

Cicero's Criticism of Stoicism - Book 4 of On Ends

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A key difference that separates Epicurean philosophy from Stoicism and other Greek philosophies is the identification of pleasure as the goal of life. Too many people abstract this word pleasure to the ambiguous word "happiness," which allows them to presume that all philosophies have the same goal. It is essential to see that this is not so. Here is Cicero revealing that the Stoics choose to ignore the body, and to elevate the "intellect" to all that matters. In so doing the Stoics conclude that the happy life entails nothing but "morality of life," and all joy in life, and all other emotion, is swept away in an impossible dream:

Cicero: "Now then let us call upon your [Stoic] leaders, or better upon yourself [Cato] (for who is more qualified to speak for your school?) to explain this: how in the world do you contrive, starting from the same first principles, to reach the conclusion that the Chief Good is morality of life? — for that is equivalent to your 'life in agreement with virtue' or 'life in harmony with nature.' By what means or at what point did you suddenly discard the body, and all those things which are in accordance with nature but out of our control, and lastly duty itself?

My question then is, how comes it that so many things that Nature strongly recommends have been suddenly abandoned by Wisdom? Even if we were not seeking the Chief Good of man but of some living creature that consisted solely of a mind (let us allow ourselves to imagine such a creature, in order to facilitate our discovery of the truth), even so that mind would not accept this End of yours. For such a being would ask for health and freedom from pain, and would also desire its own preservation, and set up as its End to live according to nature, which means, as I said, to possess either all or most and the most important of the things which are in accordance with nature.

In fact you may construct a living creature of any sort you like, but even if it be devoid of a body like our imaginary being, nevertheless its mind will be bound to possess certain attributes analogous to those of the body, and consequently it will be impossible to set up for it an end of Goods on any other lines than those which I have laid down. Chrysippus, on the other hand, in his survey of the different species of living things states that in some the body is the principal part, in others the mind, while there are some that are equally endowed in respect of either; and then he proceeds to discuss what constitutes the ultimate good proper to each species.

Man he so classified as to make the mind the principal part in him; and yet he so defined man's End as to make it appear, not that he is principally mind, but that he consists of nothing else. But the only case in which it would be correct to place the Chief Good in virtue alone is if there existed a creature consisting solely of pure intellect, with the further proviso that this intellect

possessed nothing of its own that was in accordance with nature, as bodily health is. But it is impossible even to imagine a self-consistent picture of what such a creature would be like."

Cicero, On Ends, Book 4