

Ruminations on leading with “Pleasure and Pain as the Guide” v “The Goal is Pleasure”

Post by “Godfrey” of June 7, 2023 at 9:10 PM

This subject came up in a Zoom last week, here is my attempt to elaborate.

One of the primary things that opponents of Epicurus seize on negatively is the idea that pleasure is the goal of life or the greatest good. I’ve been toying with the question: “This may have been a useful formulation for a specific ancient argument, but is it a useful formulation of the philosophy?” Did Epicurus conceive of his philosophy in this way? Or is this another sledgehammer tactic from his opponents to discredit him by removing the nuance from his thinking? All too often, I think that it’s used for the latter.

When practicing the philosophy, I find that the most benefit comes from being aware of both pleasure and pain, while striving for pleasure. To focus strictly on my pleasure without an understanding of my pain is ultimately unfulfilling. Pain, after all, is half of the guide and Epicurus constantly makes that clear. We can’t paper over what pains us with pleasure. If we want to maximize pleasure, at some point we need to address our pains, whether we eliminate them or just figure out how to live with them. That’s pretty self-evident to most of us, I imagine.

I did a quick review of the Principle Doctrines and the Letter to Menoikeus to see how intricately pleasure and pain are intertwined. Wherever Epicurus describes pleasure, he clarifies what he means by tying it to pain or adding other nuance. This is because pleasure and pain are, together, the Canonic faculty of the Feelings and thus the guide to a life of well-being. Pleasure, by itself, is but half of that faculty and this must be understood in order to live a life in accord with nature. Pleasure as the goal or greatest good is a concept that only comes after this fact.

Principal Doctrines (Saint-Andre translation):

[PD01](#): *That which is blissful and immortal has no troubles itself, nor does it cause trouble for others, so that it is not affected by anger or gratitude (for all such things come about through weakness). [A primary criticism of a life of pleasure is that it is selfish and takes no account of others. Here, in the very first PD, is one refutation of that.]*

[PD03-PD05](#): *The limit of enjoyment is the removal of all pains. Wherever and for however long pleasure is present, there is neither bodily pain nor mental distress. Pain does not last continuously in the flesh; instead, the sharpest pain lasts the shortest time, a pain that exceeds bodily pleasure lasts only a few days, and diseases that last a long time involve delights that exceed their pains. It is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously; and whoever lacks this cannot live joyously. [This is a description of how to work with the Feelings. Note that*

I've grouped them in paragraph format, as we have speculated elsewhere is the way that they were actually written.]

In 4 of the first 5 doctrines, then, Epicurus has defined what he means by pleasure as part of the faculty of Feelings, and his definition includes pain. Interestingly, pain both of oneself and of others. He also ties it in with other conclusions of his science: the gods in [PD01](#) and death in [PD02](#). The remaining doctrines that deal with pleasure add detail to this description.

From the Letter to Menoikeus, 128-132 (Saint-Andre translation):

[After discussing the desires, he continues:] *The steady contemplation of these facts enables you to understand everything that you accept or reject in terms of the health of the body and the serenity of the soul — since that is the goal of a completely happy life. Our every action is done so that we will not be in pain or fear. As soon as we achieve this, the soul is released from every storm, since an animal has no other need and must seek nothing else to complete the goodness of body and soul. Thus we need pleasure only when we are in pain caused by its absence; but when we are not in pain then we have no need of pleasure.*

This is why we say that pleasure is the beginning and the end of a completely happy life. For we recognize it as the primary and innate good, we honor it in everything we accept or reject, and we achieve it if we judge every good thing by the standard of how that thing affects us. And because this is the primary and inborn good, we do not choose every pleasure. Instead, we pass up many pleasures when we will gain more of what we need from doing so. And we consider many pains to be better than pleasures, if we experience a greater pleasure for a long time from having endured those pains. So every pleasure is a good thing because its nature is favorable to us, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen — just as every pain is a bad thing, yet not every pain is always to be shunned. It is proper to make all these decisions through measuring things side by side and looking at both the advantages and disadvantages, for sometimes we treat a good thing as bad and a bad thing as good.... [This passage calls pleasure the primary and innate good, but overall the passage is a description of the faculty of Feelings and how we work with that faculty. The primary and innate good is only in that context.]

So when we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of decadent people and lying in a bed of desire, as is believed by those who are ignorant or who don't understand us or who are ill-disposed to us, but to be free from bodily pain and mental disturbance. For a pleasant life is produced not by drinking and endless parties and bedding boys and women and consuming fish and other delicacies of an extravagant table, but by sober reasoning, searching out the cause of everything we accept or reject, and driving out opinions that cause the greatest trouble in the soul. [This passage is often cited by the “absence of pain” enthusiasts, but note how the focus of this and the previous passage is the close relationship between pleasure and pain and how to use the faculty of the Feelings.]

Practical wisdom is the foundation of all these things and is the greatest good. [Practical wisdom is understanding how to properly work with pleasure and pain as the guide of life. This

gives it a case for being the greatest good. But isn't the greatest good pleasure? Is "the greatest good" hyperbole rather than the basis of the philosophy?] *Thus practical wisdom is more valuable than philosophy and is the source of every other excellence, teaching us that it is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously. For the excellences grow up together with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them.* [Again, practical wisdom is understanding how to work with the faculty of the Feelings.]

To my understanding, there is a case to be made that the fundamental description of Epicurus' ethics is "the faculty of pleasure and pain is the guide to life" and is a much better description than "pleasure is the goal (or the greatest good)". Better for understanding EP, and better for discussing with opponents. Further, this seems to be in keeping with current neuroscience, although that's an issue for another post. Focusing on the Canon is the starting point for an accurate understanding of the philosophy. Focusing on pleasure is important, but as the be-all end-all it tends to make a caricature of the philosophy. Epicurus' extant texts have the nuance to avoid this characterization, but unfortunately, opponents such as Cicero have laid the groundwork for using a cartoon of pleasure, minus the balance of pain, as yet another means to discredit EP. Rather than starting with attempting to refute the characterizations of others, wouldn't we be prudent to emphasize our correct understanding of Epicurus?

Hopefully this makes some sense... any thoughts?