

Tips On Offsetting Pleasures Against Pains

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2023 at 8:27 AM

We've discussed this many times before, but it seems to me today that this is worth emphasizing, and maybe having a thread on "Tips on offsetting pleasures against pains."

On Epicurus' last day, when he was experiencing sharp bodily pain from his kidneys, it was "the joy in his heart" that he stated he was offsetting against that pain.

Quote from Epicurus Letter to Idomeneus

[22] When he was on the point of death he wrote the following letter to Idomeneus: 'On this truly happy day of my life, as I am at the point of death, I write this to you. The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you. Do you, as I might expect from your devotion from boyhood to me and to philosophy, take good care of the children of Metrodorus.' Such then was his will.

Under most interpretations of categorizing pleasures, "joy of heart" is considered to be an "active" or "kinetic" pleasure:

Quote from Diogenes Laertius

And Epicurus in the work on Choice speaks as follows: 'Freedom from trouble in the mind and from pain in the body are static pleasures, but Joy and exultation are considered as active pleasures involving motion. '

Go many places on the internet and in modern books and you'll find that they say that Epicurus held "static" or "katatestematic" pleasure to be the ultimate goal. But if we focus on what Epicurus himself did when the chips were down and he was in great pain and on the edge of death, it was the value of "active pleasures involving motion," even if only the active motion of his mind in summoning up the joy from memory, to which he looked for comfort in the face of the worst pains.

Epicurus didn't say to himself, as far as we know, "My kidney is in terrible shape, but boy my liver has no pain at all!" He didn't say, "My kidney is in terrible shape, but my mind is 'healthy.'" Both of those would be legitimate observations given the sweeping view of "pleasure" as Epicurus seems to have defined it, but it's worth noting which pleasures he picked out for comfort in that letter to Idomeneus.

So if we were to work on developing tips for what to look to in bad times, certainly "it is sweet" to look upon the troubles of others and see that you are not suffering from them," and that's a comfort to be taken in bad times too. But even there, does not that constitute a "motion" of the mind?

At any rate I think we can resolve all these questions in a very satisfactory way, but the next time we read someone saying that kinetic pleasures exist only for the sake of katatestematic ones, with the implication that we would be better off doing away with all "kinetics" whatsoever, I think we can look to the "Epicurus' last day" example for the very great value of "kinetic" pleasures.

Would we indeed find that it is not always, but frequently the kinetic pleasures to which we reach in making sure that we can find a predominance of pleasure over pain? Maybe it's possible to list out types of situations where looking to one type of pleasure is more useful than others, and that might be a handy way of sorting things out for future reference.

Note: There's some good material in [this thread](#), but it's less useful now as some key posts no longer there.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2023 at 9:48 AM

Katatestematic and "kinetic" pleasures are complementary. From my perspective, Epicurus was able to "offset" his physical pain with the "kinetic" pleasure of memories precisely because he had cultivated his katatestematic pleasure of a mind free from anxiety and trouble. If he had been worried about what happens after he dies, would the gods punish him for some transgression, would he become a shade in the underworld... He wouldn't have been able to find joy in memories of past times with friends. Likewise, he didn't - by definition almost - have aponia in his last days. His body was not free from pain or working effortlessly and without struggle or suffering (which I think is a better way to think of aponia rather than just "freedom from pain"), but he could still have ataraxia. Ataraxia and aponia do not arise together. You can have one without the other.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2023 at 10:02 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

From my perspective, Epicurus was able to "offset" his physical pain with the "kinetic" pleasure of memories precisely because he had cultivated his katastematic pleasure of a mind free from anxiety and trouble.

Can someone who fears the gods not also offset pleasure against physical pain?

[Quote from Don](#)

If he had been worried about what happens after he dies, would the gods punish him for some transgression, would he become a shade in the underworld... He wouldn't have been able to find joy in memories of past times with friends.

Basically I'd repeat the same question. Can't Catholics (to take one example) not find joy in memories of past times and friends? (I suspect @Eoghan will have a comment there! 😊)

[Quote from Don](#)

His body was not free from pain or working effortlessly and without struggle or suffering (which I think is a better way to think of aponia rather than just "freedom from pain"), but he could still have ataraxia. Ataraxia and aponia do not arise together. You can have one without the other.

I think this is an interesting discussion. I can see how it is possible to talk about "ataraxia" and "aponia" productively even without being an ancient Greek, but I can also see that these words can get in the way of a more practical understanding. Isn't the bottom line that life comes down to a practical combination of mental and physical pleasures and pains, and we all do our best from moment to moment to try to make sure the pleasures predominate over the pains?

