

Pleasure, Desire and Limits

Post by "Don" of July 20, 2022 at 7:03 AM

At the risk of self-horn-tooting, here's my translation and commentary on the desires from my Letter to Menoikeus. Apologies for the length. See the PDF for more:

Translation:

Furthermore, on the one hand, there are the natural desires; on the other, the 'empty, fruitless, or vain ones.' And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessary ones; on the other, the ones which are only natural; then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, those necessary for eudaimonia; then, those necessary for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those necessary for life itself. [128] The steady contemplation of these things equips one to know how to decide all choice and rejection for the health of the body and for the tranquility of the mind, that is for our physical and our mental existence, since this is the goal of a blessed life.

Commentary:

127f. Ἀναλογιστέον δὲ ὡς τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαί, αἱ δὲ κεναί,

- Ἀναλογιστέον "consider..."
- τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν "of the desires, yearnings"
 - "Consider then of the desires, on the one hand, are the φυσικαί "natural ones"
 - φυσικαί (physikai)
 - English physical, physics
 - on the other, the κεναί 'empty, fruitless, vain, void ones.'
 - κεναί is also again the word used when Epicurus talks about atoms and *void*.

127g. καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν αἱ μὲν ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ μόνον·

- "And of the natural ones, on the one hand, are the necessities; on the other hand, the natural ones only."
 - ἀναγκαῖαι "necessary, essential; (if a plural noun as here) necessities"

127h. τῶν δ' ἀναγκαίων αἱ μὲν πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν εἰσὶν ἀναγκαῖαι,

- "then, of the necessary ones: on the one hand, there are those necessary for eudaimonia;

Those necessary for eudaimonia are open to interpretation but must be based on Epicurus's philosophy.

127i. αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν, αἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν.

- ἀοχλησία "freedom from disturbance"
- σώματος genitive singular of σῶμα
 - σῶμα "the body; one's material body or existence"
- "then, those [necessary] for the freedom from disturbance for the body; then those [necessary] for life itself."

There are some translations that interpret αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀοχλησίαν to mean only things like clothing and shelter - those things that provide "freedom from disturbance" for the body, that is for one's physical existence. That isn't literally what is written so that is simply one interpretation. Those kinds of things - clothing and shelter - would seem to fall under the final category of those necessary for life. So, this category should catch those between eudaimonia and those necessary for life. This is an interesting category.

I would contend that those "necessary for life itself" are those essentials at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: food, water, shelter, sleep, air, etc. Again, clothing and shelter would seem to fall into this category.

PS: the "on the one hand... On the other hand" are meant to literally translate the Greek μὲν... δὲ... It is clunky and awkward in English but I wanted to get across that they were there in the original. They do not have to be, nor should they be, translated this literally in all cases.