

Would You Rather Live For A Week As (1) Epicurus During the Last Week of His Life or (2) An Anonymous Shepherd Laying In The Grass In The Summertime With No Pain At All?

Post by "Cassius" of September 13, 2023 at 7:04 AM

Thanks Don. Possibly for present purposes we are coming near to exhausting the ataraxia angle, with the immediate issue of ataraxia not being a transcendent state of epiphany or a final destination that once achieved either justifies the effort to that point or describes a particular experience of a particular activity which can be equated to "seeing the Mona Lisa before you die" or something specific like that. I am gathering that we both agree with this formulation from Massie:

Quote

the little clause "as long as it is present" indicates that Epicurus does not posit the stability

of katastematic pleasures as everlasting; for this reason the pursuit of ataraxia does not aim

at a beatitude that would transcend our mortal condition. A state of supernatural

blessedness is not an option. It is true that Epicurean texts often invoke the calm bliss the

gods are said to enjoy, but for us the divine is a model, not a destination.

[Quote from Don](#)

I like that idea, and it bumps up against or is adjacent to DeWitt's "the greatest good is life itself" but avoids DeWitt's tautological conundrum since "If life is the greatest good, but the greatest good is that to which everything else points to, so life points to living,, etc."

And yes I agree too. I think Dewitt would have been better off saying 'life in the absence of pain is the greatest good' if he wanted to make a point that "pleasure" isn't the only way to describe the greatest good. If we are rigorously clear in defining and explaining how "life in the absence of pain" is pleasure, then we're all saying much the same thing.

However the ones who *aren't* saying the same thing are the ones - I would think - who imply that "life in the absence of pain" is some specific esoteric and unique experience (like seeing the Mona Lisa) which requires some kind of higher plane of consciousness to understand and does not fall under the umbrella of the term "pleasure" as ordinary people can understand it. And there I would criticize those who simply say "pleasure is the absence of pain" without explaining the issue that we are discussing. I don't fault Epicurus in the letter to Menoeceus because I think his readers of the time would have had reams of other material which make the point clear. And I now think that the point remained clear through Cicero's time given a full reading of what is included in "On Ends."

But over the last 2000 years Cicero's refusal to accept the terminology and his resulting argument that the framework makes no sense has won the day. The real fault is in us because we are so indoctrinated in a restrictive definition of pleasure that we can't see the wider point. So now we have to go back and explain how we got to where we are today and how everything fits together under an expansive definition of pleasure that is more than just "sex, drugs, and rock and roll."

(Which come to think of it is what Torquatus spends so much time doing in his narrative in on ends where he links the virtues to being productive of pleasure.)

I think one of the real challenges is how to convey a mindset such that it isn't shocking to think that if you tell your dentist: "Doctor my tooth does not hurt," then your dentist should justifiably say in return: "Then your tooth is at the height of pleasure!"

Yes it's true that most people don't ordinarily think that way, but that doesn't mean that they can't think that way, or that they wouldn't be better off if they did so.

To use a religious analogy, talking about "pleasure" in a truncated, restricted, narrow, and incomplete form (such as Cicero insists on doing) would be like a Christian talking about Jesus as a good carpenter.