If those words would appear to lead to the conclusion that Catholics can't experience joy in thinking about their friends, or that they can't otherwise offset pleasures against pains, then I would think many people would think such an argument would be contrary to common experience.

Now I think we all agree that such people won't be as fully successful in offsetting pleasures against pains, because they won't be able to completely get rid of fear of death or of the gods. But if that's the issue why don't we just say so in plain English?

[Again, the context here is to help with a practical view of how to offset pleasures against pains, as against those commentators who say that Epicurus held that "katastematic" pleasure is the real goal of life, the only kind of pleasure even worth having, and the very reason for which kinetic pleasures even exist.]

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2023 at 10:27 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Can't Catholics (to take one example) not find joy in memories of past times and friends?

If a Christian of any stripe is ****convinced**** in their bones that they'll be livin' with Jesus after they die (albeit erroneously, may I add), maybe we could describe them as being free from the anxiety of death.

Maybe I should extend my remarks and say that freedom from fear and anxiety and pleasurable memories of friends (to use two specific examples) are complementary and reinforcing but can also occur independently of each other.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2023 at 10:42 AM

Yes it seems I am always struggling with potential implications of "the perfect" being the enemy of "the good." If a particular phrasing seems to create the implication that only "the perfect" is good enough, then I think that such a construction almost has to be clarified, or explained, or even simply isn't an appropriate deduction to draw from what Epicurus was saying.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2023 at 1:22 PM

[Cassius](#) : I may be misinterpreting where you're going, and I think I agree with the direction I think you're headed. So, with those caveats, I'll add the following:

I agree it does no one any good to use jargon and technical terms (in this case, Ancient Greek words) in a context meant to be understandable by "the average person" who speaks/reads English in an attempt to explain ideas to them. Likewise, someone who wants to explain philosophical or scientific ideas should be able to do so at a number of levels, jargon-free and aimed at a particular audience. I'm thinking specifically of videos I've seen online like *The Flame Challenge* (explaining complex science to children, judged by children: [2014 Winner](#))

["What is Color?"](#)) or WIRED Magazine's ["Astrophysicist Explains Gravity in 5 Levels of Difficulty."](#) It's an application of the [Feynman Technique](#). Or as Kurt Vonnegut writes in *Cat's Cradle*: *Dr. Hoenikker used to say that any scientist who couldn't explain to an eight-year-old what he was doing was a charlatan.*

So, using words like *katastematic*, *ataraxia*, *prolepsis*, etc. can be a helpful shield in protecting someone who really doesn't understand - or **thinks** they understand - what those terms mean but knows how to bandy them around to sound erudite or at least make it sound like they know what they're talking about. Full disclosure: I ****firmly**** include myself in this camp from time to time. I **think** I know what they mean. BUT, if so, I should be able to explain them in "plain English."

One issue is that these terms are convenient shortcuts, both for good and for less good purposes. If I have to say every time "a mind free from anxiety and fear of the gods and death" versus "ataraxia," that eats up a lot more words. And is "a mind free from anxiety and fear of the gods and death" really enough? Maybe I need to include "fear from anxiety about what happens after you die as well as fear of the gods retribution after you die as well as anxiety about fate and destiny and predestination and..." Or just say "ataraxia." It's a powerful pull toward just **using** the word... but then we're back to square one. Same for *katastematic*. Same for *prolepsis*. Same for (fill in the blank).

That said, by only using regular English words, one obscures what the ancient writers are talking about. As an example, where translators may use happiness, well-being, joy, pleasure... you look at the ancient texts and lo and behold, it's the SAME word in all those places. Using regular English words can be as obfuscating to the meaning of the subject as using the Ancient Greek words.

Have I resolved anything? Of course not! 😊 But I think a case can be made for explaining topics jargon-free but also at some point, the actual Ancient Greek words have to be understood. They are a very convenient short-hand AFTER the topics are explained.

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2023 at 2:23 PM

Those are good points.

I do see two issues. There is the "foreign word" issue which adds to the complexity, but I am not sure that is really my number one concern. If the foreign word has a clear equivalent that might or might not resolve all the questions.

Rather than the issue being the exact term used, the thing that bothers me more is the implication that there is an "all or nothing" aspect to the discussion.

"Are there degrees of ataraxia and aponia?" Might be the same question.

I am thinking that real life is always a net sum of pleasures and pains, and -almost as with the issues of the gods- we have an "ideal goal" vs a "real thing" issue.

Is ataraxia and aponia and "highest good" something that is attainable in reality for any length of time? If so does a millisecond of doubt spoil the condition?

