

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?

Post by “Maciej” of February 3, 2018 at 2:04 AM

I agree that to be without pain is enough to constitute good life. Because:

Quote

"Our every action is done so that we will not be in pain or fear. As soon as we achieve this, the soul is released from every storm, since a living being has no other need and must seek nothing else to complete the goodness of body and soul. Thus we need pleasure only when we are in pain caused by its absence; but when we are not in pain then we have no need of pleasure."

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2018 at 4:04 AM

OK you have quoted a section of the letter to Menoecus. And you are saying that not only is "freedom from pain" a good life, it is the best possible life.

What does it mean to you? What does the normal person interpret this to mean? How are you actually spending your time?

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2018 at 6:04 AM

Just to continue while I am thinking about it, I perceive you embrace this formulation because you are OK that what it really means is "when I am without pain I need no more pleasure because I am already in the highest state of pleasure possible" --- and so you interpret this passage as a full and complete endorsement of pleasure as the goal of life, Correct?

Post by “Maciej” of February 3, 2018 at 12:31 PM

What does the freedom from pain means? Cassius everyone who have ever had a toothache knows what freedom from pain means if he understands relation between words and meaning that underlie them.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2018 at 12:37 PM

Why don't you explain it to me, Maciej? My teeth that are not in pain do not produce to me any feeling at all. And when a toothache is heeled, I can say that I feel better than I did before in total, but the tooth that is no longer hurting produces no sensation to me at all. Is "no sensation to me at all" the highest pleasure?

Post by “Maciej” of February 3, 2018 at 1:04 PM

If you recollect the moment when it was in pain and compare to the moment when it was absent then you cannot say that latter is not better than the former. You said that yourself that it is better. This feeling better is your sensation. Recollection of past sensation is sensation as well as far as mind is concerned.

Now when your teeth are not aching you can eat an apple or drink cold water. Or just meditate on the fact that they are in their present state. Pleasure can vary in kind but not in intensity or degree.

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2018 at 1:23 PM

I don't dispute that comparing the change in condition constitutes a pleasure. But the tooth has no memory, and I think the pleasure comes from comparing the two conditions, which is an active motion of my mind, and is just one of many pleasures my mind is capable of generating. The healthful functioning of any part of the body ****can**** certainly be pleasurable, such as my tongue generates when eating, but the healthful functioning of my toe in most cases gives me

no sensation at all. If I choose to think about my health, and relish it, that is an active motion of my mind in actively generating a pleasing thought, just like my mind can actively generate all kinds of pleasurable emotions which are positive pleasures. The active functioning of my mind is not "absence of" anything. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of February 3, 2018 at 1:31 PM

Maceij I have no idea what your personal circumstances are and how much time you have to devote to these conversations, but as far as I am aware the most well-developed and well-researched statement of the opinions I am inarticulately arguing is Chapter 19 of Gosling & Taylor's "The Greeks on Pleasure." If you do not have a copy of that, check [here](#). And if you ever have time to read it and comment, I am sure your thoughts on it would be very instructive to me, even if you do not agree with it.

Post by “Maciej” of February 3, 2018 at 2:06 PM

The active functioning of mind focusing on not being in pain certainly can be described as absence of pain.

Gosling and Taylor are on my reading list. But now I am delighted in reading Polish translation of Logic by Gassendi. And next will be Life and Doctrine of Epicurus by the same author.