The Meaning of the Greek Word "Aponia"

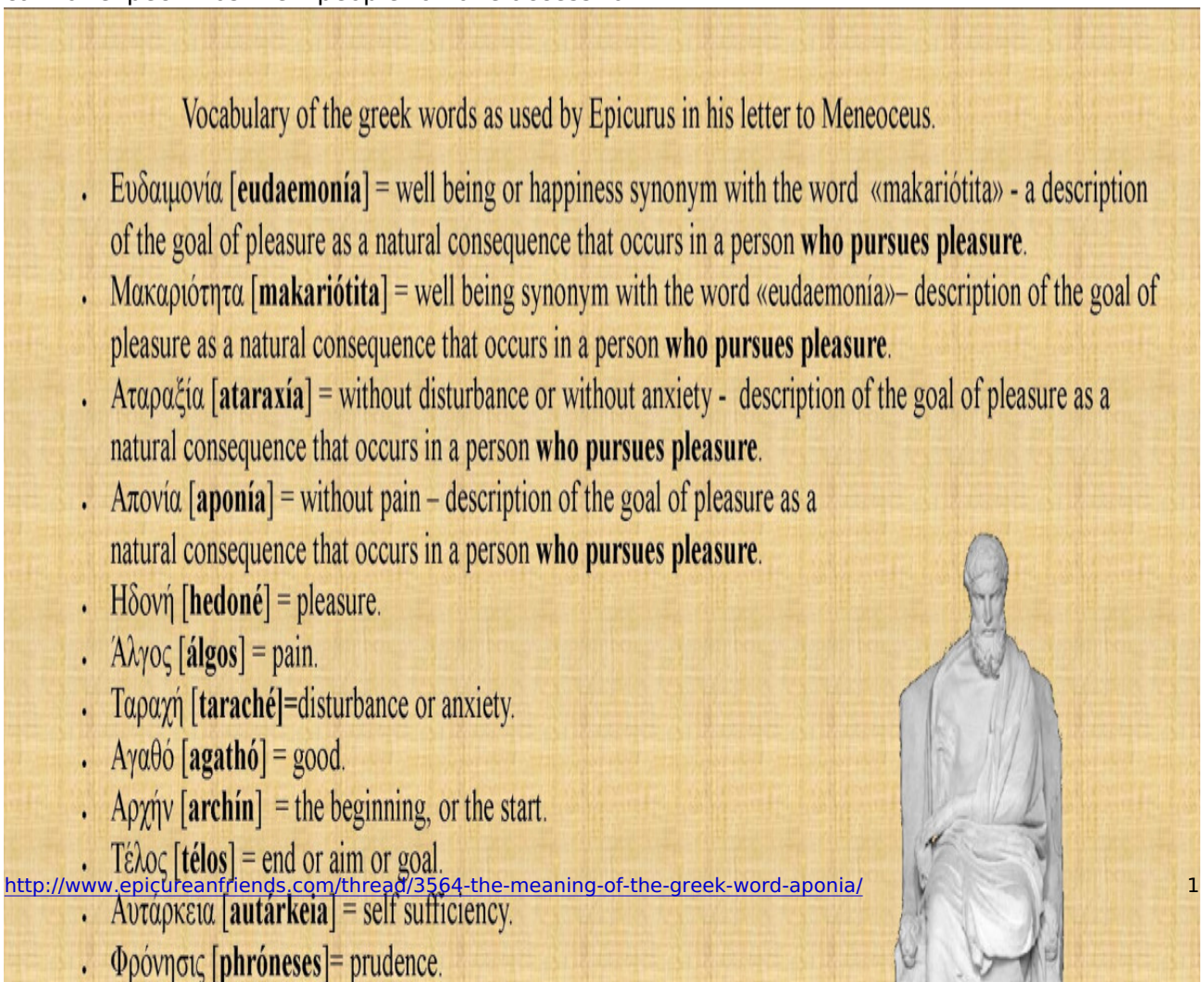
Post by “Cassius” of December 3, 2023 at 11:05 AM

"Aponia" is a key term in Epicurean philosophy. What exactly does it mean? There seems to be a consensus that it translates to "absence of pain," but is this a reference to bodily pain, to mental pain, to both, or with other connotations? This thread is for discussion of the meaning of "Aponia," including citations to reference where the term appears in Epicurean texts.

ἀπονία - Ancient Greek (LSJ)

ἡ, (ἄπονος)
A non-exertion, laziness, X.Cyr.2.2.25, Arist.Rh. 1370a14(pl.); exemption from toil, of women, Id.GA775a37, cf. Plu. Rom.6.
II freedom from pain, Epicur.Fr.2, Chrysipp.Stoic.3.33, Dsc.Eup.1.67, Aret.SA2.1, etc.