More so than rather we use Greek or English my question is - do these words indicate separate conditions in themselves, or do they represent ideal objectives which are important to consider (as with "the gods") but which in real life are lived one sum of pleasures and pains at a time?

Because if the answer is one sum of pleasures and pains at a time, then the use of the words clearly does not designate something unique that would be the focus of our primary concern - our primary concern always being simply states as the largest predominance of pleasures over pains.

Post by "Don" of November 28, 2023 at 3:04 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If the foreign word has a clear equivalent that might or might not resolve all the questions.

Ah! There's the rub. There can be more or less precise "equivalents" from one language to the other. Yes, a rose is a ῥόδον is a rosa... but even there, A ῥόδον usually referred to a [Rosa gallica](#) whereas when I think of a "rose" (in English) I'm most likely thinking [a red hybrid tea rose](#). Same with imagining "a cat in a hat." I'm going to imagine a much different image than if I read "a cattus in a pileus." So, of course, translation is possible. One just has to be wary.

But I digress, as I *think* I see more clearly where you're going now. That last post of yours helps a lot! Thanks!

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"Are there degrees of ataraxia and aponia?"

I would have to say, "Yes." If we look at Epicurus's definition of stable and active pleasures, he sort of implies that, from my perspective:

Epicurus in his work *On Choice* : "Ataraxia (Peace of mind) and aponia (freedom from effort or struggle in the our physical body) are pleasures are stable pleasures; khara (joy) and euphrosyne (delight) are seen to consist in motion by means of activity."

ὁ δ' Ἐπίκουρος ἐν τῷ *Περὶ αἰρέσεων*: "ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀταραξία καὶ ἀπονία καταστηματικά ἐῖσιν ἡδοναί: ἡ δὲ χαρὰ καὶ ἡ εὐφροσύνη κατὰ κίνησιν ἐνεργεῖα βλέπονται."

We are not constantly in a state of joy and delight. Those come and go through means of our own activities.

Ataraxia and aponia are more "stable" by definition (per Epicurus and the Epicureans) but they can obviously ebb and flow. Epicurus could in no way be described as being in a state of aponia during his final illness. He could barely move from the pain. Maybe when he was younger, he felt that state of aponia where his body worked effortlessly. He was "in the zone." Our bodies can be more or less prone to effortless movement and struggle. When we're not thinking about our bodies' and their pains and aches, then, I think, we can be said to be in a state described as aponia. That's going to come and go.

With ataraxia, I'm more inclined to say that that state of "peace of mind" is more long-lasting, maybe throughout one's life, once the anxiety and fears of gods, death, etc. are eradicated through reasoning through the physics and understanding the "way things are". I do think Epicurus can be said to have had a state of ataraxia, "peace of mind," during his final illness... and, in fact, this is exactly allowed what him to concentrate on his "active" pleasures of recalling pleasurable memories of time spent with his friends.

This may not be the mainstream academic opinion, but that's where I'm coming down... as of 3:03 pm on a Tuesday afternoon.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Is ataraxia and aponia and "highest good" something that is attainable in reality for any length of time?

Yes, to answer your question. For the reasons I shared above.

Post by "Don" of November 28, 2023 at 3:10 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"highest good"

The "highest good" is JUST pleasure. There's nothing mystical or woo-woo about the term "highest good." It's just "that to which everything else points" and "why we do what we do." "Attaining the highest good" makes it sound like some unattainable, woo-woo goal. Which is what some people want to make it mean. But that's not what it means.

[Joshua](#) 's "why" questions on the Hume posts over on the other thread seem applicable here. If you keep asking "Why do you do that?" the answer is going to be "because it's pleasurable." That's why it's the "highest" or last good standing.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2023 at 3:22 PM

Good points.

It's the regular equation of freedom from pain as "not only" the same thing as "pleasure" but relating it to "the most intense pleasure possible" that I think causes the most potential for confusion.

Quote

Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be." ... Cicero: Still, granting that there is nothing better (that point I waive for the moment), surely it does not therefore follow that what I may call the negation of pain is the same thing as pleasure?" Torquatus: "Absolutely the same, indeed the negation of pain is a very intense pleasure, the most intense pleasure possible." Cicero - "On Ends" Book 2:iii:9 and 2:iii:11 (Rackham)

I don't see this as something that Cicero has manufactured to be confusing, and I see it has inherent in a superficial reading of the Letter to Menoecus, which is why I am fixated upon it.

If we were to say "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain" then a strictly literal reading of that sentence leads to "you can't have pleasure until pain is totally absent" and that leads to the creation of "absence of pain" as some kind of highly unusual state that is divorced from

standard reality.

