

Martin Gives Us A Great Example of Epicurean "Avoidance of Pain"

Post by "Cassius" of June 16, 2019 at 4:22 PM



Martin (one of our regulars) gives us a great example of how an Epicurean "avoids pain" -- by choosing to fill his life with pleasure!

Very impressive Martin!

Post by "Joshua" of June 16, 2019 at 5:00 PM

Delightfully jaunty! I love it.

Post by "Cassius" of June 16, 2019 at 5:42 PM

A: Many people would be terrified of choosing that. They would not choose it. Even those that calculate a net pleasure would likely still have moments of terror, fear, suffering

Cassius Amicus: And that is a great example, A, why there are no absolute rules and we each much calculate our own net pleasure personally.

Not everyone can or would choose to do that, but when there are only two feelings in life - pleasure or pain - then the experience of pleasure - any pleasure - takes the place of pain, and that is what life is about, not the "zero state" that some like to preach.

Post by "Cassius" of June 17, 2019 at 7:41 AM

DB: How can you possibly think there are only two feeling in life?

GF: In PD3 Epicurus says: "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful." And in [PD18](#): "Once the pain arising from need is removed, physical pleasure is not increased and only varies in another direction." Apparently Epicurus does not recognize any pleasure beyond the zero state. Pain arises from need, so Epicurus recommends to remove the need.

Cassius Amicus @DB - This is one place this can be found, in Diogenes Laertius: "They affirm that there are two states of feeling, pleasure and pain, which arise in every animate being, and that the one is favorable and the other hostile to that being, and by their means choice and avoidance are determined; and that there are two kinds of inquiry, the one concerned with things, the other with nothing but words."

The point would appear to be that if something is a "feeling" we ultimately feel it to be either pleasurable or painful, and this includes all mental and bodily feelings.

Cassius Amicus @GF: As usual the devil would be in the details of the meaning of "zero state." There are many many passages which show that Epicurus held that we find ALL pleasure to be desirable, due to the nature of all pleasure as pleasing, even though some pleasure requires much more pain to attain than is worthwhile.

Someone who wants to focus on this passage, standing alone could more easily attain the result of removing pain from need by committing suicide: "For the end of all our actions is to be free from pain and fear, and, when once we have attained all this, the tempest of the soul is laid; seeing that the living creature has no need to go in search of something that is lacking, nor to look for anything else by which the good of the soul and of the body will be fulfilled. When we are pained because of the absence of pleasure, then, and then only, do we feel the need of pleasure."

On the other hand it makes perfect sense to view the totality of experience of life as a leaky vessel, which is difficult (without true philosophy) to fill with pleasure by eliminating pain, as referenced in the opening of Lucretius Book 6. Under such a model it is clear that a life from which all pain has been removed is not in any way similar to what a phrase like "zero state" would evoke, but is in fact a life "crammed full of pleasures without any pain" as referenced by Cicero in describing Epicurean doctrine: Cicero, In Defense of Publius Sestius 10.23: "He {Publius Clodius} praised those most who are said to be above all others the teachers and eulogists of pleasure {the Epicureans}. ... He added that these same men were quite right in saying that the wise do everything for their own interests; that no sane man should engage in public affairs; ***that nothing was preferable to a life of tranquility crammed full of pleasures.***"

Yes it is possible to look at the glass of water and describe it as half-empty if one's focus is "negative", but it is equally possible to describe it as half-full of water if one's focus is on "positive."

If we always stay with the premise that pleasure is the alpha and omega of a blessed life, as Epicurus stresses without his work, then terminology like zero state (referencing zero pains due to 100% pleasures) also makes good sense. But that is a context that is largely lost except in knowledgeable Epicurean circles, and outside those circles the perceived meaning of that phrase generally is going to result in asceticism, the opposite of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by "Cassius" of June 17, 2019 at 8:10 AM

DB: The term "feeling" is perhaps a bit vague. The view seems most plausible if it means simple "sensation", though normal touch and proprioception would appear in some cases to be neither.

If "feeling" includes "emotion" then as well as pleasure and pain we also feel relief, fear, longing, boredom, ennui, bemusement, anger, discomfort, hunger, elation, grief, love, satisfaction, etc.

You could use "pleasure" for all the positive ones and "pain" for all the negative ones, but then "pleasure" surely does not name a single feeling. Consider also emotions of questionable valence, such as surprise.

Cassius Amicus: "If "feeling" includes "emotion" then as well as pleasure and pain we also feel relief, fear, longing, boredom, ennui, bemusement, anger, discomfort, hunger, elation, grief, love, satisfaction, etc."

That's just as saying that if feeling includes taste, then it includes the pleasures of fish and ice cream and wine and cake and pies and on and on an on as well.

I think what we are talking about in more general terms is the "faculty of feeling" -- especially since Epicurus was focused on this faculty given to us by nature as the only ultimate guide in life to what is desirable and undesirable - a faculty which stands fully self-sufficient without reference or subordination to divinities or to ideal forms.

I think the true frame of reference here is not a matter of placing "sex drugs and rock'n'roll" or "cakes and pies" against supernatural religion and idealism. The real frame of reference is that Epicurus' is asserting the placement of "the natural faculty of feeling" against supernatural religion and idealism.