

Episode 196 - The Epicurean Arguments In Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 06

Post by “Cassius” of October 17, 2023 at 8:52 AM

I would suggest that we can usefully apply David Sedley's comment about Epicurus being opposed to atomic reductionism to our discussion of pleasure. [His statement was](#): **"that there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; that the former must be capable of explaining the latter, but that neither level of description has a monopoly of truth."**

I would apply Sedley's perspective to discussion of key issues in pleasure this way:

Issue	Philosophical / 30,000 Foot / Whole Organism Level	Practical / Immediate / Discrete Feeling Level
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Pleasure = the absence of pain because there are only two options, thus by definition the presence of one is the absence of the other. At the global level these words can be used interchangeably to refer to the full "net" experience of the organism. One hundred percent pleasure is desirable, and serves as a useful visualization of the goal. However the perfect is not the enemy of the good, and the wise man always has access to mental pleasures, and therefore he likely has more reason to evaluate his condition as pleasurable rather than vexatious, even when he is experiencing some pain. Examples such as Epicurus on his last day and the wise man under torture illustrate this, because both are examples of balancing mental pleasures against physical pains to conclude that life is worth living even under bad circumstances. To the extent we can at this level, we seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Relationship of Pleasure to Absence of Pain

While the terms "absence of pain" and "pleasure" can be used interchangeably to describe discrete feelings of agreeableness, discrete feelings vary tremendously in individual details like ice cream varies from sex, and have to be evaluated based on their intensity, duration, and location. If we use words that indicate that the pleasure of sex and the pleasure of ice cream are identical in every respect, or if we refer in non-philosophical conversation to ice cream or sex as "absence of pain," then we look ridiculous and obtuse. An individual feeling of body or mind is either (1) "pleasure / absence of pain," or (2) "pain / absence of pleasure." An individual feeling is not "both" or "neither" or "neutral" or "something else." It is **not** necessary to eliminate all pain before any pleasure is experienced, nor should we **always** seek to avoid every pain, because we sometimes choose pain to achieve a greater pleasure or lesser pain.

Height of
Pleasure

Height of Pleasure = Complete / Full / 100% Pleasure, and at this conceptual level it is not possible to improve or get better than 100%. It is possible at this level to say that anyone who is without pain is at the height of pleasure, and from this perspective they are experiencing the same pleasure. In the hypothetical, the host who is otherwise painless is said to be at the same height of pleasure as the guest (otherwise painless) who extinguishes his last pain of thirst by drinking. In this hypothetical, both host and guest are at the same "height of pleasure" because they are being stated to be without pain. Nothing about their respective feelings being identical is expressed or implied in this hypothetical. No one is confused that "being a host dispensing" and "being a guest receiving" is the same activity.

At the level of individual feelings, there is no natural way to identify one special feeling as "Height of Pleasure," because there is no Natural ranking of one discrete feeling of pleasure being intrinsically "best," or even intrinsically "better" or "worse," than another. Examples of heights can be given as (1) a person experiencing jubilation, such as the bare escape from some terrible way of dying, and (2) the experience of completely healthy regular functioning, such as Chrysippus' hand. But neither (1) nor (2) are 'better' than the other, and those feelings are certainly not identical. Both are part of a completely pleasurable life. If one such pleasure could be expanded to fill the whole being, then you would have the same result in regard to quantity just as at the 30,000 foot level, but the discrete experiences would still not be identical. This is so for the same reason that a painless host savoring his friendship with his guests is experiencing a pleasure that is different from the guest who is drinking wine. Both host and guest may be painless, but they are experiencing very different feelings.

Variation

At this highest level view, variation adds nothing to increasing the height of pleasure. If you are at the height of pleasure you want to stay there, by definition, and you neither need nor want to vary from that 100% status. You just want to maintain complete pleasure. "Variation" at this level adds nothing and at this level is not desirable.

At the level of discrete feelings variation is obviously desirable. Repeating exactly the same experience over and over in real life generally results in boredom or worse, and the action that originally produced pleasure starts producing pain. Variation is an aspect of the nature of pleasure of which Epicurus was well aware. He embraced variation both positively through his statements about the desirability of life, and by omission in not providing an exhaustive list of "do's" and "dont's" beyond a few general endorsements such as friendship and prudence and general warnings about hazardous activities likely to lead to more pain than pleasure.

So it seems to me essential to point out these differing perspectives are both "true," just as in regard to the atomic level.

"Nothing exists except atoms and void" becomes skepticism and nihilism in Democritus' hands, but in Epicurus' hands when seen in its proper context it supports confidence and enthusiasm for life, because: **"there are truths at the microscopic level of elementary particles, and further very different truths at the phenomenal level; [and] the former must be capable of explaining the latter, but ...neither level of description has a monopoly of truth."**

The same is true in the discussion of pleasure. Unless you keep both perspectives in focus and remember that both are true, it is easy to get confused and think "absence of pain" means nothingness and that variation is totally undesirable. In truth the case is very different: "absence of pain" really just means "every experience/feeling in life that is not painful" (which means "pleasure"), and "variation" is seen to refer to pleasures of day to day life are not only desirable but essential.

In a very general way it seems to me that these separate contexts are what Cicero is using to make his argument effective. He is switching contexts back and forth, and he is not allowing Torquatus to explain how these contexts are different and how they interrelate.