

Considering the Importance of Mental Pleasures

Post by "Cassius" of May 29, 2018 at 1:48 PM

I started to post this privately but decided it might be of general interest - it is a suggestion to Eoghan for his new Epicurean blog: Eoghan since you are attacking some of the most fundamental issues from a fresh perspective, here is one that I would appreciate your keeping in mind - from On Ends:

"(3) Yet we maintain that this does not preclude mental pleasures and pains from being much more intense than those of the body; since the body can feel only what is present to it at the moment, whereas the mind is also cognizant of the past and of the future. For granting that pain of body is equally painful, yet our sensation of pain can be enormously increased by the belief that some evil of unlimited magnitude and duration threatens to befall us hereafter. And the same consideration may be transferred to pleasure: a pleasure is greater if not accompanied by any apprehension of evil. This therefore clearly appears, that intense mental pleasure or distress contributes more to our happiness or misery than a bodily pleasure or pain of equal duration."

Here's why: Aside from the terrible tendency to dismiss the physics and the canonics, which we've also been discussing lately, I think there is far too little attention given to the meaning of "pleasure." I would wager that 80% of the people even in this group, and 99% of people out of it, think of purely physical sensations when they think of pleasure. For example, they think about such things as Lucretius' Example of lounging in the grass with friends at the side of a river. But if the record from Torquatus is correct, as I think it is, then Epicurus himself stressed mental pleasure in his own life, such as when he valued the company of his fellow schoolmembers more than the pain of his physical problems on the last day of his life. And if mental pleasures are even more varied than physical pleasures (which I also think is clear) then far from focusing on "grazing in the grass" on the side of a river, our example is more like that of Epicurus himself, in which it is least as pleasurable, if not more pleasurable, to help lead or participate in a worldwide philosophical revolution.

Which is not to say that we need to do the impossible of converting everyone into being a friend, but that as Epicurus said we live the life closest to being "gods among men" when we focus our attention on those things that are eternally true, and how we fit as individuals fit into them.