

Pleasures of the soul, Values, Meaningful Life

Post by "Cassius" of June 27, 2022 at 12:30 PM

I always enjoy discussing this issue because I think it is so important.

I find that there are basically two camps:

Camp One - People who focus on the "absence of pain" passages and conclude that "avoid all pain to the extent possible" is the supreme guide of Epicurean philosophy, without regard to the pleasure that is thereby forgone.

Camp Two: People who focus on "pleasure" as that term is ordinarily understood, embracing all forms of mental and physical enjoyment, and who conclude that the correct statement of the primary guide is that pleasure is the focus and is to be pursued so long as we ourselves deem the resulting feeling of pleasure to be worth the cost in pain needed to obtain it.

Everyone has different tolerances for pain, and different valuations of pleasure, so it's really impossible to make the generic statement of Camp Two more precise than that. There is no absolute set of pleasures always to pursue or pains always to avoid.

The error of camp one, in my view, arises from attempting to conclude that all pain is so intolerable that it must be avoided at all costs.

I wish camp one was a straw man and that no one seriously advocates for that, but we are talking philosophy here and we need to be as precise and clear as possible with our formulations.

Camp One is the short path to Stoicism and Buddhism IMHO and is therefore to be avoided at all cost. Camp One is sustainable in Epicurean terms only by ignoring large parts of the surviving texts. The Camp Two position can explain and apply ALL the texts appropriately, but the Camp One position cannot be reconciled with the many explicit endorsements of choosing pain at times for the sake of pleasure. Camp One attempts to rely on "ataraxia" as the "greatest pleasure," to support it's position, but that too (IMHO) cannot stand the test of scrutiny when compared against the full system. Ataraxia can easily be incorporated into Camp Two's big picture, but Camp Two cannot embrace Pleasure without stretching reasonable constructions of definitions beyond the breaking point.