

An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics

Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2022 at 6:14 AM

OK as to this:

Quote

Metrodorus asserts in his Reply to the Sophists: 'Hence this very thing is the Good (τὸ ἀγαθόν > τὰγαθοῦ), escape from the evil; for there is nowhere for the Good (τὰγαθὸν) to be put when nothing painful to the body or distressing to the mind is any longer making way for it.' Epicurus too makes a similar statement to the effect that the Good is a thing that arises out of your very escape from evil and from your memory and reflexion and gratitude that this has happened to you. His words are these: 'For what produces a jubilation unsurpassed is the contrast of the great evil escaped; and this is the nature of good, (τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φύσιν) if you apply your mind rightly and then stand firm and do not stroll about (περιπατῆ) prating meaninglessly about good (περὶ ἀγαθοῦ).' Oh, the great pleasure and blessed state this company enjoy, as they revel in suffering no hardship or anxiety or pain! (Usener Fragment 423 (Plutarch, That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible, Section 7, Greek text. See also here for Loeb.)

So, the Epicureans had a very clear definition of what The Good was. It was simple and direct, and they didn't see any need to "stroll about prating meaninglessly about good." And remember, especially in the context of the above Plutarch excerpt, that Epicurus said, "I do not think I could conceive of the good without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms." (Usener 67) If we are filled to the top with pleasure (The Good), "there is nowhere for the Good (τὰγαθὸν) to be put when nothing painful to the body or distressing to the mind is any longer making way for it." Aristotle's slicing, dicing, hair-splitting, micro-analysis becomes superfluous and "meaningless," literally κενῶς kenos "meaninglessly, emptily, vainly" (the same word Epicurus uses for "the void").

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I agree with that and I think maybe it is important to discuss how it is clear and simple and direct.

Isn't the reason it is clear and simple and direct something close to this:

Since there is not in reality some single good that everything is aiming toward, any any single definition of words, we can only define "the good" in hypothetical terms. Since we have to use words to communicate, we define "pleasure" as that which we feel to be pleasurable, and 'pain' as that which we feel to be painful. Thus there is no more accurate way to define 'the good' and 'the bad' in words other than as the opposite of one another. Since we are forcing ourselves to discuss what to choose and what to avoid, we can define "Pleasure" in words no more specifically than the absence of its opposite (pain). Likewise we can define 'pain' in words no more specifically than the absence of its opposite - pleasure. We can list examples of pleasures and pains til the cows come home but those examples always remain examples. We can never reduce pleasure and pain or good and bad to real experiences other than to point to individual instances, because rightly understood pleasure and pain are feelings, and our words aren't feelings - discussion of feelings as words or concepts is nothing more than artificial 'categorizing' or word-play. And wordplay is mapmaking -- fun and useful but not to be viewed as creating a kind of supernatural reality which we should defer to and worship.

I think I have now caught up in my reading of Don's series so I look forward to more!