

Ruminating on desires and on the absence of pain....

Post by "Cassius" of June 8, 2021 at 7:57 AM

To comment on your last question first, I definitely think the answer is yes, with your illustration of how much fun it is to dive off the high board, once you have overcome your fear, being a very good example.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Firstly, it seems that the "absence of pain" proponents are ignoring the first desire in this quote and focusing on the last two. I can see how this might lead one to asceticism. But the desires that are necessary for happiness are what Epicurus places in the position of importance in this quote. Personally, I had either missed this or forgotten it and so was quite pleasantly surprised to read it!

As to that part, the difficulty seems to be not so much that the AOP position ignores the prominent position of "happiness" in that section, but rather they look to other nearby sections of the same letter which can be read to equate happiness with absence of pain. For example, the very next sentence: *"The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and (the soul's) freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness. For it is to obtain this end that we always act, namely, to avoid pain and fear."*

Epicurus at the beginning has said "We must then meditate on the things that make our happiness, seeing that when that is with us we have all, but when it is absent we do all to win it." *So when he again talks about refer all choice and avoidance.... and aim of the life and to obtain this end we always act* it is easy to see how they can do that.

So in the end I don't think it is possible to win an argument against AOP by isolating one section of text and saying it's clear, because the AOP position can do exactly the same thing in a way that ends up defining pleasure and happiness as absence of pain and implicitly asceticism.

What the AOP can't do is satisfactorily account for a common-sense definition of pleasure and happiness that includes joy and delight as part of the end -- and those are the kind of 'active pleasures that both the "common person" and Epicurus himself recognizes as the ordinary definition of pleasure. The AOP position tries to say that the joy and delight may be necessary for complete absence of pain (resting / katastematic pleasure) but most common sense people are going to find that unpersuasive.

Reason and logic can be used to analyze Epicurus' position in a way that is consistent with recognizing pleasure and happiness as including the active pleasures in the way ordinary

people do, or reason and logic can be used to turn the system into super-asceticism. I think people have commented earlier that the issue becomes kind of a "Rorschach test" - which position they end up taking shows more about themselves than it shows about Epicurus.

It would really be mysterious and strange for Epicurus to have used this kind of phraseology without a good reason, and that's why I don't think it's possible to persuasively analyze this question without looking for that reason. The best explanation I can find is that the reason stems from Plato's logic-based argument that pleasure has no limit, and that happiness or pleasure cannot therefore qualify as the ultimate goal of life or greatest good, since they allegedly can always be made better. I don't think it's sufficient to dismiss that as an argument based on abstract logic and say that it fails for the reason alone.

There's good reason in the texts, including this letter, to conclude that Epicurus was working with a sound and common sense definition of pleasure and happiness, but he does seemingly depart from that at times, so we need an overall theory of what he is doing and why he actually has not. If we just line up the "pleasure" passages against the "absence of pain" passages we're still left with resolving why they can so easily be made to appear to be in conflict, and why redefining "pleasure" as "absence of pain" is not the answer to figuring out the puzzle.

I hope I did that without too much of a rant! 😊