

The Art of Remembering

Post by “Cassius” of March 31, 2024 at 2:11 PM

In the Lucretius Today podcast that we recorded today (Episode 221) we ran into a substantial passage where Cicero attacked Epicurus' stress on remembering the pleasures of the past as a means of offsetting pains in the present. Cicero went on at length questioning whether we can control our memories at all, and called into question both the possibility and the efficacy of the use of memories of past pleasures.

Quote from Cicero's On Ends Book 2

XXXII. But to return to our theme (for we were speaking about pain when we drifted into the consideration of this letter) we may now thus sum up the whole matter: he who is subject to the greatest possible evil is not happy so long as he remains subject to it, whereas the wise man always is happy, though he is at times subject to pain; pain therefore is not the greatest possible evil. Now what kind of statement is this, that past blessings do not fade from the wise man's memory, but still that he ought not to remember his misfortunes? First, have we power over our recollections? I know that Themistocles, when Simonides, or it may be some one else, offered to teach him the art of remembering, said: I would rather learn the art of forgetting; for I remember even the things I do not wish to re- member, while I cannot forget what I wish to forget. He had great gifts; but the truth is really this, that it is too domineering for a philosopher to interdict us from remembering things. Take care that your commands be not those of a Manlius or even stronger; I mean when you lay a command on me which I cannot possibly execute. What if the recollection of past misfortunes is actually agreeable? Some proverbs will thus be truer than your doctrines. It is a common saying: Fast toils are agreeable; and not badly did Euripides say (I shall put it into Latin if I can; you all know the line in Greek): Sweet is the memory of toils that are past. But let us return to the subject of past blessings. If you spoke of such blessings as enabled Gaius Marius, though exiled, starving, and immersed in a swamp, to lighten his pain by re-calling to mind his triumphs, I would listen to you and give you my entire approval. Indeed the happiness of the wise man can never be perfected, or reach its goal, if his good thoughts and deeds are to be successively effaced by his own forgetfulness,

But in your view life is rendered happy by the remembrance of pleasures already enjoyed, and moreover those enjoyed by the body. For if there are any other pleasures, then it is not true that all mental pleasures are dependent on association with the body. Now if bodily pleasure, even when past, gives satisfaction, I do not see why Aristotle

should so utterly ridicule the inscription of Sardanapallus, in which that king of Syria boasts that he has carried away with him all the lustful pleasures. For, says Aristotle, how could he retain after death a thing which, even when he was alive, he could only feel just so long as he actually enjoyed it? Bodily pleasures therefore ebb and fly away one after another, and more often leave behind them reason for regret than for remembrance. Happier then is Africanus when he thus converses with his country: Cease, Rome, thy enemies to fear, with the noble sequel: For my toils have established for thee thy bulwarks. He takes delight in his past toils; you bid him delight in his past pleasures; he turns his thoughts once more to achievements, not one of which he ever connected with the body; you wholly cling to the body.

XXXIII. But how is this very position of your school to be made good, namely that all intellectual pleasures and pains alike are referable to bodily pleasures and pains? Do you never get any gratification (I know the kind of man I am addressing) - Do you, then, Torquatus, never get any gratification from anything whatever for its own sake? I put on one side nobleness, morality, the mere beauty of the virtues, of which I have already spoken; I will put before you these slighter matters; when you either write or read a poem or a speech, when you press your inquiries concerning all events, and all countries, when you see a statue, a picture, an attractive spot, games, fights with beasts, the country house of Lucullus (for if I were to mention your own, you would find a loop-hole, you would say that it had to do with your body) — well then, do you connect all the things I have mentioned with the body? Or is there something which gives you gratification for its own sake? You will either shew yourself very obstinate, if you persist in connecting with the body everything that I have mentioned, or will prove a traitor to the whole of pleasure, as Epicurus conceives it, if you give the opposite opinion.

But when you maintain that the mental pleasures and pains are more intense than those of the body, because the mind is associated with time of three kinds, while the body has only consciousness of what is present, how can you accept the result that one who feels some joy on my account feels more joy than I do myself? But in your anxiety to prove the wise man happy, because the pleasures he experiences in his mind are the greatest, and incomparably greater than those he experiences in his body, you are blind to the difficulty that meets you. For the mental pains he experiences will also be incomparably greater than those of the body. So the very man whom you are anxious to represent as constantly happy must needs be sometimes wretched; nor indeed will you ever prove your point, while you continue to connect everything with pleasure and pain.

When combined with the regular meetings and birthday celebrations and use of images and committing texts to memory, I think this highlights that the Epicureans likely *did* stress the importance of keeping a good memory of past pleasant experiences as a strategy for living happily.

And that means that the art of cultivating good memories is probably a very significant instrumentality that deserves its own section of the forum along with the other "virtues."

Joshua has noted that Cicero himself is identified with a memory technique involving associating items with places, and so it does seem there are records from the ancient world about the topic of cultivating the use of memory.

Let's use this thread (and this entire subforum) to discuss that topic.