

PD19 And The Meaning Of No "Greater" Pleasure

Post by “reneliza” of August 24, 2022 at 1:13 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

I debated whether to respond to [Kalosyni](#) 's post above, but, the more I thought about it today, the more I wanted to share my perspective on some of her thoughts. I am not saying either of us is "right" or "wrong," but I'm sharing my perspective. Please, [Kalosyni](#) , do not take any of this personally or as an ad hominem attack. It is sincerely not meant in that way! You bring a thoughtful, curious, personal perspective to this forum which I greatly appreciate. I hope I do the same and that my response below is in an Epicurean spirit of open, frank discussion.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

I think that ataraxia and aponia are important, however I view them differently -- because modern life is really at odds with being "pain free or untroubled".

My first thought on reading this was: If modern life - in fact, life in any time - is at odds with being "pain free or untroubled," why do we find this acceptable? I don't want to think that "that's just the way things are." I don't want to accept that.

I want to envision a way of living in the modern world in which my mind *can* be untroubled, in which I can face any issue that comes up with composure and clear thinking. I want to think it's possible to assess every choice before me without mental anxiety or worry or distress. That's what ataraxia is about for me. It is an achievable way of experiencing the world here and now. It's not some ideal, Platonic, unattainable state. I may not have it all the time, but I can see it as a goal to work toward and catch glimpses of it so I know it's real.

Same with aponia. Epicurus obviously couldn't have meant it as a literally "pain-free existence" because he tells us he was in excruciating pain at the time of his death. The only way to not feel pain is without sensation, and if one is without sensation, you're already dead. But he did say it was possible to experience something. He describes it in PD3 as "Where that which gives pleasure exists, during the time it is present, there is neither pain nor that which causes pain in body or mind nor either of these together." The word for pain is actually άλγος "pain (of either mind or body)", but also sorrow, trouble, grief, distress, woe. And aponia is actually from ἄπονος (aponos) which has connotations of "freedom from toil or trouble." So, (as DeWitt says it) it's the whole "sound mind in a sound body" idea. We can also work toward a healthy body that

doesn't give us trouble. We're going to have some aches and pains as we grow old, but maintaining health will alleviate some of that trouble.

I think Epicurus is also suggesting we toil too much and trouble ourselves too much. I need to go back and re-read the full *Property Management* by Philodemus, but I seem to remember there are pertinent sections in there on that topic.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

We certainly wouldn't want to wait to be completely untroubled in order to enjoy life.

I agree completely, and I think Epicurus calls us to not wait to experience pleasure and to enjoy life. But I don't think we have to be "completely untroubled" to get a taste of what it might be like to live untroubled.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

an active modern life will bring us into "stressful" moments.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

things can be a mix of pleasure and stress -- for example going to a coffeehouse can sometimes be too noisy (or unpleasing music is playing), but as long as there is over-all more pleasure than stress we will choose this activity. Also over time what might originally feel stressful can be adapted to.

I couldn't put my finger on what bothered me with these, but I think it's the emphasis on "stress" and "stressful" here. I suggest replacing "stress" with "pain" to see how that feels. I can certainly see how "things can be a mix of pleasure and pain"; but, to me, the word "stress" adds an emotional dimension - "stress" is a way of adding our emotional reaction to the immediate feeling of pain. I'm not sure that's necessary if we're aiming at the (eventual) goal of well-being or ataraxia and aponia or happiness or completely pleasurable life. If sitting in the coffeehouse is too painful, move to a different coffeehouse. If the music can be ignored or one puts earbuds in to block the noise, do that.

So, I agree with the second part of that excerpt but again, I would advocate for not adding the emotional baggage of "stress". If one thinks of it as "stress" or anxiety or annoyance or something else, I think that feeds on itself. Pain is simply negative feeling without further judgement. If the pain is to be experienced to experience a greater pleasure, then sit with it. If the pain is simply painful, do everything to rid yourself of it. There is no virtue to "grin and bear it" for the sake of grinning and bearing it.

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

life requires a certain amount of "striving" or work. Most people until they are retired work at a job to make money for the purpose of survival (there are stay-at-home moms which is a big job in itself). Striving brings with it a certain amount of stress, but hopefully we can find ways to adapt which isn't too stressful (or jobs which aren't too stressful). Then beyond this for people who are retired, life still needs some form of striving, or else the will to live diminishes. And the striving could be any type of interest or goal (big or small) which requires some effort but also feels engaging and important in some way. And striving will always bring with it a small amount of mental stress. I would say that it is very important to make sure the level of stress does not become overwhelming.

"Striving" struck the same chord in me as "stress/stressful." It will be a little less than a decade until I can consider retirement. I try to not constantly associate my job with stress, striving, and survival, although I admit there are days and situations that cause me pain, mostly mental. However, that again to me is an argument for working toward a mind that can think clearly and a body that isn't in pain. That word "striving" to me conjures Protestant work ethic, "idle hands are the devil's plaything," and similar themes. We can work toward goals, personal and professional, that aren't characterized by mental stress and striving. To me, the last sentence sums up the issue: "it is very important to make sure the level of stress does not become overwhelming." The way to make sure the "level of stress does not become overwhelming" is to cultivate the very freedom from trouble in the mind for which Epicurus appears to advocate.

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There's so much good in here, but I want to just specifically pull out this one quote "Pain is simply negative feeling without further judgement."

I think that's great, and the kind of practical thing that I could actually take and put into action in my life immediately. It's reminiscent of the quote "pain is unavoidable, suffering is optional" which I have always really liked. The epicurean goal is to eliminate all pain but... sometimes things happen, and also I'm super clumsy so sometimes I run into a door frame or kick a wall and stub my toe while walking down the hall. There's so much to be said for just accepting and feeling that pain (when it is unavoidable) and not ADDING to it with judgments or resistance to feeling it, which is when it goes beyond just pain, and becomes suffering, or stress, or anxiety, or any of these other things that are generally viewed as being problems to be solved beyond the pain itself.