For the time being - Elli's vocabulary list -- which is excellent - but which unfortunately we cannot expect most new people to have access to:



Post by “Bryan” of December 3, 2023 at 8:20 PM

"Epicur.Fr.2" mentioned in the dictionary entry above is Usener Epicurea U2, which is the same as Diogenes Laertius 10.136 "Peace of mind and freedom from pain (ἀπονία) are pleasures which imply a state of rest..."

This is the only use I see in Diogenes Laertius book 10. Epicurus typically uses a construction with τὸ ἀλγοῦν (pain), for example "ἡ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος Ὑπεξαίρεσις - the Removal of all pain," "οὐκ ἔστι τὸ Ἀλγοῦν - there is no pain," (KD3)

Post by “Don” of December 3, 2023 at 10:43 PM

Uses of πόνος (or αλγος and related words)

VS4. Pain (algedon) is easily disdained; for a pain (ponoun) that causes intense suffering is brief, whereas a pain (ponon) that lingers in the flesh is weak and feeble.

πᾶσα ἀλγηδὼν εὐκαταφρόνητος· ἡ γὰρ σύντομον ἔχουσα τὸ πονοῦν σύντονον ἔχει τὸν χρόνον, ἡ δὲ χρονίζουσα περὶ τὴν σάρκα ἀβληχρὸν ἔχει τὸν πόνον.

VS457. Passion for true philosophy destroys every disturbing (epi+ponos > painful, toilsome, laborious) and troublesome desire.

ἔρωτι φιλοσοφίας ἀληθινῆς πᾶσα ταραχώδης καὶ ἐπίπονος ἐπιθυμία ἐκλύεται.

Philodemus

On Choices and Rejections (peri haireseon kai phygon)

[Column 4] [Epicurus teaches us that good is easy for us to procure] and that evil is [not] only limited by precisely because it is useless to have defined the good (τἀγαθόν), if it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to attain, nor to have fixed limits to evil, if it is difficult to bear because of its long duration. This knowledge has the effect of prohibiting both the pursuit of any [good] which is not by nature capable of eliminating pain (ἀλγηδόνα) - such are, most of the time, the [goods] which have motivated a search eager in humans -, and let none be discarded which does not prevent having pleasure -- that is how one must [conceive] most of [those which are

acquired] gradually.

Column 10: And the pain (λύπην > grief, sadness; pain of mind or body, suffering, distress; LSJ antonym = ἡδονή hedone!) that grips them at the idea of dying makes them irascible, never happy or in a good mood

Column 12: although they do not have the [fundamental ideas (ἀξιοῦμεν ὑπο[λή][ψ]εις)] that we are talking about. And what leads him instead to upright behavior are the laws, which brandish threats over his head: death, punishments of divine origin, as well as punishments (pains) considered very difficult to endure

πόνους ὡς δυσ[εκπο]νήτους) and deprivation of certain things which are said to be difficult to obtain.

Column 17: They are not ready, for insignificant gain, [both] to say goodbye to the only things that can give pleasures, and to bear pains (πόνους) in vain -- indeed, they also turn away entirely from philosophy, each saying: "Am I now going to start giving myself endless pain only to then get thrown like a disc halfway through?" -- even to share anything because, they believe, it is up to the immortals to do so, or to those who wait to be thanked.

Post by “Don” of December 3, 2023 at 11:33 PM

For aponia, we can take a look at LSJ:

Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἀπονία

non-exertion, laziness

freedom from pain (Epicurus)****[see PS note at bottom]*

Xenophon, in Cyropaedia: And so, when people are bad only because of laziness and indolence (βλακείᾳ καὶ ἀπονίᾳ), I believe that they, like drones, damage their associates only by the cost of their keeping. But those who are poor companions in toil, and also extravagant and shameless in their desire for any advantage, these are likely also to lead others to what is vicious; for they are often able to demonstrate that vice does gain some advantage. And so we must weed out such men at any cost.

Plutarch, in Romulus: They also applied themselves to generous occupations and pursuits, not esteeming sloth and idleness (ἀπονίαν) generous, but rather bodily exercise, hunting, running, driving off robbers, capturing thieves, and rescuing the oppressed from violence. For these things, indeed, they were famous far and near.

Aretaeus, De causis et signis acutorum morborum (lib. 1)

This is what we call Peripneumonia, being an inflammation of the lungs, with acute fever, when they are attended with heaviness of the chest, freedom from pain, provided the lungs alone are inflamed; for they are naturally insensible (απονος), being of loose texture, like wool. But branches of the aspera arteria are spread through them, of a cartilaginous nature, and these, also, are insensible (απονος); muscles there are nowhere, and the nerves are small, slender, and minister to motion. This is the cause of the insensibility to pain (απονος). But if any of the membranes, by which it is connected with the chest, be inflamed, pain also is present; respiration bad, and hot; they wish to get up into an erect posture, as being the easiest of all postures for the respiration.