Seems to me that potential ambiguity in the presentation is what Cicero is picking up and running with for all he is worth.

I think it's reconcilable and explainable, but takes effort beyond just reading that passage from Menoeceus over and over.

In English "pleasure" can go up and down in intensity, duration, location (at least).

To say that "absence of pain" is "the same as" pleasure" would imply that it too can go up and down.

But to then state that "absence of pain" is "the highest" or "most intense" pleasure indicates that it is at a fixed position (at least to my way of reading).

It's not really any unusual use of the terminology by you Don that is causing me to think this can be made more clear, but dividing up what are two apparently separate things (varying pleasure) and (pleasure at the highest notch) that I think needs to be made more clear.

I am presuming that the Epicureans saw this as one issue -- pleasure can vary, and can only go so high, but the same thing is being measured all the way up and down the scale.

Uses of these terms "ataraxia," "aponia," "highest good" etc would seem to imply that there is something different at that top notch location.

I do NOT think Epicurus saw anything uniquely different about the top notch vs the lower readings (especially for example 99.9%) but using the terms loosely can be read to imply to casual readers that you don't have anything unless you're at 100%.

It's that issue -- that you want the highest but will take what you can get - that I sense needs to be made more clear in order for the terminology and the system to be made as clear as possible.

Post by "Eikadistes" of November 28, 2023 at 4:05 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If a Christian of any stripe is ****convinced**** in their bones that they'll be livin' with Jesus after they die (albeit erroneously, may I add), maybe we could describe them as being free from the anxiety of death.

The placebo effect is a measurably powerful phenomena that can be exploited as an emotional tool. I often reflect on a study from Cornell University (2019) that compared a group of mentally healthy participants with a group of people suffering from depressive disorders. They all played a card game that was completely fixed, and then their responses to "How much control they personally reported" were measured. In general, the healthy, optimistic crowd assessed their *victories* as being the consequence of good decision making, and their *failures* to be the inevitable result of occasional misfortune. On the other hand, the depressed group, who were genuinely sick, saw right through the ruse: the game was fixed. They knew that they had absolutely no control over the outcome, and were therefore able to see through the conditions of the experiment. [<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/07/190717230341.htm>]

Since we're not being controlled by extra-dimensional scientists, this isn't a great analogy (just something I think about from time to time). Ultimately, I think optimism is equal parts healthy, effective, and delusional. I think this is why Epicurus recommends a form of prayer, but only on the condition that the practitioner understands that god is not listening, and that wishes cannot be reliably fulfilled with choosing to further one's personal accomplishments.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2023 at 5:40 PM

As a curiosity, I wanted to see how Yonge translated that section of On Ends:

Quote from Cicero, On Ends: 2.3.9 & 2.4.11

but unless you are very obstinate, you must admit that pleasure is a perfectly distinct thing from mere freedom from pain. You will, however, said [Torquatus], find that I am obstinate in this; for nothing can be more real than the identity between the two. ...

IV. Is it possible, said [Torquatus], for anything to be more delightful than freedom from pain? Well, said [Cicero], but grant that nothing is preferable to that, (for that is not the point which I am inquiring about at present,) does it follow on that account, that pleasure is identical with what I may call painlessness? Undoubtedly it is identical with it, said [Torquatus]; and that painlessness is the greatest of pleasures which no other can possibly exceed.

For the heck of it and easy reference, here's the Latin:

Quote

[3.9] Negat esse eam, inquit, propter se expetendam.

Aliud igitur esse censet gaudere, aliud non dolere.

Et quidem, inquit, vehementer errat; nam, ut paulo ante¹ docui, augendae voluptatis finis est doloris omnis amotio.

Non dolere, inquam, istud quam vim habeat postea videro; aliam vero vim voluptatis esse, aliam nihil dolendi, nisi valde pertinax fueris, concedas necesse est.

Atqui reperies, inquit, in hoc quidem pertinacem; dici enim nihil potest verius.

Estne, quaeso, inquam, sitiendi in bibendo voluptas?

Quis istud possit, inquit, negare?

Eademne, quae restincta siti?

Immo alio genere; restincta enim sitis³ stabilitatem voluptatis habet, inquit,⁴ illa autem voluptas ipsius restinctionis in motu est.

Cur igitur, inquam, res tam dissimiles eodem nomine appellas?

Quid paulo ante, inquit, dixerim nonne meministi, cum omnis dolor detractus esset, variari, non augeri voluptatem? ...

