

Ruminating on desires and on the absence of pain....

Post by "Godfrey" of June 7, 2021 at 9:10 PM

Quote

"...and of the necessary [desires], **some are necessary for happiness** and some for freeing the body from troubles and some for life itself." Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus 127

I was surprised to find this quote which exactly expressed my thoughts concerning the relatively ascetic existence during the pandemic restrictions and fulfilled my curiosity as to what Epicurus might have to say about it. Thinking of asceticism inevitably led me as well to thoughts of the absence of pain.

Firstly, it seems that the "absence of pain" proponents are ignoring the first desire in this quote and focusing on the last two. I can see how this might lead one to asceticism. But the desires that are necessary for happiness are what Epicurus places in the position of importance in this quote. Personally, I had either missed this or forgotten it and so was quite pleasantly surprised to read it! (For clarity, I wasn't thinking of becoming an ascetic 😊)

Thinking further on the practicalities of the absence of pain, hopefully without provoking any rants:

The fears that Epicurus addresses in LM and in the PDs are "macro" fears, those of death and the gods. But there are and always have been "micro" fears that I don't recall reading about in the surviving literature. To me, for Epicurus to posit a complete therapeutic philosophy he would need to address these "micro" fears, and I assume that he did so through frank speech in the garden, one person at a time or perhaps in small groups. These micro, everyday fears are more personal fears, specific to everyday situations, although there are common threads to them. And I'm mentioning them partly because they don't lead to asceticism but to immediate pleasures of the non-fancy type. Nothing mystical here! (Is mystical related to "mystified?")

An example that comes to mind is from my early childhood, learning to swim. After I had become proficient at swimming and at diving off the diving board, my teacher tried to get me to jump off of the high dive. I was scared out of my wits! I stood up there, looking down and trembling... climbed down off the board, climbed back up... it took quite a long time and lots of encouragement, but finally I went up and jumped off. It was so exhilarating that I spent the rest of the afternoon repeatedly experiencing the sheer joy of climbing up and jumping off: the removal of pain (fear) was definitely pleasure!

Another example might be of a mythical land surveyor working in alligator country. He might be terrified of alligators as evil spirit animals, or afraid of being attacked. Either of these could be addressed through reason: thinking through the implications of a material universe for the first, learning about proper safety protocols in alligator country for the second. Removing the pain of fear in these ways would allow for the pleasure of doing his job and enjoying being out in nature; it wouldn't lead him to avoid his work and sit in his room on a zafu cushion.

Could/should the pain/pleasure dichotomy be used in this way as an Epicurean "exercise" or "practice" to maximize one's pleasure? At the very least, to me, thinking in this way is a useful and direct tool for understanding the relationship between pleasure and the absence of pain.