

An Epicurean Study of Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics

Post by "Cassius" of November 2, 2022 at 9:44 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I don't think Epicurus was doing that at all. I think Epicurus *was* in fact saying there is a "single" good - "the good" αγαθον - and that good is pleasure.

Yes I think that we'll want to continue to discuss this point and discuss multiple layers of meaning, such as DeWitt does with ["all sensations are true."](#) I think that is a very clear example that words have to be defined in context. All sensations are reported honestly, for example, but all sensations do not reveal the full "truth" of the full context.

So I would say the same with "pleasure." Pleasure is considered as a feeling is absolutely the only positive guide given by nature to point to things to choose. But the word "Pleasure" can also be considered as a general concept (same with "happiness") and from that perspective the word is like a map that can be very useful but is not at all the same as the real world that it seeks to describe.

If someone wants a "map" and wants to drill down to a single word that is usable to describe all feelings of pleasure, then "Pleasure" fills the bill and within that philosophical framework is very useful. But the word "Pleasure" does not and cannot contain within it the full feeling of every experience of pleasure, and so people chafe under the idea that the single term embraces all instances of enjoyment.

So while I can agree with you that "there is a 'single' good ... and that good is pleasure" I think the problem that Epicurus is pointing to is that this statement has to be viewed in full context and not considered to be anything but a formulation of words. Words have meaning, but they only have the limited meaning that we give to them by definitions.

As I see it that's your whole problem (and I agree with you) about Aristotle: he's chopping words into definitions that suit his preferences. The problem is not that his preferences are "wrong," the problem is that there is in fact no absolute standard of right and wrong as to how to define words. Choice of language is only one of the first and most obvious problems - shades of meaning aren't defined by God or by ideal forms, so the definitions we choose to give to words are entirely up to us. And if we don't always keep that in mind, we start thinking that Aristotle is some brilliant genius of the ages who somehow figured out things that weren't there to be observed by anyone else who cares to take the time to pay attention.

That's what I think is being indicated by this sentence in the letter to Herodotus: "First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning." I think we all agree that Epicurus rejected Plato's version of "ideas" - the ideal forms - as being divine or absolute. If they aren't divine or absolute, then the logical conclusion is we assign them meaning according to our choice to describe what we observe through the senses.

I think we have previously had different opinions on this next statement, but this is what I think is also indicated by Diognes Laertius when he recorded:

"The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined. Of investigations some concern actual things, others mere words. This is a brief summary of the division of their philosophy and their views on the criterion of truth."

So this is indeed a big issue and I think that you are rightly rejecting Aristotle's arbitrary categorization, but the next step - which I think that Epicurus was making clear - is that ALL categorization (all maps) are "artificial." I think Epicurus was that that in the end all we can do is assign words to what we observe. We always need to be clear that those assignments are our own choices. We work hard to make sure that the assignments are consistent across words and across sensory observations, but we always have to be clear that the assignments aren't universal or established by gods or even by Nature.

All leading back to when we decide to talk about a "single good" we're talking about a concept that we as humans have invented. We've hopefully defined it honestly based on our observations of the way nature works, but in deciding to use a single word to describe the way nature works we are making that formulation / drawing that map ourselves.

I would expect we'll see example after example of that as you go forward through the rest of N.E..