

Torquatus' Statement of the Epicurean View Of The Ultimate Good In "On Ends"

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Parker translation:

I will begin in that method which my master observed before me, and define the subject of the question ; not that I suppose you want any such instruction, but that we may proceed more regularly. It is therefore demanded what is our chief and ultimate good, into which, as it is agreed among all philosophers what- soever, the rest are universally resolved, and itself into none. Epicurus will have this to be pleasure; as, on the contrary, pain to be the greatest of evils; and he thus proposes to prove it.

Every animal, says he, is no sooner born, but it begins the chase after pleasure, and indulges itself in that, as the only expedient of its well-being ; while to the utmost of its power it avoids and rescues itself from pain; and this in an unprejudiced and an undepraved state of nature. And therefore he denies any necessity of expostulating for a reason why we should affect pleasure and abhor pain. These he accounts the immediate results of sensation, as we perceive that fire makes us warm, that snow is white, and honey sweet; of all which particulars, we need no other demonstration to convince us, than that of impressions from without, the difference being wide between syllogistical deductions, and the simple perceptions of sense: the one unlocks doubts and obscurities, and lets you into truth; the other is a thoroughfare, and lets in truth upon you.

Now in regard a man without any senses is no better than a carcass; from hence it follows, that nature is the best judge of her own desires and aversions: and that pleasure is the immediate object of the first, and pain of the other. For is there any thing which a man is capable of perceiving and distinguishing in order to pursue or shun it, besides pleasure or pain?

Others there are of Epicurus's disciples that carry the thing further ; and not enduring that the distinctions of good and evil should be ingrossed by the senses, understand it as a dictate of the judgment, and a rule of right reason, that pleasure is in its own nature desirable, and pain odious. And say that the consequence, which is, that we should pursue the first, and avoid the last, is an innate principle.

But another party, to which I properly belong, observing how strangely the dispute concerning excellency of pleasure and the evil of pain has been bandied about, are of opinion, that we ought not to manage our cause with pertness and bigotry, but lay our reasonings carefully together, and confer at large upon the nature of pleasure and pain. Wherefore for the easier detection and disproof of their error that declaim against pleasure, and speak favourably of pain, I will set the whole matter in a true light, and give you the sense of what I find suggested

to our purpose by our great alchemist of truth and projector of human felicity.

Nobody conceives an aversion to pleasure ; but because, if we take imprudent measures to attain it, we suffer for it in the consequences. As on the other hand, nobody can be a friend to pain, as pain; but yet it may meet with a favourable reception, because it frequently happens, that pain and labour prove a necessary means towards the procurement of exquisite pleasures. To propose a trivial instance; which of us three would fatigue himself with our bodily exercises, if he did not find his account in it? At the same time shall I blame a man for preferring that pleasure which he can purchase without any manner of trouble, or for excusing himself from that pain which is not productive of pleasure?

Notwithstanding, when the blandishments of any present delights prevail so far as to intoxicate and incapacitate us for judging what difficulties and inconveniences we had better embrace, we are highly to be blamed, and deserve to have no favour shewed us; as do also those people, whose effeminacy, and lightness, and antipathy to pain and labour betray them into dishonourable courses. But here the right distinction is very obvious. As thus; when we are free from all conditional bars and limitations, and warranted to make directly after that which pleases us best, then we must resign up ourselves entirely to the pleasure, and admit no treaty with the pain.

But when, as it falls out sometimes, either our duty or our circumstances oblige us to give up our pleasures, and wade into vexations, there is this choice yet reserved for every wise man, either to secure to himself greater pleasures at the price of lesser, or to escape severer vexations by accepting lighter. This is my notion of the business; and I would gladly understand why the instances of our family will not agree with it — seeing you were pleased, upon recollection, out of respect and kindness to fasten there. A notable stratagem (if it would take) to stroke your adversary into a peaceable indifference!

But, I beseech you, what account will you give us of their acting as they did? Can you believe when the enemy was charged so briskly, and their own flesh and blood handled so roughly, that no ends or interests were to be served ? The very beasts of prey are wiser than to expose and disorder themselves for nothing : and can you fancy that persons of such a character would have acted so singularly, if they knew not why? Hereafter we shall see what grounds they went upon.

