

# PD19 And The Meaning Of No "Greater" Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2022 at 2:26 AM

Here is *some* of the key material on this from DeWitt's chapter on "The New Hedonism". This excerpt starts in the middle of the previous section before the immortality discussion.

It is impossible to whip up a thirst or an appetite superior to that created by natural hunger and thirst. To the youthful Menoecus Epicurus writes: "Plain-tasting foods bring a pleasure equal to that of luxurious diet when once the pain arising from need has been removed, and bread and water afford the very keenest pleasure when one in need of them brings them to his lips." 22 This is the fixed ceiling for pleasure, which he endeavors to establish in opposition to Plato, who compared the appetitive part of the soul to "a many-headed beast" and held to the opinion that desires increase endlessly and that pleasure defied the fixing of a limit.<sup>23</sup>

The natural and necessary desires that still await mention are those for clothing and shelter. The authorized teaching concerning these will be made plain by the first half of Authorized Doctrine 18: "The pleasure in the flesh is incapable of increase when once the pain arising from need has been removed but is merely embellished." The Greek word here rendered "embellished" has also been translated by "varied" and by "variegated," but these renderings fall short of revealing the meaning. Seneca does better when interpreting the word as "to season, as it were, and divert."<sup>24</sup> This is correct; to luxurious men it is a fact that eating is a way of passing the time. Epicurus himself applies the word *poikilmata*, "embellishments," to food, Vatican Saying 69: "It is the ingratitude of the soul that makes the creature endlessly lickerish of embellishments in diet."

Cicero, however, happens to be our best guide, because the meaning of his version is made clear by Lucretius. He says "the pleasure can be *variari distinguique* but not increased." <sup>25</sup> The first of the verbs italicized applies properly to color and the second to needlework, as may be gleaned in the lexicon. Lucretius confirms this: "It hurts us not a whit to lack the garment bright with purple and gold and embroidered with striking designs, provided there still be a plain cloak to fend off the cold." <sup>26</sup>

When once the meaning of *poikillo* has been fixed as "embellish" and applicable alike to diet, clothing, and housing, the doctrine can be extended with precision. The function of walls is to afford protection from the weather; the enjoyment of this is a basic pleasure, and, being basic, cannot be increased. If the walls are decorated, the enjoyment of them is merely a decorative pleasure. Similarly, the function of a garment is to avert the pain arising from cold and the resulting pleasure is basic and, being such, cannot be increased but is merely embellished if the cloth is gaily colored or brocaded.

The case is not different in respect of diet. The satisfaction of natural hunger is the basic pleasure, which is not increased but merely embellished by richness of diet. Epicurus is recorded by a late doxographer as saying: "I am gorged with pleasure in this poor body of mine living on bread and water." 27 Porphyry records him as saying: "It is better for you to lie down upon a cheap cot and be free of fear than to have a gilded bedstead and a luxurious table and be full of trouble." 28

In the same Authorized Doctrine, 18, in which the ceiling of pleasure for the flesh is defined, the ceiling of pleasure for the mind is set forth: "As for the mind, its limit of pleasure is begotten by reasoning out these very problems and those akin to these, all that once created the worst fears for the mind." These words need not seem enigmatical: the worst fears are created for the mind through false opinions concerning death and the gods, the topic of Authorized Doctrines 1 and 2. These fears rank in point of importance with false opinions concerning pleasure and pain, the topic of Doctrines 2 and 4. The cure for all these false opinions and the fears they entail was dubbed by detractors the tetrapharmakon, or fourfold remedy. It is charmingly elaborated by Epicurus in the letter to Menoecus, which alone of his extant writings possesses literary grace.

In this letter the doctrine of the basic pleasures and the consequent fullness of pleasure is elaborated: "It is for this that we do everything, to be free from pain and fear, and when we succeed in this, all the tempest of the soul is stilled, the creature feeling no need to go farther as to something lacking and to seek something else by which the good of soul and body shall be made perfect."29 In speaking of "going farther" and "seeking something more" he refers to the superfluous or merely embellishing pleasures.

#### PLEASURE NOT INCREASED BY IMMORTALITY

At the same time that the denial of immortality resulted in placing body and soul upon a parity and required the formulation of a dualistic good, it demanded a doctrinal counterpoise for the surrender of belief in immortality. That this surrender was recognized in the reasoning of Epicurus as a further delimitation of the scope of pleasure is indicated by the position of the Authorized Doctrine in which the remedial doctrine is stated; it is No. 19 and follows that on the ceilings of pleasure: "Infinite time and finite time are characterized by equal pleasure, if one measures the limits of pleasure by reason." This is both paradoxical and subtle. It is shocking to Christian feeling and was hardly less so to the pagan of antiquity. To the multitude, as Lucretius observed, it was a gloomy and repulsive thought.<sup>30</sup> To Platonists, with their stately, elaborate, and mystical eschatology, it must have seemed like nihilism.

