

From The "Golden Mean" to the "Summum Bonum" - Useful or Deceptive Frames of Reference?

Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2022 at 5:30 AM

This discussion (split from here: [What do you mean from the "Golden Mean" of Aristotle?](#)) reminds me of two other recent things that have been in my mind:

(1) I was discussing with someone a new sort of 'self-help' book that the person was reading, which focuses on what I perceive to be psychological self-help techniques geared toward reaching goals. My comment was to ask whether that person had first identified their real goals, as it makes sense to me that it is usually would be appropriate to clarify in one's mind what one's proper goal IS, before launching off into generic goal-achieving activity.

(2) I know I have probably spoken negatively in the past about articles which seem to say that we should not set pleasure or happiness as our goal, but rather something else, and look for pleasure and happiness as side effects rather than going after them directly. I still think negatively of that perspective BUT:

I have always realized that the word "happiness" and even "pleasure" to a degree are conceptual abstractions. The word 'happiness' almost definitely is so, and we find "happiness" being used in totally different ways by different people, so much so that it takes fairly elaborate definition-building to be clear what we're talking about.

"Pleasure" has some of the same issues, but it is a word that also more clearly denotes a "Feeling" - and I think that it is as a feeling that it takes its central role in Epicurean philosophy, as a part of the canon of truth by which we grapple with external reality.

But it's also obvious that "pleasure" is no different from "hedone" or other words in other languages - it too is a concept for which we have to do some mental processing to identify what we mean when we use it.

Epicurus was always clear that the feelings are TWO - pleasure and pain, and that we sometimes choose the pain in order to achieve more pleasure or avoid worse pain. But formulating it that way still requires you to identify in your mind what is pleasurable and what is painful to YOU, and if you don't think through the issues carefully you end up totally wasting your time - or in the words of Torquatus - "Surely no one recoils from or dislikes or avoids pleasure in itself because it is pleasure, but because great pains come upon those who do not know how to follow pleasure rationally."

Here we have to keep in mind that "rationally" doesn't mean using the syllogistic abstract logic detached from reality that Epicurus criticizes, but does mean "sober reasoning, searching out

the motives for all choice and avoidance, and banishing mere opinions, to which are due the greatest disturbance of the spirit." (Letter to Menoecus).

So we need to ask ourselves if we have really soberly reasoned through the details and searched out the motives and ways that we find pleasure and avoid pain in our own personal circumstances. If we have adopted faulty opinions from others, or from teachers, or culture, or religion, or whatever, have we banished those from our thoughts and clearly identified what is going to bring to us OUR greatest pleasure and OUR relief from pain?

I gather that this is probably related to what Smoothiekiwi was talking about earlier. It is totally non-Epicurean to simply and blindly pursue "pleasure" without regard to what the action we engage in ultimately brings to us, and without banishing into the pit the false opinions about the nature of the universe that lead us in the wrong direction.

VS46. Let us utterly drive from us our bad habits, as if they were evil men who have long done us great harm.

That's why it's not good to think of this philosophy as Pleasurism, or Hedonism.

This isn't either of those. This is EPICURUS.

Sung to the tune of [this](#)