At present it is enough to be assured, that if they did what became them, they acted upon some other motive than that of simple and abstracted virtue. One of them carried off his enemy's chain; and when he had done so, made armour on it for his own security. Well, but there was a dangerous obstacle that faced him, called an army. And what could be the temptation then? Why a prospect of raising his reputation, and fortifying his interest with applause and popularity. The same person knocked his child on the head; but had he been so rash and inhuman as to do such a thing without a reason, I should blush to own myself his relation. Now, if it was his intent rather to destroy his own quiet, than suffer the military discipline to be infringed, or his orders and authority neglected among the soldiers, when the

danger was imminent ; he made a wise provision for the safety of his countrymen, well-knowing that his own was comprehended therein. The same observations are applicable to a vast variety of instances.

And as industriously as both of you, especially my antagonist, who thrashes at the study of antiquity, exercise your lungs upon the characters of gallant and extraordinary men, and magnify their actions, as not resulting from any mercenary considerations, but purely from a principle of virtue and honour, you are tied to retract, provided, as in the premises, it be made a rule of option, that lesser satisfactions are to be quitted for the obtaining of greater, and lesser inconveniences borne with to divert worse. And thus much may suffice in relation to your instances of glorious and heroic actions, it being by this time proper to come forward and observe how directly all virtue tends to pleasure.

And here I shall explain what it is I mean by pleasure, that so the common misconstructions may be prevented, and the seriousness and even austerity of that philosophy, which passes for such a luscious, effeminate system, may be set forth. For indeed that sort of pleasure which strikes the senses, and affects the economy of our bodies with an obliging influence, we do not pursue exclusively of the other incomparable pleasure, which consists in indolency, or an exemption from pain: for since pleasure is nothing else but the agreeableness, nor pain but the disagreeableness of things to the percipient ; and since the very removal and intermission of pain is a thing so very agreeable to us, no wonder if we pronounce the absence of pain to be a pleasure.

Thus for the purpose, the consequence of taking off hunger, and extinguishing thirst is an actual satisfaction: and so, as to all other particulars, a cessation of disturbance is the very birth of pleasure. Hence it was that Epicurus denied a medium between pleasure and pain, because that medium, as understood by those who talk of it, implies freedom from pain; which he will have to be not a pleasure barely, but the queen of all pleasures; it being impossible but that every man who feels at any time within himself after what manner he is affected, should be sensible either of some pleasure or some molestation: whereas it is Epicurus's maxim, that the sublimest pleasure terminates in an entire discharge from pain ; and that although it further admits of specifications and variety, yet it is capable of no higher improvements.

Upon this occasion, I remember, my father has told me, when he has been in the humour of rallying stoicism, that at Athens, in one of the Ceramici, there is a statue of Chrysippus sitting, and holding out his hand, as if he would propose his favourite quere, "Do you find any cravings in your hand in the present crisis of its affairs?" None, I dare say, which yet it would not but have, if pleasure were a real good ; and therefore it cannot be such. My father was positive, the statue itself, if able to speak, would talk more apropos. It is true, the argument holds handsomely against the Cyrenaics; but Epicurus is by no means concerned in it.

If there were no pleasure but that which exhilarates and captivates the senses, the mere absence of pain, without the force of a little lively pleasure, could never have given his hand content : but if Epicurus's indolence be the highest of all pleasures, we may grant Chrysippus

the first supposition, that his hand, while he held it out, felt no want of any thing; but for the next, that if pleasure were a real good, his hand would be grasping at it, we must beg his pardon; for it could not possibly feel the want of any thing, because that which is free from pain is in a state of pleasure.

Further, to make it plain that pleasure is our utmost good, let us represent to ourselves the condition of a man perpetually regaled with all the variety conceivable of the most ravishing pleasures incident either to the mind or body, without the least alloy of pain, either present or approaching: can any condition of life be more advantageous, or more desirable than this? Especially since it must include such a firmness of soul as renders it proof against the fears of death or pain; death being a loss of all sensation, and pain either long and moderate, or acute and short; so that which ever it proves, there is room for comfort; though to finish the felicity of it, it is necessary that the dread of a Deity be forgotten, and the sweetness of past pleasures very frequently recollected.

Again: let us imagine a man afflicted with the saddest agonies and tortures of mind and body, utterly despairing of any relief or relaxation, and wholly lost as well to the remembrance of past, and the expectation of future, as the fruition of any present pleasure; what could we call him but the very accomplishment and idea of misery itself? If therefore a life of torment is the most detestable, undoubtedly it is the greatest evil, and consequently a life of pleasure must be the greatest good, on this side whereof the mind of man finds nothing for it finally to fix upon; as there is nothing besides pain, as that comprehends all sorts of terrors and molestations, which simply and from itself can either disturb or shatter us.

