

Responding to the Arguments Against Pleasure In Cicero's "On Ends" Book 2

Post by "Cassius" of February 2, 2018 at 10:00 PM

(Originally posted at Facebook) People, it's time to come to grips with controversies on a deeper level. We've been at work in this group for over four years, and yet never have we examined at close range the arguments arrayed against Epicurus in Book 2 of Cicero's "On Ends." Unsurprisingly enough, those arguments turn on criticism of Epicurus' definition of pleasure, and on the idea (asserted by Cicero) that Epicurus held painlessness to be identical to pleasure (an idea which in fact was held by an earlier philosopher):

Well," I replied, "either Epicurus does not know what pleasure is, or the rest of mankind all the world over do not." "How so?" he asked. "Because the universal opinion is that pleasure is a sensation actively stimulating the percipient sense and diffusing over it a certain agreeable feeling." "What then?" he replied; "does not Epicurus recognize pleasure in your sense?" "Not always," said I; "now and then, I admit, he recognizes it only too fully; for he solemnly avows that he cannot even understand what Good there can be or where it can be found, apart from that which is derived from food and drink, the delight of the ears, and the grosser forms of gratification.....

"Do you remember, then," I said, "what Hieronymus of Rhodes pronounces to be the Chief Good, the standard as he conceives it to which all other things should be referred?" "I remember," said he, "that he considers the End to be freedom from pain." "Well," said I, "what is the same philosopher's view about pleasure?" "He thinks that pleasure is not desirable in itself." "Then in his opinion to feel pleasure is a different thing from not feeling pain?" "Yes," he said, "and there he is seriously mistaken, since, as I have just shown, the complete removal of pain is the limit of the increase of pleasure." "Oh," I said, "as for the formula 'freedom from pain,' I will consider its meaning later on; but unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same as 'pleasure.'"

And later in Book 2, Cicero summarizes his argument this way: ""If pain is an evil, to be without this evil is not enough to constitute the Good Life."

Is Cicero right or wrong? On this last question, I think most people will agree with Cicero. I agree with him myself! If we can't articulate a convincing response to Cicero's criticisms - and a better one than Torquatus offered in the passages that followed - then we haven't begun to understand Epicurean philosophy. And if so, then our arguments don't deserve to be any better respected than those of Torquatus - a version of Epicurus painted by the hand of Cicero for the purpose of knocking them down.

Anyone want to take a hand at answering this first criticism of Cicero?