[4.11] Immo sit sane nihil melius, inquam—nondum enim id quaero—, num propterea idem voluptas est, quod, ut ita dicam, indolentia?

Plane idem, inquit, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest.

Quid dubitas igitur, inquam, summo bono a te ita constituto, ut id totum in non dolendo sit, id tenere unum, id tueri, id defendere?

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So, Cicero asks "num propterea idem voluptas est ut ita indolentia?" "Is pleasure (voluptas) the same as "freedom from pain" (indolentia)?" Interestingly enough, indolentia, according to Lewis & Short (*the* Latin dictionary) is a word coined by Cicero! So, Cicero is literally putting words in Torquatus's mouth. And "Torquatus" then agrees that they are the same: Plane idem, inquit, et maxima quidem, qua fieri nulla maior potest. "Plainly the same, says he, and indeed the greatest, than which no greater can be done."

Again, I have to stress that Cicero is making Torquatus say what Cicero wants him to say. Cicero may be a d*ck, but he's a very intelligent, crafty, talented d*ck.

I *think* freedom from pain is usually aponia (ἀπονία) or some form of that or algos (ἄλγος).

ἀπονία is a "not/un-" + ponos

Ponos has a wider meaning than just "pain": stress, trouble, distress, suffering; hard work, toil; pain, esp. physical.

So, to me "aponia" goes beyond a surface reading of "freedom from pain" as I mentioned previously. It's freedom from exertion, toil, suffering, in body and maybe even in mind. That suffering part is important to me. We can experience pain without necessarily layering on suffering.

Algos encompasses "pain (of either mind or body), sorrow, trouble, grief, distress, woe."

So, when we see "freedom from pain" translated from Greek texts, it is an all encompassing idea of freedom from exertion, sorrow, trouble, suffering, distress.

Cicero creates a new word "indolentia" and make it mean "freedom from pain, insensibility" from which we get "indolence" which used to mean "A state in which one feels no pain or is indifferent to it; a lack of any feeling." Then he has his Torquatus agree that pleasure is equated with painless indifference or lack of feeling. By definition, that's NOT an Epicurean equivalence... By definition "freedom of pain" is the feeling of pleasure.

This post has gotten a little long... let me stop here. regroup, read the rest of Cassius's post and Nate's and then ...I'll probably have more to say! 😊

Post by "Don" of November 28, 2023 at 6:09 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

In English "pleasure" can go up and down in intensity, duration, location (at least).

To say that "absence of pain" is "the same as" pleasure" would imply that it too can go up and down.

Agreed. And that's implied in the Epicurean texts since:

PD3: The limit of pleasure (hedone) is the removal of all pains (algos). Wherever and for however long pleasure (hedone) is present, there is neither "algos" nor "lupe."

I'm purposefully leaving those Greek words to express the all-encompassing nature:

algos: "pain (of either mind or body), sorrow, trouble, grief, distress, woe."

lupe: "grief, sadness; pain (of mind or body), suffering, affliction, distress"

But PD3 implies that both pleasure and pain "go up and down," to the limit where all distress, trouble, grief, sadness, suffering has been eliminated in both body and mind. And it is the "limit" of pleasure! Which, again, implies there's pleasure all along the spectrum, from being completely overcome by suffering and pain to being completely filled with nothing but pleasure.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But to then state that "absence of pain" is "the highest" or "most intense" pleasure indicates that it is at a fixed position (at least to my way of reading).

The total absence of pain *is* the "highest" limit of pleasure. That's by definition. No pain = maximum pleasure. Yonge has "Torquatus" say "painlessness is the greatest of pleasures which no other can possibly exceed." Which is Cicero's clever wordplay as far as I'm concerned using his new word. But "absence of all pain" is the "greatest" of pleasure simply because there is no more room for pain to exist, pleasure has completely filled the cup to the brim. That's why pleasure, when pain is gone, can only be varied.

That "highest notch" you refer to is just "the limit of pleasure" = "total absence of pain." It's not a special state, just the brim of the cup.

In reading (and re-reading and re-reading and..) that quote from Epicurus's *On Choice*, I don't necessarily think ataraxia and aponia are being given special status. The only "special" status given to the stable pleasures of "peace of mind" and "freedom from exertion" are that we just experience them. We don't have to "do" anything to experience the pleasure of them. We just have to notice that they're there. There a state of being, not a thing you do.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

It's that issue -- that you want the highest but will take what you can get - that I sense needs to be made more clear in order for the terminology and the system to be made as clear as possible.