Its subtlety is equally manifest. As will presently be shown, Epicurus maintained that pleasure is not altered in kind by the fact of duration or extension; here he declares that it is not increased in quantity. All pleasures have fixed ceilings and fixed magnitudes. When in the words of the Doctrine he speaks of "measuring the limits of pleasure by reason," he means recognition of the fact that for the body health and the expectation of its continuance is the limit of pleasure, and that for the mind the limit is the emancipation from all fear of the gods or death. The

attainment to this state, he now declares, is a condition of one dimension. He seems to think of it as an Alpinist would regard the ascent of an arduous mountain peak. The pleasure would not be increased by remaining on the peak.

## THE FULLNESS OF PLEASURE

It is possible, however, to arrive at a higher degree of precision, always a chief objective in the reasoning of Epicurus. This higher precision depends upon discerning the subsidiary doctrine of the fullness of pleasure. For this there is a double logical basis: the first basis is the infinity of time, from which it is deduced that there can be nothing new. As the Epicurean Ecclesiastes expresses it, 1:9: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." Lucretius reminds us in similar vein "that all things are always the same" and "no new pleasure can be devised."<sup>31</sup> From this it follows that the exhaustion of pleasures is feasible and the fullness of pleasure is attainable.

The second basis of this subsidiary doctrine is the existence of natural ceilings of pleasure, which, being thus limited, could be enjoyed to the full. Out of this was begotten the familiar metaphor of the aged sage as taking leave of life like a satisfied banqueter. This theme was chosen by Lucretius for the ringing finale of his third book; he personifies Nature and represents her as rebuking the complainer because he cannot depart "as a guest who has had his fill of life" or "as one who is full and has had his fill of experience." <sup>32</sup> The wise man, on the contrary, can say *bene vixi*, "I have lived the good life." This is the cry of triumph uttered by old Diogenes of Oenoanda; to quote his own words: "Facing the sunset of life because of my age and on the verge of taking my leave of life with a paean of victory because of the enjoyment of the fullness of all pleasures." <sup>33</sup>

If still further precision on this topic be sought, it may be observed that this doctrine of the fullness of pleasure is supplementary to the doctrine that death is anesthesia. The latter may help to reconcile men to the state of being dead but it fails to compensate for the surrender of immortality.

Only the possibility of having enjoyed all pleasures to the full in this life can counterbalance the relinquishment of the hope of enjoying eternal pleasures in the afterlife. This is the "true understanding" of which Epicurus speaks: "Hence the true understanding of the fact that [death is nothing to us](#) renders enjoyable the mortality of existence, not by adding infinite time but by taking away the yearning for immortality." <sup>34</sup> What cancels the yearning for immortality is the conviction that the fullness of pleasure is possible in this mortal life. The ingenuity of this argument is undeniable; it means the victory over death and we have proof of its wide acceptance in the vigor with which St. Paul in his ardent plea to the Corinthians champions the resurrection of the dead as a new means of victory over death.

Incidentally, without close scrutiny it is difficult to discern by what sort of logic this doctrine could be reconciled with the perfect blissfulness of the gods. If pleasure is not increased by the length of its duration, how could the lot of the gods seem more desirable than that of the

mortal sage? With this problem Epicurus did not fail to deal. The topic must await detailed treatment in the ensuing chapter on the True Piety. Here it will suffice to say that the superiority of the happiness of the gods is represented as consisting in the perfect assurance of its continuance. Involved with this judgment is a startling paradox: what renders the happiness of the gods eternal is this perfect assurance of its continuance; its eternity is a result, not a factor of causation. It is a quality of life.

The paradox that ranks major to this, that happiness is not increased in magnitude by immortality, has found its way into Western thought through the literature of consolation. Obviously, if happiness is not increased by immortality, neither can it be increased by length of mortal life. The philosopher Seneca expatiates upon this inferred aspect of the doctrine, though without mentioning its source, and comforts his correspondent by dwelling feelingly upon the wisdom of measuring a human life by its achievement rather than its length.<sup>35</sup> In the course of this homily he compares the long and merely vegetative life to that of a tree and this detail survives for us in the poem of Ben Jonson which begins,

It is not growing like a tree, in bulk,

Doth make man better be.

But the last lines of the poem hark back definitely to Epicurus:

In small proportions we just beauty see

And in small measure life may perfect be.

The sentiment recurs in Christian hymnology:

He liveth long who liveth well.

Such is often the fate of Epicurus, to be quoted anonymously if approved, by name if condemned.