

Episode 195 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 05

Post by “Cassius” of October 11, 2023 at 7:28 AM

Always good to bring in a comparison with the Cyreniacs (also Gosling & Taylor):

18.3.6. (iii) But this brings us to the third problem. For Epicurus should not be prepared to allow that one unmixed pleasure can be greater than another. The ‘greater than’ relation can only hold between pairs of pleasures at least one of which is mixed, it cannot hold between two unmixed ones. So this at least looks like a fairly blatant inconsistency.

18.3.7. The only hope here is to query the testimony of Diogenes, but it clearly will not do simply to dismiss it because it is awkward. Two things are, however, worth noting: first, although Diogenes (DL X.136, 137) sounds as though he is reporting an explicit set of disagreements with the Cyrenaics, he is probably only working out divergencies, and secondly, when the point at present under discussion is introduced the dispute is over whether physical or mental pains are worse; it is only after an explanation of why Epicurus thought mental ones were worse that Diogenes adds that for the same sort of reason he thought that mental pleasure were greater.

Now the Cyrenaics dismissed the idea of calculating the effects of actions and advocated pursuing the immediately available pleasure. So far as immediately available pleasures were concerned they considered bodily ones to be the greater, presumably judging degrees of pleasure on a scale of intensity. Since pleasure is the only good, and this does not mean pleasure maximization over a life, they are obviously going to think that bodily pains are worst and bodily pleasures best just because most painful and pleasurable respectively. One would not, however, expect Epicurus to settle the question of which were better in these terms (DL X.129-30). He would not deny, perhaps, that some bodily pains are very intense, and even more intense than any mental ones, but he thought that intense bodily pain was always short-lived and that therefore one should not make much fuss about it (PD 4; DL X.140). For, in such pain the body has only to cope with the present disorder, which is only of brief duration. The mind, by contrast, dwells on not only present evils but past and future ones as well, and so its pain endures as long as the memory and expectation of evil. These are also typically fertile of pain. The memory of past failure leads to fear of future ones in turn aggravated by memories of past ones. So the body’s limitation to its present condition in contrast to the mind’s wandering over past, present, and future would make one, on Epicurean grounds, consider the pains of the mind to be worse, and this is precisely the ground cited by Diogenes in X.137.

But this is, note, a ground for considering them worse, not in any ordinary sense as more painful. Epicurus’ disagreement with the Cyrenaics would be precisely on the point of equating what is more painful with what is worse. It is only after his reports of the Epicurean grounds for thinking mental pains to be worse that Diogenes comments that ‘so in this way he holds that the pleasures of the mind are also greater’. But ‘this way’ has given no grounds for supposing

them greater in the sense of more intense, nor pleasanter in any sense found elsewhere in Epicurus. At most it gives grounds for supposing them more enduring and more productive of pleasure. It is simplest in fact, either to suppose that 'greater' does not mean 'more pleasant', or to suppose that this has slipped in because of carelessness on the part of Diogenes who was constructing a dispute in which Epicurus' 'opponents' were using 'greater' as equivalent of 'more pleasant' and taking greater pleasures as ipso facto better. Either way Epicurus is not committed to saying that mental pleasures are pleasanter than bodily ones, though he will doubtless say that unmixed mental ones are pleasanter than mixed bodily ones. So the probability is that the basis of Diogenes' report is quite consistent with Epicurus' remarks elsewhere on degrees of pleasure.