

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

Post by "Cassius" of October 2, 2021 at 2:13 PM

I think I also like Reid's version of the Chryssipus statue example:

But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus, sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: *Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel*

a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good. -My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics,-but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no

lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been.....

I have always had a bit of a problem following the point of the Chrysippus argument, because there seems to be some buried presumption that doesn't make sense to me. Ok, even if we accept that the hand has its own feelings and disregard that the hand isn't an independent entity that has its own scale of pleasure and pain, there seems to be some presumption that if pleasure is the greatest good then the hand should be feeling that greatest good at every moment, or else feel like it was lacking something? I am not sure it is clear why this is so except maybe under the "replenishment theory of pleasure" anything that isn't experiencing its greatest good is by definition lacking something. At least, my hand in its ordinary condition doesn't feel like it lacks anything, even though I would admit that something like a hand massage could stimulate it to feel better than it does right now.

Maybe the point is too obvious for me but when we get to the point of explaining this part I'd like to be more articulate about what it means. At the very least I think this is showing that someone (the Stoics? Epicurus? both?) had some presumption about the nature of the greatest good that needs to be explained. And I presume this is closely related to the entire issue of

"limits of pleasure."

My tentative position is that this is clearly a Stoic argument and slanted for that reason, but I am not sure that the answer that is suggested is not one that makes sense to Cicero in Cicero's view of Epicurus, but doesn't adequately convey the full Epicurean position.

There is no way based on pure feeling that I would rate my hand at rest as feeling better than my hand while undergoing a massage, so I think we're again dealing here with more of a response to a dialectical trick than to a real-life situation that conveys Epicurus' full philosophy.

Note: Might also be related to the "constancy / continuous" issue that pleasure has to be constantly available in some form so as to constitute the highest good. I recall DeWitt saying that Plato thought that pleasure has ups and downs and periods of total nonexistence and that that was one of the reasons that it could not serve as the ultimate good.