

The Definitive "Chrysippus' Hand Argument" Thread

Post by "Cassius" of April 18, 2023 at 8:47 PM



Earlier today, after revisiting the "Chrysippus hand argument" from Torquatus' "On Ends" speech, I am unlike Chrysippus' hand - have a lack for something - and that something is a Definitive Thread on the topic. I would like to eventually make a graphic for the front page of the website that highlights this episode in the Epicurean texts because I think it is a good way to focus on a critical issue. We have discussed the issue previously a number of times, probably more than the two threads listed below, and I know we discussed it in the Lucretius Today podcast when we went through the Torquatus material.

But I am convinced from my own lack of comfort with this passage that there is a lot more to be learned. Chrysippus and/or the Stoics seemed to think that this argument against pleasure as the good was a killer, significant enough to be featured in the statue dedicated to his memory - at least if Torquatus's story can be credited as supporting that conclusion.

So the first thing I will do in this thread is to quote again the Reid translation of the relevant passage, and before going further, I would like to challenge anyone who has the time to contribute - before we go much further - their explanation of what he is arguing. Before we can deal with whether he is right or wrong, we first have to understand what he is saying, and it seems clear that there are some underlying and unstated presumptions behind his framing of the question that have to be brought to the surface.

First, here is the quote:

Quote

[38] Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension.

[39] But actually at Athens, as my father used to tell me, when he wittily and humorously ridiculed the Stoics, there is in the Ceramicus a statue of Chrysippus,

sitting with his hand extended, which hand indicates that he was fond of the following little argument: *Does your hand, being in its present condition, feel the lack of anything at all? Certainly of nothing. But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack. I agree. Pleasure then is not the supreme good.* My father used to say that even a statue would not talk in that way, if it had power of speech. The inference is shrewd enough as against the Cyrenaics, but does not touch Epicurus. For if the only pleasure were that which, as it were, tickles the senses, if I may say so, and attended by sweetness overflows them and insinuates itself into them, neither the hand nor any other member would be able to rest satisfied with the absence of pain apart from a joyous activity of pleasure. But if it is the highest pleasure, as Epicurus believes, to be in no pain, then the first admission, that the hand in its then existing condition felt no lack, was properly made to you, Chrysippus, but the second improperly, I mean that it would have felt a lack had pleasure been the supreme good. It would certainly feel no lack, and on this ground, that anything which is cut off from the state of pain is in the state of pleasure.

As to underlying but unstated presumptions, there seems to be something going on in the assertion: "*But if pleasure were the supreme good, it would feel a lack.*"

Chrysippus seems to expect us to take as a given that hand would feel the absence of the supreme good at that moment if the supreme good were pleasure. Is that an assertion with which everyone would agree? What is it presuming that might need to be brought to the surface? That one characteristic of the supreme good is that it is always present and - if absent - that the presence would be felt immediately? Why would that be so and what is the implication of it?

I don't think we can understand Chrysippus' assertion, or Torquatus' explanation of why it is wrong, if we don't understand that point.

Anyone want to try to explain in their own words what Chrysippus is saying and why?

Prior Threads:

- 1 - [Starting here in a thread from 2021](#) (probably the best existing thread)
- 2 - [Comments in Kalosyni's "Slider" thread of 2023](#)

#HighestGood