

Diogenes Laertius on Epicurean Ethics

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Diogene Laertius talks about Epicureans (as a comparison to the Cyrenaics) in this section in Book 2 of Diogenes Laertius, online:

Quote

VIII. These men then who continued in the school of Aristippus, and were called Cyrenaics, adopted the following opinions.—They said that there were two emotions of the mind, pleasure and pain; that the one, namely pleasure, was a moderate emotion; the other, namely pain, a rough one. And that no one pleasure was different from or more pleasant than another; and that pleasure was praised by all animals, but pain avoided. They said also that pleasure belonged to the body, and constituted its chief good, as Panætius also tells us in his book on Sects; but the pleasure which they call the chief good, is not that pleasure as a state, which consists in the absence of all pain, and is a sort of undisturbedness, which is what Epicurus admits as such; for the Cyrenaics think that there is a distinction between the chief good and a life of happiness, for that the chief good is a particular pleasure, but that happiness is a state consisting of a number of particular pleasures, among which, both those which are past, and those which are future, are both enumerated. And they consider that particular pleasure is desirable for its own sake; but that happiness is desirable not for its own sake, but for that of the particular pleasure. And that the proof that pleasure is the chief good is that we are from our childhood attracted to it without any deliberate choice of our own; and that when we have obtained it, we do not seek anything further, and also that there is nothing which we avoid so much as we do its opposite,[90] which is pain. And they assert, too, that pleasure is a good, even if it arises from the most unbecoming causes, as Hippobotus tells us in his Treatise on Sects; for even if an action be ever so absurd, still the pleasure which arises out of it is desirable, and a good.

Moreover, the banishment of pain, as it is called by Epicurus, appears to the Cyrenaics not to be pleasure; for neither is the absence of pleasure pain, for both pleasure and pain consist in motion; and neither the absence of pleasure nor the absence of pain are motion. In fact, absence of pain is a condition like that of a person asleep. They say also that it is possible that some persons may not desire pleasure, owing to some perversity of mind; and that all the pleasures and pains of the mind, do not all originate in pleasures and pains of the body, for that pleasure often arises from the mere fact of the prosperity of one's country, or from one's own; but they deny that pleasure is

caused by either the recollection or the anticipation of good fortune—though Epicurus asserted that it was—for the motion of the mind is put an end to by time. They say, too, that pleasure is not caused by simple seeing or hearing. Accordingly we listen with pleasure to those who give a representation of lamentations; but we are pained when we see men lamenting in reality. And they called the absence of pleasure and of pain intermediate states; and asserted that corporeal pleasures were superior to mental ones, and corporeal sufferings worse than mental ones. And they argued that it was on this principle that offenders were punished with bodily pain; for they thought that to suffer pain was hard, but that to be pleased was more in harmony with the nature of man, on which account also they took more care of the body than of the mind.

And although pleasure is desirable for its own sake, still they admit that some of the efficient causes of it are often troublesome, and as such opposite to pleasure; so that they think that an assemblage of all the pleasures which produce happiness, is the most difficult thing conceivable. But they admit that every wise man does not live pleasantly, and that every bad man does not live unpleasantly, but that it is only a general rule admitting of some exceptions. And they think it sufficient if a person enjoys a happy time in consequence of one pleasure which befalls him. They say that prudence is a[91] good, but is not desirable for its own sake, but for the sake of those things which result from it. That a friend is desirable for the sake of the use which we can make of him; for that the parts of the body also are loved while they are united to the body; and that some of the virtues may exist even in the foolish. They consider that bodily exercise contributes to the comprehension of virtue; and that the wise man will feel neither envy, nor love, nor superstition; for that these things originate in a fallacious opinion. They admit, at the same time, that he is liable to grief and fear, for that these are natural emotions. They said also that wealth is an efficient cause of pleasure, but that it is not desirable for its own sake. That the sensations are things which can be comprehended; but they limited this assertion to the sensations themselves, and did not extend it to the causes which produce them. They left out all investigation of the subjects of natural philosophy because of the evident impossibility of comprehending them; but they applied themselves to the study of logic, because of its utility.

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