

An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics

Post by “Cassius” of November 2, 2022 at 5:25 AM

So maybe one huge topic is the question of what 'good' even means? For example:

Quote

In 1094b15-20, Aristotle writes something that I think Epicurus would actually agree with:

“In many cases good things bring harmful results. There are instances of men ruined by wealth, and others by courage.”

Carrying on my last comment about challenging whether there is a single good, I think Epicurus might object that if you're being rigorous about the meaning of 'good' then wealth and courage (in that example) are in fact not good in themselves at all - that they are only contextually good - and that thus Aristotle was wrong in even talking about them as 'good' if he is going to be true to a single definition.

And is this not why we end up with the formulation that there is in fact nothing good but Pleasure, nothing bad but Pain? (Do we have that in Epicurus himself or is that Frances Wright's summary of his point?)

I think this points in the same direction:

Quote

However, his next statement struck me and I'm going to quote Rackham's translation at length:

“And further, the life of active virtue is essentially pleasant. For the feeling of pleasure is an experience of the soul, and a thing gives a man pleasure in regard to which he is described as 'fond of' so-and-so: for instance a horse gives pleasure to one fond of horses, a play to one fond of the theater, and similarly just actions are pleasant to the lover of justice (δικαία dikaia “just”), and acts conforming with virtue generally to the lover of virtue. [11] But whereas the mass of mankind take pleasure in things that conflict with one another,² because they are not pleasant of their own nature, things pleasant by nature are pleasant to lovers of what is noble, and so always are actions in conformity with virtue, so that they are pleasant essentially as well as pleasant to lovers of the noble. [12] Therefore their life has no need of pleasure as a sort of

ornamental appendage,³ but contains its pleasure in itself. For there is the further consideration that the man who does not enjoy doing noble actions is not a good man at all: no one would call a man just if he did not like acting justly, nor liberal if he did not like doing liberal things, and similarly with the other virtues. [13] But if so, actions in conformity with virtue must be essentially pleasant.”

To me Aristotle seems to be setting up an abstraction of the pleasures of "virtue" or "what is noble" as being somehow absolutely good in themselves all the time and for everyone.

OK maybe so if you want to talk in map-like terms, but again that's a map and doesn't really exist except in our minds as a construct that is useful when understood to be limited, deadly when imagined to be reality itself.

Quote

And again the same thing here: This also sets up another stark distinction between Aristotle and Epicurus in that that latter insisted that no one was ever too young or too old to practice philosophy and let it benefit you! Aristotle seems to say, “Are you happy? Can you be happy? Well, certainly not until you’re dead I can’t say one way or the other.”

Aristotle is trying to set up the cold hard piece of paper as the standard by which we judge life itself, rather than recognizing it as a map that is useful for communication but a trap if considered to be handed down from a divine creator of the universe!