

Perspectives On "Proving" That Pleasure is "The Good"

Post by "Cassius" of December 20, 2022 at 11:08 AM

[Quote from Todd](#)

but I'll need to try to collect my thoughts a bit more to keep this from becoming a rambling stream-of-consciousness on my end.

Don't let that worry you too much!

Also:

To me what you are bringing up reminds me of this which [Frances Wright addresses in her Chapter 15](#). I am not at all sure that what she is writing is what Epicurus would say, and in fact I think she goes significantly further and off in a different direction than Epicurus did. But the description of the topic I think is very much on point, and deciding whether what she says is right or consistent with Epicurus might help people think about what is really involved in the question of "theory" in the first place. Is this correct? - *"In philosophy — that is, in knowledge — inquiry is everything; theory and hypothesis are worse than nothing."*

Quote from Frances Wright A Few Days In Athens Chapter 15

"I admit the truth of the metaphor," said Theon. "But may we not simplify too much as well as too little? May we not push investigation beyond the limits assigned to human reason, and, with a boldness approaching to profanity, tear, without removing, the veil which enwraps the mysteries of creation from our scrutiny?"

"Without challenging the meaning of the terms you have employed," said Metrodorus, "I would observe, that there is little danger of our pushing investigation too far. Unhappily the limits prescribed to us by our few and imperfect senses must ever cramp the sphere of our observation, as compared to the boundless range of things; and that even when we shall have strained and improved our senses to the uttermost. We trace an effect to a cause, and that cause to another cause, and so on, till we hold some few links of a chain, whose extent like the charmed circle, is without beginning as without end."

"I apprehend the difficulties," observed Leontium, "which embarrass the mind of our young friend. Like most aspirants after knowledge, he has a vague and incorrect idea of what he is pursuing, and still more, of what may be attained. In the schools you have

hitherto frequented," she continued, addressing the youth, "certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained. You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge. She receives no truths, until she has tested them by experience; she advances no opinions, unsupported by the testimony of facts; she acknowledges no virtue, but that involved in beneficial actions; no vice, but that involved in actions hurtful to ourselves or to others. Above all, she advances no dogmas, — is slow to assert what is, — and calls nothing impossible.

The science of philosophy is simply a science of observation, both as regards the world without us, and the world within; and, to advance in it, are requisite only sound senses, well developed and exercised faculties, and a mind free of prejudice. The objects she has in view, as regards the external world, are, first, to see things as they are, and secondly, to examine their structure, to ascertain their properties, and to observe their relations one to the other. — As respects the world within, or the philosophy of mind, she has in view, first, to examine our sensations, or the impressions of external things on our senses; which operation involves, and is involved in, the examination of those external things themselves: secondly, to trace back to our sensations, the first development of all our faculties; and again, from these sensations, and the exercise of our different faculties as developed by them, to trace the gradual formation of our moral feelings, and of all our other emotions: thirdly, to analyze all these our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, — that is, to examine the qualities of our own internal, sentient matter, with the same, and yet more, closeness of scrutiny, than we have applied to the examination of the matter that is without us: finally, to investigate the justness of our moral feelings, and to weigh the merit and demerit of human actions; which is, in other words, to judge of their tendency to produce good or evil, — to excite pleasurable or painful feelings in ourselves or others. You will observe, therefore, that, both as regards the philosophy of physics, and the philosophy of mind, all is simply a process of investigation. It is a journey of discovery, in which, in the one case, we commission our senses to examine the qualities of that matter, which is around us, and, in the other, endeavor, by attention to the varieties of our consciousness, to gain a knowledge of those qualities of matter which constitute our susceptibilities of thought and feeling."

"This explanation is new to me," observed Theon, "and I will confess, startling to my imagination. It is pure materialism!"

“You may so call it,” rejoined Leontium, “But when you have so called it — what then? The question remains: is it true? or is it false?”

“I should be disposed to say — false, since it confounds all my preconceived notions of truth and error, of right and wrong.”

“Of truth and error, of right and wrong, in the sense of *correct* or *incorrect* is, I presume, your meaning,” said Leontium. “You do not involve moral rectitude or the contrary in a matter of opinion?”

“If the opinion have a moral or immoral tendency I do,” said the youth.

“A simple matter of fact can have no such tendency or ought not, if we are rational creatures.”

“And would not, if we were always reasoning beings,” said Metrodorus; “but as the ignorance and superstition which surround our infancy and youth, favor the development of the imagination at the expense of the judgment, we are ever employed in the coining of chimeras, rather than in the discovery of truths; and if ever the poor judgment make an effort to dispel these fancies of the brain, she is repulsed, like a sacrilegious intruder into religious mysteries.”

“Until our opinions are made to rest on facts,” said Leontium, “the error of our young friend — the most dangerous of all errors, being one of principle and involving many — must ever pervade the world. And it was because I suspected this leading misconception of the very nature — of the very end and aim of the science he is pursuing, that I attempted an explanation of what should be sought, and of what can alone be attained. In philosophy — that is, in knowledge — inquiry is everything; theory and hypothesis are worse than nothing. Truth is but approved facts. Truth, then, is one with the knowledge of these facts. To shrink from inquiry, is to shrink from knowledge. And to prejudge an opinion as true or false, because it interferes with some preconceived abstraction we call vice or virtue, is as if we were to draw the picture of a man we had never seen, and then, upon seeing him, were to dispute his being the man in question, because unlike our picture.”

“But if this opinion interfered with another, of whose truth we imagined ourselves certain.”

“Then clearly, in one or the other, we are mistaken; and the only way to settle the difficulty is to examine and compare the evidences of both.”

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The discussion goes on further from there but that part is probably the heart of the question. What is the proper attitude toward "theory"?