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And remember aponia is a "not/un" + ponos.

Ponos carries the meaning in Ancient Greek of "pain" but that's woefully inadequate.

Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, πόνος

work, esp. hard work, toil, in Hom. mostly of the toil of war, μάχης π. the toil of battle; generally, toil, labour

stress, trouble, distress, suffering

pain, esp. physical; distd. from λύπη (pain in general) (see the use of lype in Philodemus above)

So when the word a+ponia is being used, we can't just think of pain like a sprained ankle or upset stomach. To my reaading, it refers to the physical components (which *can* include the mind since it is connected to the physical body, the sarkos) working without exertion, to be free from distress, suffering, trouble in the physical body. All that rolled into one succinct word.

****PS: Note: In thinking about this more, it seems to me that LSJ provides the "freedom from pain" definition and attributes it to Epicurus because that is the usual paraphrase used by academic translators. To my reading, Epicurus is using the word as its literal meaning given in the connotations of a+ponos.*

Post by “Joshua” of December 4, 2023 at 12:55 AM

Given that work or toil is deeply connected to the meaning of this word, I proposed this morning that the Latin word *Otium* might make for an interesting comparison;

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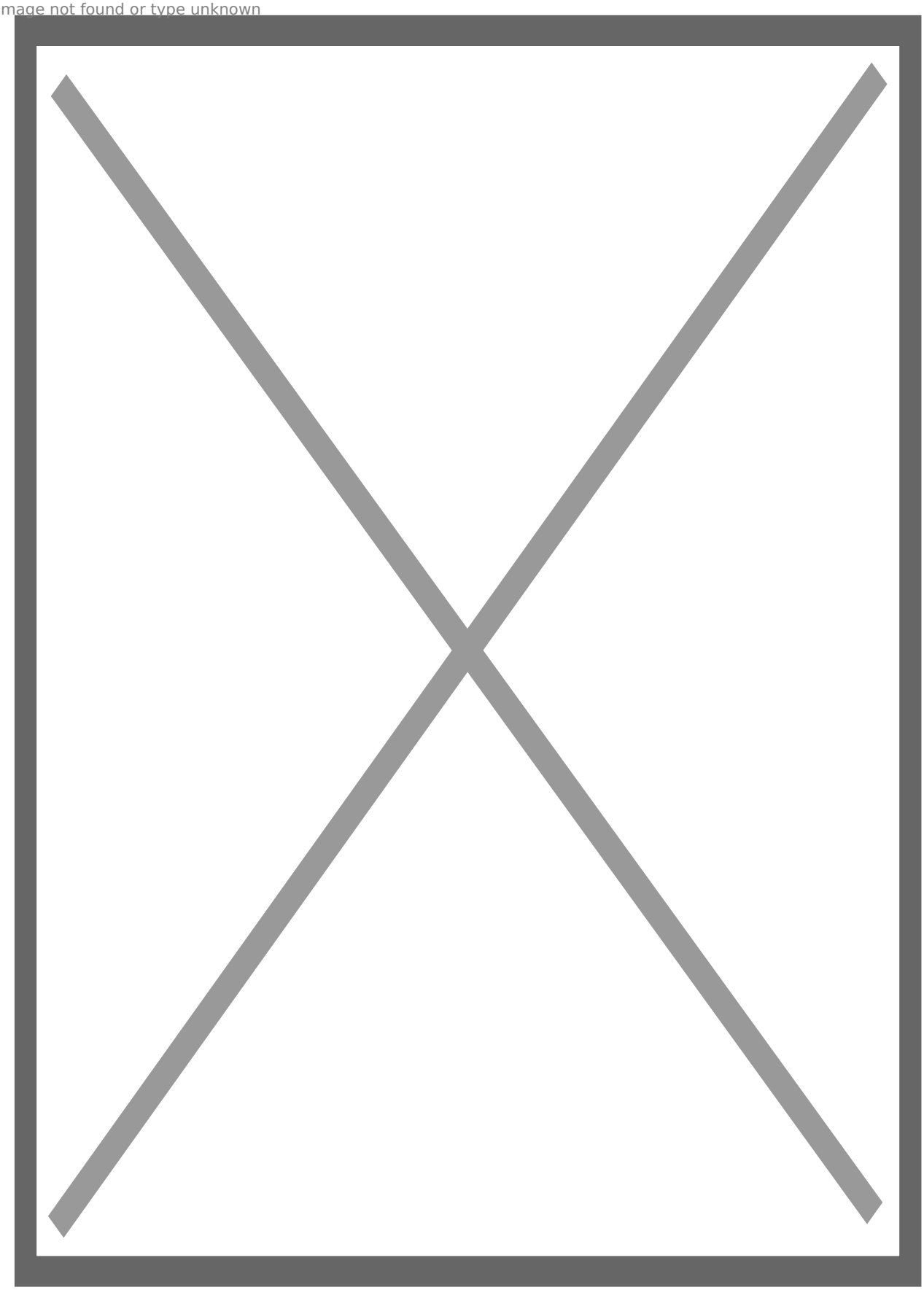

Otium - Wikipedia
en.m.wikipedia.org

It looks like the Greek word for leisure is σχόλη.