Fair enough. Maybe that's why the "gods" are held up as an archetype or paragon of what that limit of pleasure, that total absence of pain, suffering, and exertion could look like. We mortals can never attain that. Epicurus certainly didn't experience that! He suffered physical pain and suffered, but he knew how to "play the game" (for lack of a better way of putting it) to fill his cup with the most amount of pleasure, both in his stable anxiety-free mind and in his choice of what active pleasures to pursue and which to reject.

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2023 at 6:18 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

So, Cicero asks "num propterea idem voluptas est ut ita indolentia?" "Is pleasure (voluptas) the same as "freedom from pain" (indolentia)?" Interestingly enough, indolentia, according to Lewis & Short (*the* Latin dictionary) is a word coined by Cicero!

If I recall correctly Thomas Jefferson picked up that line and put it in his outline:

Yep:

Syllabus of the doctrines of Epicurus.
Physical The universe eternal.

M. J. J. J. J.

its parts, great & small, interchangeable.

Matter and Void alone.

Motion inherent in matter, which is weighty & declining.
eternal circulation of the elements of bodies.

Gods, an order of beings next superior to man.

enjoying in their sphere, their own felicities;

but not meddling with the concerns of the scale of beings below them.

Moral Happiness the aim of life.

Virtue the foundation of happiness;

Utility the test of virtue.

Pleasure active and In-dolent.

In-dolence is the absence of pain, the true felicity.

Active, consists in agreeable motion

it is not happiness, but the means to produce it.

thus the absence of hunger is an article of felicity; eating the means to obtain it.

The *Summum bonum* is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind

i.e. In-dolence of body, tranquility of mind.

to procure tranquility of mind we must avoid desire & fear, the two
principal diseases of the mind.

Man is a free agent.

Virtue consists in 1. Prudence. 2. Temperance. 3. Fortitude. 4. Justice.

Each has an opposite 1. Folly. 2. Desire. 3. Fear. 4. Deceit.

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2023 at 6:30 PM

I am more in the middle of thinking than I am stating any conclusions, but while I am more convinced than ever that it is very appropriate in Epicurean terms to say things like:

"Absence of pain" means "pleasure."

"Absence of pain" is an identical term with "pleasure."

"Total absence of pain is the highest pleasure."

If someone tells me they are feeling no pain, either in some part of their body or in the sum of their experience, I can reply to them that they are feeling the purest and most intense pleasure, either in that part of their body or in the sum of their experience (respectively).

I am also more sure than ever that stating these things to the "average person" -- without some very elaborate explanation - is almost inevitably going to result in bewilderment, misunderstanding, shock, rejection, or some combination of them all.

And I think that my last sentence there was only slightly less true in 300 BC Athens or 50 BC Rome than in 2023 in any advanced modern country (it's going to be worse in the "less advanced" parts).

So what were the Epicureans in 300 BC Athens or 50 BC Rome doing to bridge that gap between in speaking to non-Epicureans.

Does the Torquatus presentation represent the latest in advancement up to that time?

Is the Torquatus presentation consistent with Lucretius' presentation, or are there any contradictions (I don't really think there are any), but if there were how would that reflect on what the "state of the art" was in 50 BC?

My personal view is that the words Cicero gave to Torquatus are not warped or misrepresentative in themselves, but they are missing this ****additional**** explanation which is necessary.

What does all this say about how modern Epicureans should approach this problem, because if anything the misunderstandings are getting worse rather than better. At least in 50 BC it looks like the Epicureans were in fact making broad inroads into the "regular people" world. I don't think they could have done so if they didn't have these "additional explanations" that we are talking about in threads like this one.

Post by "Cassius" of November 28, 2023 at 6:32 PM

And of course trying to use "indolence" as part of the explanation probably just points out how bad the problem is.

Like Don, Jefferson's probably finding Cicero's word choice interesting, but no one in 2000 years has probably found the word "indolence" remotely attractive.

Of course maybe it had much different connotations in 50 BC.

To say that Cicero "coined" it probably needs to be hedged that maybe he picked it up from the Epicureans and we simply don't know who first started it, but in the "surviving" literature all we have to go on is Cicero.

Post by "Pacatus" of November 28, 2023 at 6:34 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

The placebo effect is a measurably powerful phenomena that can be exploited as an emotional tool.

Yes the placebo effect can be powerful, and often works therapeutically. The trick may be then to convince the patient that the placebo was effective just because of their own psychi-somatic connections, and to help them (e.g. via counseling/therapy) to access those connections.

+++++

An old joke:

A patient returns to the doctor to request a refill on his prescription -

The doctor says: "Well, I have to tell you - what I prescribed in your case was just a placebo."

