

An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics

Post by "Cassius" of October 28, 2022 at 11:16 PM

Going a little further, I think the way we unwind [*all sensations are true*](#) gives us a good pattern. Sounds like Epicurus did say something like that, but if we take it at face value and unthinkingly, then we and he both look like fools. The statement has to be considered and understood at a deeper level - at the level in which we see "true" means "honest" in this context, rather than "fully consistent with the actual and verifiable facts."

Same goes with considering pleasure to be the highest or greatest good. If we pursue a particular pleasure recklessly and singlemindedly we can easily get ourselves killed and again look like - or be - a fool. Words have to be evaluated in context, and our human context requires us to be alive in order for pleasure to have any meaning to us. Getting ourselves killed is generally not the best way to maximize our future net pleasure. So considering these words ("pursue pleasure!") outside of our human context can get us into big trouble very fast. The penalty for misunderstanding this might not just be more pain than pleasure - the penalty might well be premature death. (And looked at in that way, this ultimate issue is outside the weighing of net pleasure vs pain. If you get yourself killed instantly driving 200 miles an hour you don't in fact experience more pain than pleasure from that choice, you die instantly. So this too is a point that the mind has to understand and isn't revealed purely through the senses.)

That's what I think Dewitt grasps and is on to, and this is an example of aggressive thinking which I think makes him one of the best interpreters of Epicurus for practical application of the philosophy. Yes pursue pleasure as the end (because virtue and holiness are illusions), but unless you are sure about your choice (dying for a friend might be an example) don't get yourself killed doing it. Life comes first in order that you may have pleasure.

Its kind of hard to accept it, but it may have taken Dewitt to bring down to earth something that should always have been obvious in the teachings of Epicurus. I don't know any other commentator who has raised this point as well as Dewitt or even thought it significant to talk about. Most commentators are content to let Epicurus sound superficially like a spoiled child without going to bat for a reasonable interpretation of what he was saying.

In contrast, I suspect this relationship was in fact obvious to Epicurus' followers in the ancient world before the Great Corruption took over.