

On The Subject of the Tetrpharmakon

Post by "Cassius" of August 3, 2016 at 8:36 PM

I agree with you, Leonard, in disagreeing with the interpretation of 4. I also disagree with the interpretation of 3. In this case my disagreement is not mainly with Cyril (though that is there too) as much as it is with the T. itself. I do not blame this on Epicurus, but on whoever decided that 3 and 4

were adequate summaries of PD3 and PD4. Of course we don't know what else that person wrote in context to explain it, so I blame the situation mainly on Vesuvius.

Cassius Amicus

The full PD3 and PD4 are of course:

3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain. When such pleasure is present, so long as it is uninterrupted, there is no pain either of body or of mind or of both together.

4 "Continuous bodily pain does not last long; instead, pain, if extreme, is present a very short time, and even that degree of pain which slightly exceeds bodily pleasure does not last for many days at once. Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain."

If one wants to use these to make a polemical (stoic) point about how the mind alone can overcome bad circumstances, so be it, because in some cases that is true. But we should not forget that there is alternative way of looking at PD 3 and 4: Epicurus was a philosophy teacher, and as such he was teaching his students the proper response to the establishment philosophers who taught that pleasure had no limit, and that continuous pleasure was impossible.

How to decide which interpretation is correct? Everyone can draw their own conclusions, but as for me, I ask whether Epicurus was the kind of teacher who would say to people in distressed circumstances that the good life is "easy" to get, or to people in the worst kind of pain from sickness and injury that pain is "easy" to avoid."

I believe these sentiments are accurately picked up by people like Leonard W Martin as ringing false, and therefore not what Epicurus taught. That's why I think the T. has to be carefully used, and kept in context of the rest of the teachings.

CJ What is this alternative interpretation? That Good Is hard to

MC So what do you think it means then?

Cassius Amicus I am doing nothing other than restating what DeWitt has explained exhaustively. Epicurus did not live and teach in a vacuum. He was dealing with and refuting claims made by generations of philosophers before him, especially Plato and Aristotle, and Plato in particular had taught that pleasure could not be the goal of life because it has no limit, and that pleasure could also not be the goal because it was not continuously present as our guide. These issues are in Phaedo and other Platonic works and well documented by DeWitt, which is one of the reasons that the mainstream doesn't like his work.

These issues were as important to a philosophic movement based on pleasure as was death and religion. And in order to refute them, just as PD1 and PD2 refute popular religion and fear of death, it is necessary to show the logical fallacy in the arguments. PD3 and other citations establish that pleasure DOES have a limit, and therefore there is nothing that is "higher" or "more worthy" or need

be "added" to pleasure to constitute the logical goal of life. This doctrine inoculates Epicurean students against the Platonic argument (repeated by Seneca and discussed here recently) showing that a life of full pleasure is possible.

PD4 does the same to refute the argument that pleasure cannot be the goal because it is not continuously present. Epicurus famously said that he calls us to a life of "continuous pleasure" and that is the context of the philosophical dispute. Pleasure IS constantly our guide because pain never overwhelms it to extinction.

These are common sense but crucial logical refutations of Platonic arguments. They are NOT the basis of flippant dismissal of the reality of pain, or the difficulty of achieving a peaceful and safe life.

We have NOTHING about the context of the tetrapharmakon to establish who the author was or what he said before or after that passage - even whether he was stating that this was a true doctrine of Epicurus.

This is much like the falsehood that is spread that ancient Epicureans lived in Communes. Where is the authority that establishes that ANY Epicurean ever referred in the ancient world to this formulation as helpful or authoritative? I have not seen any references to it in the texts anywhere, and the way it is used today reeks of anti-Epicurean sentiment that has infected the world since long before this parchment was discovered. Does anyone have ANY proof that an acknowledged faithful Epicurean cited it in an existing text? I haven't seen it - if someone has, please let us know.

Check the references here and you'll see that the authoritative use of this formulation (in a pro-Epicurean text in the ancient world, I mean) as a complete summary of PD3 and PD4 is non-existent.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetrapharmakos#cite_note-2