

Opening Discussion of Kelly Arenson's "Health And Happiness In Plato And Epicurus"

Post by "Cassius" of August 1, 2026 at 4:49 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Pleasure/Pain guide to what ?

They are the guide to the best life, because pleasure is the word we choose to use to describe all that is intrinsically desirable.

Yes this is a word game, and if you want to argue that the goal should be set as "virtue" or "being like god" you can argue that too. In the end all these things are just words.

But some words can be tied to real experiences. In the case of Pleasure as the goal, that is tied to the feelings of pleasure and pain which our experiences reveal to us directly. Other goals are not so directly establishable - they are just words that float around forever in ambiguous and unprovable assertions about things like "gods" or "virtue" that can never be pinned down because they are just abstractions for which there is no direct sensory experience of them.

We have often mentioned in the past the cliché about the perfect not being the enemy of the good.

A variation of that is probably easier to see in this context is that *the goal is not the enemy of the process, or the destination is not the enemy of the journey.*

Embedded in the Platonic analysis seems to be the idea that "the good" should be viewed as the *result* of actions, but that the actions themselves are not good. It appears that the example that is cited is ships and shipbuilding -- that "ships" are "the good" of shipbuilding.

If you use that approach then ships are good, but shipbuilding is *not good*. Now the defenders of Platonism may say that that's not what they mean, but nevertheless that is what the ordinary person is going to gather from the statement. That shipbuilding is *inferior* to ships - that shipbuilding is at best a necessary evil, and that what you really want is ships with the implication that you can dispense with shipbuilding.

That's also implied in the quoted statement - *Pleasure/Pain guide to what ?* As if all you need to know is what the goal is, and that once you know the goal you can dispense with pleasure and pain.

This attitude perspective is a big part of the issue with the way people are reading Menoeceus 128:

The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear. And when this is once secured for us, all the tempest of the soul is dispersed, since the living creature has not to wander as though in search of something that is missing, and to look for some other thing by which he can fulfill the good of the soul and the good of the body. For it is then that we have need of pleasure, when we feel pain owing to the absence of pleasure; (but when we do not feel pain), we no longer need pleasure.

Yes you no longer need ADDITIONAL pleasure, but that's because what you have is made from all the normal pleasures of life. Would someone in the business of ships properly say "Now that I have a ship I no longer have need of nails, fabric, wooden beams, ropes, tar, or the rest?"

That would be ludicrous -- the only way to make sense of that is to understand you don't need MORE of them but ONLY because you already have them in the completed ship that you're going to sail on.

Would it be proper for a doctor to say - *You have your health, so you no longer need skin, bones, food, water, air, shelter, or clothing.* (?)

Of course not - that would be ludicrous - you have "health" ONLY because you have the things that make up health.

Epicurus is talking in Platonic terms to someone who would have understood that this relationship between the perfect and the good, between the goal and the process was a major concern of the time because Plato had preached it and Aristotle had wrestled with it without making the proper perspective clear.

And we're obviously still wrestling with it today, because CLEVER people have us convinced that "the good" is what we should be concerned about rather than what that term means.

And so we have people obsessed with 'a healthy mind in a healthy body' without any concern whatsoever for what "health" is all about - in fact allowing or even demanding that *health* be divorced from *pleasure*, even though it is absolutely ludicrous to do so.

We talk as if we are so superior to the rubes who believe in supernatural gods and punishments or rewards after death, when in truth much of the discussion about Epicurus today is trapped in an illusion that is far worse than those mistakes. As Epicurus said, at least those who follow religion have the hope of happiness by cozying up to the gods. Those who are mesmerized by "tranquility" and "health" and "happiness" and "the good" and even "absence of pain" while looking down on *pleasure* are trapped in something far worse. They have created a divide that can never be healed because they think that "being" (the goal) is all that matters and that "becoming" (the required process) is beneath them.

Note: This analysis would also apply to the relationship between virtue to prudence, honor, and justice in [PD05](#). Don't preach to me about "happiness" if you don't understand that happiness is inseparable from the actions that produce it (we call those actions *virtues*). It's the same point: Don't talk to me about "ships" if you don't understand that ships are inseparable from the wood and nails and cloth and rope from which a "ship" is made. Don't talk to me about "absence of pain" unless you understand that "absence of pain" is inseparable from the regular bodily and mental pleasures from which "absence of pain" is made.