Patient: "Does that mean you won't refill the prescription?"

Doctor: "You do understand what a placebo is, don't you?" 🤔

Patient: "Yes, I do. But they work, and I need the prescription refilled ..." 😬 😄

Post by "Don" of November 28, 2023 at 7:10 PM

It could be instructive to see how modern neuroscience explains the pleasure/displeasure aspect of affect. Because it seems to me that's what we're trying to communicate here.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 28, 2023 at 7:27 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

It could be instructive to see how modern neuroscience explains the pleasure/displeasure aspect of affect.

Just from recall, but -- although himself not an expert in the field -- I think Haris Dimitriadis delved into that stuff quite a bit ...

Post by “Cassius” of November 28, 2023 at 7:52 PM

Here's another way of looking at this too:

I strongly suspect that almost all of our regular posters here on this forum are approaching Epicurus in about the same common-sense way:

We are doing what we can to maximize pleasures of all kinds, and we are doing what we can to minimize pains of all kinds, and we're trying to go about it prudently including analyzing what we spend our time on and what we set as our goals. And we don't worry about life after death because we're convinced there is none. We don't worry about fearing or pleasing "gods" because either they don't exist at all, or they exist and look at us (if at all) like we look at ants, or some combination of the two. We don't really worry past a certain age that we haven't lived long enough, because we begin to see that it truly is just variation of what we've seen before, and as our bodies and minds naturally age we get more tired and less in need of newness in general.

I strongly suspect that the ancient Epicureans were doing the same thing.

The more academic and complicated definitions and arguments are useful for keeping our minds sharp and giving us confidence that we are on the right path -- that we don't have to doubt that what we're doing is all wrong from beginning to end.

So if we're all doing it about the same, as I think we are, what is the issue? I think "the issue" is that the way Epicurean philosophy has come to be viewed that you don't get from the starting point to where we are as easily as you should, because the standard interpretation of the letter to Menoeceus in particular has warped it into a manifesto of Stoic/Buddhist/Ascetic Minimalism. I think I can say that "we" aren't in danger of that kind of interpretation, anymore for a variety of reasons, but not everyone can take the time to read through all the discussions we have to find out that that "standard" interpretations are grossly oversimplified.

Over at Facebook (I don't think I mentioned this) someone recently posted that they wished that some "scholar" would go through and produce an easy-to-understand paraphrase of the [Principal Doctrines](#) and use it to print a pamphlet.

That has probably been done already, and there are many ways to do it, but the interesting thing to me is that as far as they go, it's not like the [Principal Doctrines](#) need to be "simplified." The language in them now is already direct. The issue is more that the Doctrines are presuming an Epicurean understanding of so many key terms and concepts, and without that background understanding the simple words are generally taken to mean something much different than intended. It's not "simplification" of wording that is needed, it's more "additional" wording that explains the use of the terms.

Improving the roadway from the starting point of the Letter to Menoeceus and the Principal Doctrine to where most of us are now through regular study and reading is what I think is so important. Because when these issues become second nature and fade into the background it becomes much easier to simply and practically focus on achieving a predominance of pleasures over pains.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2023 at 11:24 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

We are doing what we can to maximize pleasures of all kinds, and we are doing what we can to minimized pleasures of all kinds,

...minimize pains of all kinds...right? 😊

I agree with everything you wrote in post no. 20, [Cassius](#) . Well put.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

The issue is more that the Doctrines are presuming an Epicurean understanding of so many key terms and concepts, and without that background understanding the simple words are generally taken to mean something much different than intended. It's not "simplification" of wording that is needed, it's more "additional" wording that explains the use of the terms.

Agreed. On that note, it's important to emphasize that all the epitomes, letters, Principle Doctrines, even *The Sayings of Epicurus* contained in the Vatican manuscript are summaries of voluminous teachings of the Epicurean school. They were literally - even explicitly, in the case of the letters - designed to remind the student of the larger body of teachings. They weren't an end in and of themselves. They were a useful means to an end. Even the Tetrapharmakos itself *needs* the full context of *all* the teachings and is meant as a memory aid not as an evangelism tool. So, "simplifying" them further is pointless if the wider doctrines and teachings aren't being pointed back to. If you try to use a summary to remind you of the content of just a larger summary, you're missing the reason for the initial summary in the first place.

