a distinction between two frameworks for pleasure theories: the *attitudinal* framework and the *experiential* framework. The standard interpretation discussed above falls within the bounds of the former, whilst the latter, I will argue, better fits the account of pleasure in Epicurean epistemology and is, therefore, the right framework within which to situate any interpretation of Epicurean pleasure. Before giving an account of these frameworks however, it is essential to note the following: Epicurus thought pleasure to be a unified phenomenon. He claimed that it takes on two *aspects* (i.e. *katastematic* and *kinetic*) nonetheless, he thought both these aspects species of the same genus. Therefore, if one aspect of pleasure on an interpretation necessarily falls within the bounds of one of the frameworks, we must then construe *all* that interpretation's pleasures as being explicable under that framework.

What, then, constitutes an *attitudinal* theory of pleasure? Andrew Moore defines them as follows: “*Attitudinal* accounts claim that pleasure is an intentional state, such as a certain sort of belief or desire, directed at a feature of oneself or the wider world. It identifies pleasure with this attitude, not with its experiential object” (2004:9). It should be clear why the standard interpretation of Epicurean pleasure is an *attitudinal* account. In construing *katastematic* pleasure as an unfelt state of static painlessness, it becomes necessary that the basis of the state's pleasurable nature be *identified* with the attitude directed toward the painless experience. This is because, in the absence of feeling, no quality or property of the “motionless” experience could plausibly be identified as pleasure.<sup>8</sup> *Experiential* accounts are diametrically opposed to *attitudinal* accounts. According to Moore, *experiential* accounts claim that “pleasure is a distinctive conscious experience or element in such experience” (2004:6). *Experiential* pleasure theories deny the possibility of *attitudinal* pleasures — such as the standard interpretation's *katastematic* pleasure — because, on this framework, pleasure is a quality belonging to the experience itself, and not the attitude directed

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<sup>8</sup> It might be suggested that the sensations one experiences in such static states could be pleasant in themselves, but, as we will see below, Epicurus was clear in claiming that “feelings” were both the basis of our assessments of good and evil (pleasure and pain), and were a separable aspect of sensation, so such an approach would not be suitable in an interpretation of him.

toward it. If, then, we can show that Epicurus supported an *experiential* account of pleasure, it will follow that the standard interpretation is based on a theoretical foundation that is fundamentally different from that upon which Epicurus constructed his theory. At a minimum, such a finding should give us cause to be wary of analysis that has been built on the ground that Cicero prepared.

## The “sensory” basis of Epicurean pleasure

So, did Epicurus' account of pleasure conform to the *experience* model? I think it did. Indeed, certain of Epicurus' basic epistemological commitments seem to *demand* that we see his theory of pleasure as being constructed upon this framework. To see why, we need to briefly examine his epistemology. Owing to the prominence of sceptical arguments at the time, all the major philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period developed detailed defences of their beliefs in relation to the reliability of sense-perception. Epicurus was probably the first to employ a *kanon* or criterion of truth in the service of such a defence (Long and Sedley, 1987:88). The criteria of truth are the ultimate means by which one separates true judgments from false and the Epicurean criteria were sensations, preconceptions and feelings. For our purposes, the last of these is most important. On “feelings” (*pathe*) as a criterion, Diogenes Laertius writes: “The Epicureans affirm that there are two states of feeling, pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being, and that one is favourable, and the other hostile to that being...living things are (thus) well content with pleasure and are at enmity with pain, by the prompting of nature and apart from reason” (*Lives*, 10.31). The last element of this quotation — “by the prompting of nature and apart from reason” — points to the Epicurean notion that one cannot deduce what the good is by means of rational argument alone, rather one meets with the good in experience and immediately recognizes it. We can see more clearly what

Marble bust of Epicurus. Roman copy of Greek original. British Museum, London

this means for our argument in light of the Epicurean division of the soul into rational and a non-rational elements. “Feeling”, in the epistemological context, refers to the intrinsic positive or negative quality of perceptual experience, which arises in the bodily, or non-rational, part of the soul (Annas, 1992:190–1; Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 52, 53). These are then passed to the rational part of the soul (Annas, 1992:191–5). “Feeling” serves as the *basis* for the evaluative aspect of cognitive attitudes. Pleasure, therefore, on this picture, is an *experiential* quality that determines the positive or negative character of a cognitive attitude; pleasure is not the cognitive attitude itself.

If we accept that the concept of “feeling” has been consistently applied across Epicurus, Cicero, Purinton and Moore, and if we accept Moore’s division of theoretical frameworks, we can, I think, confidently conclude that the standard interpretation is mistaken. This is because, as we have seen, the standard interpretation of the nature of pleasure in Epicurus conforms to the *attitudinal* theoretical framework, whilst the interpretation that emerges from Epicurean epistemology construes pleasure as *experiential*. But can we *really* assume that our use of concepts like “feeling” is the same, or even similar, across four philosophers, three languages and twenty-five centuries? And *are* we justified in accepting Moore’s division of theoretical frameworks, particularly given that so many philosophers have used the concepts “feeling” and “attitude” interchangeably?<sup>9</sup> These are, of course, very difficult questions and I cannot hope to do them justice here. I can, however, gesture as to possible responses to each. On the first point, we tend today, in ordinary talk, to use the word “feelings” to refer to subjective emotional experience and sensation, and so did Epicurus. It may be that concepts like this, which are basic to our humanity, tend to be similarly applied across cultures and languages. On the second point, I think we are justified in accepting Moore’s division of theoretical frameworks so long as the attitudes that the division refers to are stipulated to be the cognitive attitudes of rational subjects and not lower-order affective or emotional attitudes.<sup>10</sup> If full responses along these lines can be made adequate, the main argument I have presented here should have considerable force.

## Conclusion

The standard/Ciceronian interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure looks to be mistaken. Cicero’s Platonic assumptions in relation to pleasure lead him to interpret this condition as bare, unfelt, painlessness. This interpretation, when applied to Epicurean ethics, produces contradictions within his ethical system. Cicero, naturally, is comfortable with his own interpretation and he consequently rejects Epicurean hedonism as inconsistent. This would be hardly noteworthy were it not for the Ciceronian interpretation’s profound influence on Epicurean scholarship to this

<sup>9</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

<sup>10</sup> On the difference between cognitive attitudes and lower-order affective attitudes see Aydede (2000).



day. The “standard” contemporary interpretation accepts the rudiments of the Ciceronian account and produces similar inconsistencies in its explication of Epicurean ethics. Epicurean hedonism is therefore most often taken as being of only historical interest. But there is a problem at the heart of the standard interpretation. Its characterisation of *katastematic* pleasure necessitates that its theoretical basis is *attitudinal*. However, when we examine aspects of Epicurus’ epistemology, it seems to demand that we attribute to him an account of pleasure that fits the *experiential* framework. This framework refuses any conception of pleasure that locates it extrinsically to its experiential object — yet this is just how the standard interpretation casts *katastematic* pleasures. There are further questions to be answered about conceptual agreement across cultures, languages and ages, and also questions relating to the viability of the distinction between theoretical frameworks upon which my argument has been based. It is likely, though, that there are plausible responses to these questions. We should, therefore, in our continued examination of Epicurean pleasure and ethics, be, at the very least, wary of analysis that has been built on the ground that Cicero prepared.

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