

Episode Ninety-Three: Torquatus Leads Us Forward Into Conflict Over Epicurean Ethics

Post by “Cassius” of October 30, 2021 at 9:11 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Okay, yes yes. I think we are understanding the word "rank" in two different senses. That's seems to be the crux of my issue. Not that rank doesn't have the two senses but we're let's say talking past each other. That's the issue with posting rather than talking! That could have been resolved in a back and forth in two minutes rather than multiple posts over a week.

I do not believe that this issue is limited by any means to communications in this thread. I really think that this issue in general ("how to communicate the subtleties and different contexts of words") is quite possibly one of the issues that we need to focus on more than anything else -- even in many cases more than we need to focus on some of the more difficult doctrines and passages.

For me, the problem we face here is best exemplified in how people (in general, casual readers) are taking the phrase "by pleasure we mean the absence of pain." Stoic-oriented commentators and self-help readers looking for mental health assistance are looking at that phrase as if it were a clinical prescription - almost like it's a drug like valium. They are thinking that "here is some counterintuitive psychological insight by a 2000-year old doctor, and all I have to do is start viewing pleasure as absence of pain - in other words, aiming for numbness - and my life will be great."

Obviously I think that is not at all what Epicurus intended. Viewing pleasure as absence of pain is in fact not "clinical" and in my view has to be explained first and foremost in a way that conveys that numbness is NOT the goal. That means going into detail about the foundational premises that allow Epicurus to reach this conclusion - foundational premises like "there are only two feelings, pleasure and pain." And that approach is the opposite of being clinical, and can't be done by simply pointing and saying "look there, that absence of pain is pleasure."

We run into this issue over and over in terms of words like "gods" and "pleasure" and "virtue" and I think the list could go on and on. Epicurus has very specific explanations of these words in mind, which frequently conflict with the explanations and definitions of these words that we carry with us today and presume he is talking about.

I'm suggesting that just as DeWitt thought it appropriate to start his book with a synoptic overview, and at the top of that overview put "be prepared to understand that Epicurus was at

the same time among the most loved and hated of ancient philosophers" we need to do something similar.

I'm suggesting that as part of our introductory and outreach materials we find a way to emphasize to everyone at the start that before we can understand Epicurus we have to go back and make absolutely clear what his premises were and how those ended up in definitions of important words that carry implications that almost all of us have to take apart and put back together for us to understand what he meant.