

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

Post by "Cassius" of October 12, 2023 at 7:44 AM

To sort of recap for a moment let me say this:

My major issue with the "absence of pain" analysis I see discussed by many modern commentators is that they either state or imply that there is some kind of "true pleasure" or "higher pleasure" that is the ultimate goal of life which is only experienced when every last drop of pain is eliminated. As a result they imply that the ordinary experience of pleasure in normal life as you get your life under control and gradually increase the predominance of pleasure in your experience from 50% to 75% to 90% to 99% ultimately is worthless, and that nothing is worth achieving until you cross that 100% pleasure / 0% pain threshold.

To coin a new term that no one has ever used before 😊 - that interpretation would make "the perfect the enemy of the good."

As I would say it now, PDO3 is making clear BOTH:

1 - That the theoretical goal is 100% pleasure / 0% pain, because it's obvious nothing can be more complete than 100%. When looking at your whole life "in sum," the logical goal for your life as a whole is 100% pleasure / 0% pain. Of course we know it is canonical Epicurus that we sometimes choose pain when that leads to more pleasure or less overall pain, so the 100% / 0% goal is a "whole organism" perspective, and not an inflexible rule that says at every moment that your "prime directive" is to make sure you never experience a moment of pain. You look to all the consequences and you act accordingly.

2 - That every step along the way, in any discrete moment / part / feeling / experience of your life, what you are feeling / experiencing is registered as either pleasure or pain, and that there is no "neutral" or third or fourth or any other kind of experience that does not fall under pleasure or pain. If you are not feeling pain, what you are feeling is pleasure, full stop, end of need to look for any other high-level label. Any feeling that we find to be desirable is equally describing as "pleasure" or "absence of pain" at this high level of analysis.

If those two points are accepted as clear, I think you eliminate most of the ill effects of all the "woo" that surrounds absence of pain, and you end up with a very practical and common sense framework that refutes all the ascetic or esoteric assertions that people who are averse to the word "pleasure" want to push. Accepting these two points as core Epicurus fleshes out what Epicurus is talking about in the letter to Menoecus and makes clear he is not pointing in an ascetic direction, and that he has no intention of "writing out" the pleasures of "stimulation" from within the proper and full definition of pleasure, which includes both stimulation and all other activities of normal life which are not painful.

There's a lot further we can go in terms of practical advise and additional details, such as linking statements to the effect that life is desirable and that is a small man indeed who has many reasons for ending his life. We can then develop a similarly clear statement on the issue of being satisfied with what you have while at the same time wanting to continue living so long as you can expect a predominance of pleasure over pain.

But if points 1 and 2 above are not clear, I don't think it's productive to move further until we have confidence in those two.

Any thoughts?