

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

Post by “Cassius” of October 3, 2023 at 12:01 PM

I think Don and I are largely in agreement with the exception of this point in dispute:

[Quote from Don](#)

The Tetrpharmakos is an authentic memory aide used by ancient Epicureans and documented by a classical Epicurean scholar .

I do not agree that the contextual evidence we have supports this conclusion. The fragmentary nature of the text in which this is preserved (issues which we have posted about at length [here](#) and [here](#) and in many other threads) in a work in which Philodemus is complaining about Epicureans who do not pay sufficient attention to the texts is good reason in my view to question the authenticity of this as an accurate statement of Epicurean doctrine. Only if additional parts of this scroll are deciphered which allow us to know for sure what Philodemus had in mind (if indeed the transcribers who examined the original even transcribed it correctly) would I expect to change my view on that. My view is that if it in fact does appear in the text in the way it is translated - and for now I concede it does - I think the odds are at least as great that Philodemus was being critical of it rather than supportive.

Instead, I would say that I think a lot of the issues I complain about arise from a natural sequence of events spanning 2000 years after the Epicurean texts and teachers faded away.

Rather than meaning to complain about anybody else's interpretations, I mean the thrust of my point to be this:

Consideration of all non-painful experiences to be pleasurable is so foreign to the most way people think that virtually no one is going to understand this unless you hit them in the face with a proverbial 2x4. Unless this sweeping view of pleasure as the default is explained clearly, most everyone is going to presume that like some religious cultist Epicurus is peddling some hitherto-undiscovered type of pleasure. Maybe I alone have been misreading the commentaries of the last 50 years, but my take-away from most all of them is that they agree with the academic consensus that Epicurus is talking about some weird kind of pleasure involving asceticism that makes little sense to anyone is not dedicating their lives to fleeing from the pains of the world.

My preferred interpretation at this point is not that Epicurus discovered some new type of pleasure, but he instead developed a new way of looking at all experiences of life as inherently pleasurable whenever those experiences are not painful. This re-identification makes it easy to

understand the references to absence of pain being the highest pleasure, because it's just the same kind of viewpoint as contrasting atoms and void. Our lives are full of atoms of pleasure, interrupted by voids of pain, and our goal is to gather together in our lives as many atoms of pleasure together uninterrupted by pains as we can. The two - atoms and void / pleasure and pain - coexist but never lose their natures. Where you have one you have the other, and vice versa, but nothing else exists to make up the experiences of life other than pain and pleasure. Once you see what he is doing, everything else falls into place. When you once see the picture you can't "un-see" it, but until you do see it you can stare at the picture for years on end and you'll keep looking in vain for some kind of mysterious pleasure that you will never find because it isn't there.

The rest of any disagreement that Don and I have is reconcilable by my agreement that the tetrapharmakon and katastematic/kinetic discussions do in the end prove useful to those who are willing to really dig into the question. Without something like them to get you started you lose scent of the track of explaining the non-standard view of pleasure stated in the Letter to Menoecus. I don't see the tetrapharmakon as the kind of memory aid that I would advocate anyone using, because I don't want anyone to think that I consider their troubles to be easy to endure, or their legitimate desires in life to be easy to get. But as it is the tetrapharmakon does stir emotions in us, sort of like "[death is nothing to us](#)" is an in your face formulation, and it does get people talking. And that's a good thing.