

The “Absence of Pain” Problem

Post by “Cassius” of April 14, 2025 at 5:38 PM

Another thing I'd add is that the cup analogy is just that - an "analogy" - as would be the ideal of all experience being pleasure. I think there's a tendency for us all to be thinking in terms of "explain to me exactly what I must do to enter the kingdom of heaven." In other words, give me the exact prescription for paradise, and I'll follow exactly those steps so that I - and everyone else who drinks the medicine - will experience exactly the same thing. With the idea being that there is some precise experience - setting foot in heaven or experiencing exactly the same euphoria of a magic potion - that is being talked about.

But life is not like that. Everyone has their own circumstances, and everyone has their own preferences in pleasures, and so the goal of everyone is not the same in exact terms -- only in abstract terms. And in abstract terms, it's very simple (and helpful, as a clear statement of a goal) to identify that what you would really like to have is "complete" pleasure with no mixture of pain.

But in our rush to think that there is a magic pill that everyone can experience the same way, we forget those differences, and we try to force "absence of pain" into a particular experience that we can climb into like a 1957 Chevy.

And the trouble is compounded because what is really in issue is not some abstract definition of a goal like a "kingdom of heaven." What really is the truth is that we don't live forever, our souls are not magical or divine, there's no life after death, no "god" to tell us what to do, and we have to ourselves use our time as we deem best, just like any other dolphin or horse or cat or dog or any other living thing must do. Only humans have the disposition to be lulled into complacency by thinking that there is some afterlife that we can look forward to as our reward, and thereby trade in our time in the here and now for a promise of something "better" later.

I don't believe Epicurus saw "absence of pain" as something equivalent to a kingdom of heaven for which we trade the pleasures that are available to us while we are alive. I think he saw that life is a real-life here-and-now experience in which the best we can do is to organize our activities so that the time that we are as happy as possible during the time that we have.

This is the opposite of monasticism or passivity or the kind of intellectualism that results in going round and round and debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It's a very practical call to action to use your life as productively as you can during the time that you have, with "productivity" defined not in terms of purely bodily pleasure or purely mental pleasure but in terms of whatever combination of both nature impresses on you as the "happiest" way to spend your time. To paraphrase Torquatus, the person who runs from all pain and mental and bodily activity and who cannot foresee the disaster to which that kind of life will lead is worthy of contempt, not a chair in philosophy. Likewise in Jefferson's advice to William

short, we need to "brace ourselves up" and get on with life, because the kind of soft indulgence in indolence that comes from what some people want to see as "absence of pain" is the furthest thing possible from what Epicurus actually taught.