

Episode 194 - The Epicurean Arguments In Cicero's On Ends - Book One - Part 04

Post by “Cassius” of October 2, 2023 at 2:59 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Having listened to that portion now, I can say that I don't know how you managed to edit it in such a way that I nearly made sense in what I was saying! 😊

Not only did I think what you said made perfect sense in the big picture of things, I am going to use the same analysis to make sense of [PD18](#), [PD19](#), and [PD20](#):

Based on:

1. That [PD03](#) states: *"The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful. Wherever pleasure is present, as long as it is there, there is neither pain of body, nor of mind, nor of both at once."*
2. That Diogenes Laertius tells us that Epicurus held there to be only two states of feeling, pleasure and pain.
3. That Torquatus tells us [O.E. Book One, 30] that Epicurus held that *"Moreover, seeing that if you deprive a man of his senses there is nothing left to him, it is inevitable that nature herself should be the arbiter of what is in accord with or opposed to nature. Now what facts does she grasp or with what facts is her decision to seek or avoid any particular thing concerned, unless the facts of pleasure and pain?"*
4. That Torquatus tells us [O.E. Book One, 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."*
5. That Chrysippus' hand illustration is absolutely clear that the normal state of a hand is in pleasure, and in fact if the hand is totally without pain it is in the highest state of pleasure. [O.E. Book One, 39] *For if that were the only pleasure which tickled the senses, as it were, if I may say so, and which overflowed and penetrated them with a certain agreeable feeling, then even a hand could not be content with freedom from pain without some pleasing motion of pleasure. But if the highest pleasure is, as Epicurus asserts, to be free from pain, then, O Chrysippus, the first admission was correctly made to you, that the hand, when it was in that condition, was in want of nothing; but the second admission was not equally correct, that if pleasure were a good it would wish for it. For it would not*

wish for it for this reason, inasmuch as whatever is free from pain is in pleasure.

6. That the comparison of the host pouring wine and the guest drinking it being in the same state of pleasure, which is clearly implied in the example, seems based on the same flat consideration that if someone (host or guest or anyone else doing anything else) is free from pain, then they are in the same state of maximum pleasure. [O.E. Book 2, V-16]: *"This, O Torquatus, is doing violence to one's senses; it is wresting out of our minds the understanding of words with which we are imbued; for who can avoid seeing that these three states exist in the nature of things: first, the state of being in pleasure; secondly, that of being in pain; thirdly, that of being in such a condition as we are at this moment, and you too, I imagine, that is to say, neither in pleasure nor in pain; in such pleasure, I mean, as a man who is at a banquet, or in such pain as a man who is being tortured. What! do you not see a vast multitude of men who are neither rejoicing nor suffering, but in an intermediate state between these two conditions? No, indeed, said he; I say that all men who are free from pain are in pleasure, and in the greatest pleasure too. Do you, then, say that the man who, not being thirsty himself, mingles some wine for another, and the thirsty man who drinks it when mixed, are both enjoying the same pleasure?"*

Applying those to 18, 19, and 20.....

Quote

[PD18](#). The pleasure in the flesh is not increased when once the pain due to want is removed, but is only varied: and the limit as regards pleasure in the mind is begotten by the reasoned understanding of these very pleasures, and of the emotions akin to them, which used to cause the greatest fear to the mind.

[PD19](#). Infinite time contains no greater pleasure than limited time, if one measures, by reason, the limits of pleasure.

[PD20](#). The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life.

We can deduce that these observations are based on the same principal that Torquatus is explaining. If there are only two experiences, pleasure and pain, then by necessity any experience which is not painful is pleasurable. All you need to know to determine the "height of pleasure" is to realize that by definition it is the result of any combination of experiences in life of which none of them are painful. By necessity of analysis and logical deduction "pleasure" can not be further improved if it is pure pleasure.

This analysis also applies to time. The circumstance of whether a person lives one year or at thousand years adds nothing to the analysis. The height of pleasure is the same whether a person is male or female, young or old, Greek or barbarian, noble or commoner, or whatever other qualifiers you would like to add.

This analysis applies no matter what "What about?" questions you throw at it. What about sex? What about drugs? What about rock'n'roll? What about world peace? What about meaningfulness? What about virtue? What about nobility? What about Wisdom. Each and every one comes under the same analysis. Each of those is valuable only so far as it brings pleasure, and each and every one of those should be spit upon if they do not bring pleasure. Infinite time contains no greater pleasure in the sense of "better" pleasure than finite time, it just contains "more in terms of variation, but the limit of pleasure is not extended. The flesh does not understand this, and never will without a correct philosophy explaining this situation, but the mind can understand it, can enjoy the understanding, and can know that whenever the end comes it has not fallen short of the experience of the best life possible.

A reasoned understanding of the situation reveals that the height of pleasure is always the absence of pain, and that standard always applies and trumps every other consideration over every time period. Of course you want to experience more pleasure over time if that time is available to you, but no matter how long you have the 'limit of pleasure' is not increased. You can vary the pleasures if you have more time, but the perspective never changes. You can never do better than "zero pain," and this perspective is understandable by the wise.

As we discussed in the episode, there are many people who - like Cicero - are not going to accept this analysis. Such people insist on a narrow definition of pleasure as including only stimulations of the body or mind, and those are not always available for most people. For example here in book one Cicero rejects the idea that the older Torquatus received mental pleasures from their actions:

1. It is possible, indeed, that I may be mistaken; but my opinion is decided that that Torquatus, who first acquired that name, did not tear the chain from off his enemy for the purpose of procuring any corporeal pleasure to himself; and that he did not, in his third consulship, fight with the Latins at the foot of Mount Vesuvius for the sake of any personal pleasure. And when he caused his son to be executed, he appears to have even deprived himself of many pleasures, by thus preferring the claims of his dignity and command to nature herself and the dictates of fatherly affection. What need I say more?

And Cicero goes so far as to say that Epicurus never defended his philosophy based on study and pursuit of mental pleasures, but this is simply false, even if we cited nothing more than Epicurus' last letter writing about the pleasant memories of associations with his friends and the pleasure he got from the study of nature:

1. What pleasure do you, O Torquatus, what pleasure does this Triarius derive from literature, and history, and the knowledge of events, and the reading of poets, and his wonderful recollection of such numbers of verses? And do not say to me, Why all these

things are a pleasure to me. So, too, were those noble actions to the Torquati. [pg 106] Epicurus never asserts this in this manner; nor would you, O Triarius, nor any man who had any wisdom, or who had ever imbibed those principles.

If you accept Epicurus' explanation, that the normal experience of being alive is pleasurable at all times unless you are in pain, then you can take advantage of stimulations when they are available and take advantage of the mental pleasures of understanding (including taking pleasure in the pains you are not suffering like the shipwreck analogy in Book 2). Thus there is never a time when the wise person cannot experience a predominance of pleasure over pain, just as Epicurus was doing just before he died.

It seems to me to be very helpful to keep remembering that if you object to this analysis that the normal state of life is pleasure, then what you are doing is buying into the argument of Cicero and the non-Epicurean philosophers that indeed pleasure is limited to "sex, drugs, and rock'n roll." At this point I think I would also suggest that unless the normal state of life is identified as pleasurable, just as Norman DeWitt describes on page 240 of his book, it's pretty much impossible - or at least extremely hard - to make practical sense of Epicurean ethics.