In short, pleasure and pain are the first occasions and springs of all affection, aversion, and action ; whence it is evident, that all the concerns of wisdom and virtue are to be reckoned into the account of a life of pleasure. And thus while we convince ourselves, that when we have said all, a life of jollity and pleasure is the summum bonum, the last and the completest good, into which all others must be resolved, and itself into none; there are some people abroad that widely mistaking the intendment and scope of nature, affirm, that virtue and glory claim that denomination; an absurdity, from which Epicurus, if they would lend him an ear, would easily free them: for what becomes of the dignity and value of all your fine charming virtues, in case they are no longer effective of pleasure ?

But for the sake of health, we should look upon the science of medicine as an idle piece of curiosity ; and a pilot is esteemed, not for his theory of navigation, but the benefit of his conduct: accordingly wisdom, or the science of living, were it no more than a barren amusement, would be undeserving of our application, whereas it claims our attention, because we are by it put in a way to come at pleasure.

What pleasure I mean, I hope you know so well by this time, that I need not fear the odium of the word will stand in the way of my argument. The thing which I drive at is this. All the unhappiness of our lives is notoriously imputable to the false estimates we pass upon the nature of things, and these misapprehensions frequently forfeit us our choicest pleasures, and

lay us open to the most melancholy discomposures; against which, wisdom is our antidote, as being that which subdues our fears, and our desires, corrects our vain opinions and prejudices, and certainly brings us to the possession of true pleasure. It is this alone that quells our solicitude, and all our panic fears, that slakes the vehemence of our appetites, and teaches us the art of living happily, our appetites being so insatiable as to bring destruction upon ourselves and our neighbours, upon entire families, nay upon whole commonwealths.

These are the fountains of emulation, ruptures, faction, and war. And yet as wildly and impetuously as they are raised against other people, the tempests and tumults they excite in our own breasts are such that the comforts of life are totally lost in them; and till a man has the discretion to prune away his levity, and his mistakes, and contain himself within the restrictions of nature, it is not in his power to live without disturbance and terror.

To this purpose is that most useful and edifying division, which Epicurus has introduced of our desires into those that are both natural and necessary ; those that are natural but not necessary ; and those that are neither natural nor necessary. The first may be satisfied easily and cheaply : the second will also come to very reasonable terms, requiring no more than a moderate competency of what provisions offer themselves : but the third will not be restrained or stinted at all. Now then, as sure as ignorance and false reasonings over-cast the serenity of human life, and nothing but wisdom rescues us from the tyranny of our inclinations and terrors, and makes us a match for the malice of fortune, and masters of our own ease and quiet: so surely it is pleasure we propose to ourselves, when we labour to be wise, and fear of infelicity that keeps us from courses of indiscretion.

Thus ought we to be ambitious of having a command over ourselves, not for the sake of the virtue, but the inward satisfaction, complacency, and harmony arising out of it. For this virtue is that which governs us in all our pursuits and aversions, inasmuch as it is not enough for us to distinguish- between what methods are fit or unfit to be taken, but our determinations must be followed with suitable resolutions and practices; whereas usually when we come to know what we have to trust to, some one phantom or other of pleasure enchants us; we yield ourselves prisoners to our own desires, and lose all apprehensions of the consequences ; and so for the love perhaps of a poor insignificant satisfaction, that might have been obtained some other way, or if not, it had been never the worse for us, we run ourselves into diseases, distresses, and disgraces; nay, frequently upon the very weapons of public justice : while they who contrive and regulate their pleasures in such a manner that no subsequent inconveniences attend them, and deal so ingenuously by themselves as not to do, for any solicitations of pleasure, what they are satisfied ought not to be done, receive always double interest for any pleasure they quit ; and to put by a greater evil they surrender themselves to a less.

Whence we infer, that as moderation and temperance are not desirable qualities, as they retrench our pleasures, but only as they commute them to our advantage, so extravagances and in- temperance are not purely upon their own account detestable. The same is to be said of fortitude. It is not for the blessedness either of taking or en- during pains that we give proofs of our patience, our vigilance, nay our industry, and even our bravery itself: but these, we know, are the best physic toward a cure of the solitudes and discouragements of human life, and a

philosophical garde