

Catherine Wilson's January 2021 article: "Why Epicureanism, Not Stoicism, Is The Philosophy We Need Now"

Post by "Cassius" of January 14, 2021 at 11:56 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Epicurus wouldn't advocate taking the drug. How would it make me a god? How would my atoms replenish themselves to make me incorruptible?

[Quote from Elayne](#)

if anything at all is missing from total pleasure, then it's not a total bliss pill, by definition!

OK I see this discussion as reinforcement of the need to be more aggressive in the logical side. As Elayne is pointing out, the only way to resolve these questions is to look at the definitions, and that's the problem that has to be addressed with hypotheticals at the very beginning -- stating the terms extremely clearly.

Does the difficulty with clarify in hypotheticals mean that we should never use them? I can see the possibility of arguing both sides of that, but the step of arguing both sides would probably be extremely helpful for being clear on the benefits and limits of the use of hypotheticals.

I think that's behind our different viewpoints on [PD10](#). I think that Epicurus WAS setting up an extreme hypothetical in which he was in fact suggesting what Don is resisting -- [PD10](#) in my view is as hypothetical or a logical challenge or whatever you would like to call it, set up specifically as an "in your face" statement of the position that the ultimate goal is pleasure, and forcing you to confront what some people are going to think are uncomfortable truths.

So if you state in your hypothetical that the "bliss drug" is in fact fully effective in providing you with a lifetime of unmitigated and undiluted pleasure - the effective equivalent of Epicurean godhood as set forth by Torquatus in on ends -- then yes indeed I do think that Epicurus would say: "Of course you should take it - that's the whole goal of my philosophy!"

[Note: I am referring to this section from Torquatus, which I see as itself a hypothetical such as we are debating: "

Let us imagine a man living in the continuous enjoyment of numerous and vivid pleasures alike of body and of mind, undisturbed either by the presence or by the prospect of pain: what possible state of existence could we describe as being more excellent or more desirable? One so situated must possess in the first place a strength of mind that is proof against all fear of death or of pain; he will know that death means complete unconsciousness, and that pain is generally light if long and short if strong, so that its intensity is compensated by brief duration and its continuance by diminishing severity. Let such a man moreover have no dread of any supernatural power; let him never suffer the pleasures of the past to fade away, but constantly renew their enjoyment in recollection, and his lot will be one which will not admit of further improvement."]

I'm not trying to criticize Don here because he's not the one who wrote the article for public consumption that ends up creating the confusion that I think Wilson is creating. The more I think about it the more I think she has raised exactly what Epicurus held to be the ultimate point -- that "pleasure" must be defended to the end on both logical and experiential grounds, and she has flubbed the test.

Which is not to say that she is by any means unique, because it appears that later people who thought they were following Epicurus have been arguing about this for 2000+ years, if the comments in Cicero's "On Ends" in the underlined section below are any indication:

Quote

This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the Chief Good, pain the Chief Evil. This he sets out to prove as follows: Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the Chief Good, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil, and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, at the prompting of Nature's own unbiased and honest verdict.

Hence Epicurus refuses to admit any necessity for argument or discussion to prove that pleasure is desirable and pain to be avoided. These facts, he thinks, are perceived by the senses, as that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet, none of which things need be proved by elaborate argument: it is enough merely to draw attention to them. (For there is a difference, he holds, between formal syllogistic proof of a thing and a mere notice or reminder: the former is the method for discovering abstruse and recondite truths, the latter for indicating facts that are obvious and evident.) Strip mankind of sensation, and nothing remains; it follows that Nature herself is the judge of that which is in accordance with or contrary to nature.

What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance? Some members of our school however would refine upon this doctrine; these say that it is not enough for the judgment of good and evil to rest with the senses; the facts that pleasure is in and for itself desirable and pain in and for itself to be avoided can also be grasped by the intellect

and the reason. Accordingly they declare that the perception that the one is to be sought after and the other avoided is a notion naturally implanted in our minds. Others again, with whom I agree, observing that a great many philosophers do advance a vast array of reasons to prove why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil, consider that we had better not be too confident of our case; in their view it requires elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion of the nature of pleasure and pain.

I will address expected comments here by saying that I think even this doesn't state the issue the way I would state it. I think that the first part about "grasped by the intellect and reason" is what Epicurus was doing, and they were not in fact refining upon Epicurus' doctrine, because everyone knows that the intellect and reason aren't feelings that can detect pleasure and pain. So my view is that this first position is that there is a proper intellectual and reasonable argument that "the good" is pleasure can and does go hand in hand and with the observation that no outside proof of pleasure is necessary or even possible.

I think the error -- the one that Torquatus says he agrees with, is that "the nature of pleasure and pain" requires elaborate and reasoned argument and abstruse theoretical discussion. There's no way to appreciate pleasure and pain except to experience it -- to me that is clear, and that is I think Elayne's position. But if it were truly unnecessary to engage the question of "what is the good?" logically, then we wouldn't even be having these discussions at all. We'd just say "look over there" and the discussion would be over.

Even the statement "What does Nature perceive or what does she judge of, beside pleasure and pain, to guide her actions of desire and of avoidance?" is in fact a logical proof that supports and bolsters the "experience-based" position.