As for evangelism and "spreading the word," we have Cicero complaining that the common people understood Epicurus's philosophy enough to be considered (by him, at least) members of the school. At it's most basic, Epicurean philosophy IS easy to understand. Let me take a stab:

1. Pleasure feels good. Pain feels bad.
2. Some pleasurable activities lead to pain.
3. Use your judgement to do more activities that bring long-term pleasure and avoid pain.
4. Take a second when you're just feeling good to notice that it feels good. You're not worried (at the moment). Your body feels good, too. That's what we mean by pleasure, too!
5. Make some friends to help you make better choices.
6. Don't worry about life after death, because you're not going to be aware that you don't exist!
7. Don't worry about being "in the hands of an angry god," because there's no reason any gods should concern themselves with you.
 1. Stick around to learn more about those last two if you want. For now, trust that we have good reasons to say them!

You can spend a lifetime (however long that is) studying, learning, discussing, internalizing the finer points; but those seven basics might be why Cicero was so angry about the hoi polloi being Epicureans. It's not that hard to "get started." And, no, I didn't mention physics, nor the details of how to choose and reject, nor a myriad of other things. But agreeing with those seven things doesn't seem a bad place to start for someone, in my opinion.

Post by “Don” of November 28, 2023 at 11:51 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If I recall correctly Thomas Jefferson picked up that line and put it in his outline:

That was an incredible display of recall, [Cassius](#) . Well done!!

I was curious to check out the *Oxford English Dictionary* to see what definition Jefferson would have been working with (as well as maybe those translators):

From 1603-1723: † Insensibility or indifference to pain; want of feeling. *Obsolete*.

From 1656-1751: Freedom from pain; a state of rest or ease, in which neither pain nor pleasure is felt. *Obsolete*.

Quotations (This definition actually uses quotes about Epicurus):

1656

Indolence, which Epicure held, they esteem not pleasure, nor want of pleasure,..for Indolence is like the state of a sleeping man. (T. Stanley, History of Philosophy vol. II. iv. facing p. 5)

1702

D'you know, said I, what Hieronymus Rhodius has allotted for the Summum Bonum? I know, said Torquatus, he resolves it into Nihil dolere, Mere Indolence. (S. Parker, translation of Cicero, Five Books De Finibus ii. 56)

1713

I cou'd rather call it an Indolence. It seems to be nothing more than a Privation of both Pain and Pleasure. (G. Berkeley, Three Dialogues Hylas & Philonous i. 14)

1751

That tranquility of mind, and indolence of body which he made his chief ends. (Earl of Orrery, Remarks Swift (1752) 113)

From the Historical Thesaurus entries for this definition:

non-feelingness 1650 Absence of sensation.

indolence 1656–1751 Freedom from pain; a state of rest or ease, in which neither pain nor pleasure is felt. *Obsolete*.

dispassion 1690- Freedom from passion; dispassionateness; t̄apathy.

dryness 1748 figurative. Absence of emotion, feeling, or fervour; lack of cordiality; coldness of feeling; distance of manner.

dispassionateness 1842- A dispassionate condition or quality.

passionlessness 1867- The state or condition of being or appearing passionless.

emotionlessness 1873- The quality, state, or condition of being emotionless.

(My Note: Those all sound more Stoic than Epicurean!)

Finally, definition from 1710-

The disposition to avoid trouble; love of ease; laziness, slothfulness, sluggishness.

Post by “Godfrey” of November 29, 2023 at 12:45 AM

Quote from Cassius

"Total absence of pain is the highest pleasure."

"Total" seems like a good clarification here 👍

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of November 29, 2023 at 9:05 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Can't Catholics (to take one example) not find joy in memories of past times and friends?

If a Christian of any stripe is ****convinced**** in their bones that they'll be livin' with Jesus after they die (albeit erroneously, may I add), maybe we could describe them as being free from the anxiety of death.

I don't have much to add but just for the sake of it, Catholics can NEVER be free from anxiety of hell\god's punishment because it is sinful to have "absolute certainty" of your salvation and you may only have a "moral" (lol) certainty. If you read the lives of some saints a lot of them die thinking they committed the sin of presumption so even though they lived a monastery and lived a life of sanctifying grace, they still die with anxiety of death and punishment. Shaking my head vigorously as I type this.

Not to get into the fact that Catholics saints caution against having "particular" friendships, so I don't even think they could think of happy times...also finding joy in anything except for the sake of God is imperfect.

Of course today most Catholics are cultural, they do the ceremonies and go to mass maybe at Christmas but don't allow the Church any hold over them...I think Epicurus or one of the Epicureans said to appear at the local religious festivities but you don't really have to believe...I could be misremembering. Anyway another Catholic rant, apologies. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of November 29, 2023 at 9:56 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

minimize pains of all kinds...right? 😊

Yes my typing remains terrible. Will fix.