

"Absence Of Pain Is Pleasure" - How Would You Articulate That To Someone?

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 9:57 AM

Here's a start. I will expand on this but I want to go ahead and add an explanation that Joshua just found in the Aulus Gellius material:

It is a perfectly acceptable construction in grammar, used by numerous people but no less than Virgil and Homer, to express one of a pair of opposite terms by stating its negation. For example, when Homer wanted to describe a virtuous person, he would call him "without fault." When Virgil was describing a horrible person, he described him as "without praiseworthiness." We could go on and on to expand this list, but these are among the examples that Aulus Gellius cites as perfectly acceptable and clear language, and we are all familiar with similar usages.

Aulus Gellius then goes on to include Epicurus' use of "absence of pain" as an example of the same kind of grammatical construction. This shows that Epicurus' usage is not intended to be mysterious, but to be a normal construction when discussing opposites.

Epicurus can describe pleasure as "absence of pain" because he holds that pleasure is the opposite of pain, and that all feelings resolve into one of the two, so that if you are feeling anything at all you are feeling either pleasure or pain but not both at one part of your body or mind, and not "neither" -- there is no neutral state. The universe is made up of atoms and void and nothing else, and all feelings are either pleasure or pain and nothing else. So "absence of pain = pleasure" and "absence of pleasure = pain."

Expressing feelings by using negations emphasizes that the worst pain is the total absence of pleasure, and the best pleasure is the total absence of pain. Further, use of the negation helps emphasize that we are not concerned with describing an exact experience of pleasure or an exact experience of pain. We aren't concerned about doing that because it can't be done, because there is nothing common between all pleasures except that we feel them to be agreeable, and there is nothing in common between all pains except that they feel disagreeable.

Expressing pleasure in such sweeping terms was important to Epicurus because he wanted to emphasize that "pleasure" is not limited to "stimulative" experiences, but that pleasure also includes all normal and healthy mental and bodily experiences of life. There's no way to express those in greater detail without providing an innumerable list of experiences, or without simply calling them experiences in which pain is absent, or "absence of pain."

And using DeWitt's words, this extension of the name of pleasure to the normal state of life is the key insight:

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3499-absence-of-pain-is-pleasure-how-would-you-articulate-that-to-someone/?postID=27356#post27356>

"The extension of the name of pleasure to this normal state of being was the major innovation of the new hedonism. It was in the negative form, freedom from pain of body and distress of mind, that it drew the most persistent and vigorous condemnation from adversaries. The contention was that the application of the name of pleasure to this state was unjustified on the ground that two different things were thereby being denominated by one name. Cicero made a great to-do over this argument, but it is really superficial and captious. *The fact that the name of pleasure was not customarily applied to the normal or static state did not alter the fact that the name ought to be applied to it; nor that reason justified the application; nor that human beings would be the happier for so reasoning and believing.*"

The only way that Epicurean philosophy makes sense is to see "Absence of Pain" as synonymous with "pleasure," and "Absence of pleasure" as synonymous with "pain." If you try to divorce the two and make absence of pain something different from, and higher than, pleasure, then you tear the heart out of the insight that pleasure includes both pleasures that are stimulating and pleasures that are part of normal daily healthy life, and you lose the trail to see that "pleasure" is the term to use to describe the alpha and omega of life.

For those who are into the details, I would say that this is why examining closely Torquatus' response to the Chrysippus' hand argument is so important. The normal hand in a normal state without pain IS in a state of pleasure, and if you state that anything is "without pain" then you are stating that it's at 100% pleasure. This is also the way to understand why the pain-free host pouring wine for the thirsty but otherwise pain-free guest are both experiencing the same level of pleasure - "pain-free" is "pain-free." And it's why Torquatus is so adamant in insisting to Cicero that "pleasure" and "absence of pain" are the same.

Quote

Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be." ... Cicero: Still, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Absolutely the same, indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible." Cicero - "On Ends" Book 2:iii:9 and 2:iii:11 (Rackham)