Post by “Cassius” of December 4, 2023 at 7:46 AM

> Quote from Don
>
> [Column 4] [Epicurus teaches us that good is easy for us to procure] and that evil is [not] only limited by precisely because it is useless to have defined the good (τἀγαθόν), if it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to attain, nor to have fixed limits to evil, if it is difficult to bear because of its long duration. This knowledge has the effect of prohibiting both the pursuit of any [good] which is not by nature capable of eliminating pain (ἀλγηδόνα) - such are, most of the time, the [goods] which have motivated a search eager in humans -, and let none be discarded which does not prevent having pleasure -- that is how one must [conceive] most of [those which are acquired] gradually.

Don the part where I underlined there -- should that be "desired" rather than "defined"?

Post by “Don” of December 4, 2023 at 8:26 AM

> Quote from Cassius
>
> Don the part where I underlined there -- should that be "desired" rather than "defined"?

I got that primarily from a Google Translate of the French in Les Epicureans, then fine tuned it in English from there. Unfortunately, I don't have time right now to parse the Ancient Greek, but if anyone else wants to dig in, here's column 4 in context:

καὶ [τὸ κ]ακ̣ὸ[ν οὐ] μό̣νο[ν ἔ-]

χον̣ ὅ̣[ρ]ους [κατ]ὰ̣ τὸ μέγε̣θ̣ος

καὶ κατὰ [τὸν] χρόνον, ἀλλὰ

καὶ εὐεκκα[ρτ]ακ(*)ητον, ἐπει-

5δήπερ οὐδ[ὲ]ν̣ ὄφελος ὡ[ρίσθ]αι

μέν, ἡμῖν δ̣' [ἄκ]τητον ἢ δ[ύσ-]

κτητον ε[ἶναι] τἀγαθόν, ἢ [πε-]

περάνθα[ι μέ]ν, ἀνεγκαρτέ-

ρητον δ' [εἶν]αι διὰ τὴ[ν πο-]

10λυχρονιότ[ητ]α τὸ κακόν· πε-

ριγίνεται γὰρ ἐκ τῶν γνώσε-

ων τούτων τό τε μηθὲν δι-

ώκειν ὃ μὴ πέφυκεν ἀλγη-

δόνα περιαιρεῖν, οἷα τὰ πλεῖσ-

15τα τῶν κατεσπουδασμέν[ων]

ἐστὶν παρ' ἀνθρώποις, μή[τε]

φεύγειν ὃ μὴ κωλύει τ[ὴν ἡ-]

δονὴν ἔχειν, οἷ(*)α τὰ πλεῖσ[τ]α

τῶν ἐν προκοπῇι δεῖ ν[οῆσαι·]

20κ̣αὶ πάλ̣ιν πρὸς μηδεο̣[..]ς

Post by “Bryan” of December 4, 2023 at 11:01 AM

(Giovanni Indelli construction) καὶ τὸ κακὸν οὐ μόνον ἔχον ὅρους κατὰ τὸ μέγεθος καὶ κατὰ τὸν χρόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ εὐεκκαρτέρητον, **ἐπειδήπερ οὐδὲν ὄφελος ὡρίσθαι μέν, ἡμῖν δ' ἄκτητον ἢ δύσκτητον εἶναι τἀγαθόν,** ἢ πεπεράνθαι μέν, ἀνεγκαρτέρητον δ' εἶναι διὰ τὴν πολυχρονιότητα τὸ κακόν.

"since it would be no use for it to be limited - ἐπειδήπερ οὐδὲν ὄφελος ὡρίσθαι μέν"

"while also, for us, the good is unattainable or difficult to get - ἡμῖν δ' ἄκτητον ἢ δύσκτητον εἶναι τἀγαθόν"

The word here is ὁρίζω

Therefore "defined" (as in "limited") has the correct sense.

(Voula Tsouna trans.) "...for otherwise it would be of no use that the good should be limited but impossible or difficult for us to attain..."

Post by “Cassius” of December 4, 2023 at 11:46 AM

> Quote from Bryan
>
> (Voula Tsouna trans.) "...for otherwise it would be of no use that the good should be limited but impossible or difficult for us to attain..."

Makes perfect sense -- thank you!

Post by “Don” of December 4, 2023 at 12:30 PM

> Quote from Bryan
>
> The word here is ὁρίζω

Trivia: From which we get the English word horizon.