

Practical exercises: PD4

Post by “Godfrey” of July 13, 2021 at 8:06 PM

Quote

*PD3: “The removal of all pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, pain or distress or their combination is absent. **PD4: Pain does not last continuously in the flesh: when acute it is there for a very short time, while the pain which just exceeds the pleasure in the flesh does not persist for many days; and chronic illnesses contain an excess of pleasure in the flesh over pain.**” Long and Sedley translation*

Exercise: focus on pleasurable sensations, thoughts, feelings and actions and, later, think about what happened to your mental and physical pains.

Notes: Quote from [Don](#) from ([RE: Practical exercises: PD2](#) “I sometimes have a hard time accepting PD4. Theoretically, yes. Practically? I reach for Tylenol when I have a headache! A chronic, painful condition? That's going to be hard... But maybe PD4 gives us a goal?”

For me, PD4 becomes clearer when not separated from PD3. In this context, I think it's appropriate to use the same exercise for both PD3 and PD4 as they are basically two sides of the same coin.

From Cicero's On Ends, 1.37-39 (with omissions): “Thus when hunger and thirst have been removed by food and drink, the mere withdrawal of distress brings pleasure forth as its consequence. So quite generally the removal of pain causes pleasure to take its place. (7) Hence Epicurus did not accept the existence of anything in between pleasure and pain. What some people regarded as in between – the complete absence of pain – was not only pleasure but also the greatest pleasure. For anyone aware of his own condition must either have pleasure or pain. Epicurus, moreover, supposes that complete absence of pain marks the limit of the greatest pleasure, so that thereafter pleasure can be varied and differentiated but not increased and expanded.” Long and Sedley translation, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* p. 174-5.

Is the act of eating a pleasure or a removal of a pain? As far as I can see it doesn't matter, since the two are the same. In answer to Don's question above, PD4 isn't saying “don't reach for that Tylenol!” Ingesting that Tylenol is going to lead to a pleasure, and likewise a removal of a pain. So is bringing to mind pleasant memories, enjoying some music or a spectacular sunset. More important than whether something is a pleasure or removal of a pain, at least for me, is “being aware of your own condition.” That way, you can make choices and avoidances proper to your specific situation. The exercise I'm proposing here and for PD3 is simply one method of

practicing this awareness of your own condition.

Also regarding Don's question: I think that PD3 is actually what represents a (the!) goal, not PD4. Practically speaking, I think that we pursue pleasure in the realm of individual, sequential choices and avoidances and that PD4 is addressing this while the removal of all pain in PD3 is a pleasantly abstract ideal. This jumps out to me (maybe erroneously?) when the two PDs are combined. More challenging for me is "*Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, pain or distress or their combination is absent.*" That's something else to examine empirically in this exercise.

Post by "Don" of July 13, 2021 at 9:56 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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It is important to remember that there are no numbers in Diogenes Laertius' section containing the [Principal Doctrines](#). That numbering is only convention.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Practically speaking, I think that we pursue pleasure in the realm of individual, sequential choices and avoidances and that PD4 is addressing this while the removal of all pain in PD3 is a pleasantly abstract ideal.

Just be careful using those last two words. 😊 There's some round these parts with a strong reaction to the phrase "abstract ideal." But I think I know where you're coming from.

Food for thought! Thanks!

Post by "Godfrey" of July 14, 2021 at 1:14 AM

Oops! Let's say "distant goal" instead of "abstract ideal" 😬

[Quote from Don](#)

It is important to remember that there are no numbers in Diogenes Laertius' section containing the [Principal Doctrines](#). That numbering is only convention.

Exactly! 👍

Post by “Cassius” of July 14, 2021 at 3:16 AM

I might be comfortable with "theoretical limit" in place of "abstract ideal.". Of those two words "ideal" seems to me to be ok - it is the "abstract" that tends to imply that the thing being discussed is set apart from reality and impossible by definition to obtain.

What makes absence of pain so difficult is more a practical difficulty of obtaining and maintaining that status. But some of us surely come closer than others, and the possibility that under some conditions all obstacles might be overcome seems to be one of the conceptual or preconceptual attributes of what we would identify as godlike.

Maybe this would be a variation of the cliché about not letting the "perfect" get in the way of the "good.". Just because we know at the start that we are unlikely to succeed in sustaining continual pure pleasure with no mixture of pain does not mean that we should not set that mentally as our view of the goal.

Post by “Don” of July 14, 2021 at 7:24 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What makes absence of pain so difficult is more a practical difficulty of obtaining and maintaining that status. But some of us surely come closer than others, and the possibility that under some conditions all obstacles might be overcome seems to be one of the conceptual or preconceptual attributes of what we would identify as godlike.

Exactly. That's one of my arguments for the idealist model of the gods. They don't/can't exist as physical entities but do exist as concepts of a perfect life, totally free from pain, totally imbued with unshakable pleasure. That can't exist in the physical world. There will **always** be blows in the real world if only by chance and not choice.

Post by “Cassius” of July 14, 2021 at 1:42 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

They don't/can't exist as physical entities

[Quote from Don](#)

That can't exist in the physical world.

I think that Epicurus would qualify both of those statements by adding the words ...HERE IN THIS WORLD to the end of them.

That seems to me to be the reasoning involved in placing them in the "intermundia" where either (1) the environment is by nature fully supportive and not harmful to them or (2) the gods by some technology or system are able to control their environment with the same result.

Maybe that might appear to some of us as a rationalization merging into pure idealism, but I also think that Epicurus thought his physics of the infinite/eternal universe populated with many forms of life, and the theory of isonomia described in Cicero's "On the nature of the gods," impel the same conclusion in reality.

Quote

“These discoveries of Epicurus are so acute in themselves and so subtly expressed that not everyone would be capable of appreciating them. Still I may rely on your intelligence, and make my exposition briefer than the subject demands. Epicurus then, as he not merely discerns abstruse and recondite things with his mind's eye, but handles them as tangible realities, teaches that the substance and nature of the gods is such that, in the first place, it is perceived not by the senses but by the mind, and not materially or individually, like the solid objects which Epicurus in virtue of their substantiality entitles *steremnia*; but by our perceiving images owing to their similarity and succession, because an endless train of precisely similar images arises from the innumerable atoms and streams towards the gods, our mind with the keenest feelings of pleasure fixes its gaze on these images, and so attains an understanding of the nature of a being both blessed and eternal.

Moreover there is the supremely potent principle of infinity, which claims the closest and most careful study; we must understand that it has in the sum of things everything

has its exact match and counterpart. This property is termed by Epicurus isonomia, or the principle of uniform distribution. From this principle it follows that if the whole number of mortals be so many, there must exist no less a number of immortals, and if the causes of destruction are beyond count, the causes of conservation also are bound to be infinite.

Post by “Don” of July 14, 2021 at 6:00 PM

Not sure who's seen this, but here is Long and Sedley's notes on the gods in their *The Hellenistic Philosophers*.

Post by “Don” of July 15, 2021 at 10:25 AM

At some point, I'll try and go through and give the citations for the E7, 15F, etc. Those are primarily ancient text references that I can simply provide the citations for. I don't feel I can copy and share that entire section but I felt sharing the 5 pages was well within copyright bounds.

That being said, I find Long and Sedley's interpretation to be sophisticated, intellectually satisfying, well within Epicurus's overall philosophy, and practical.