

Episode 201 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 09

Post by "Cassius" of November 15, 2023 at 5:29 AM

Joshua from your references on Gellius in [Attic Nights](#), here is something else I think is *highly* useful: Gellius is showing us a list of examples where highly reputable Greek writers were using the negation of a term as the extreme point of its opposite, and he includes within the list Epicurus' use of "absence of pain."

I see this has helping a lot with the argument we are always facing: Why wasn't Epicurus more clear about the meaning of "Absence of pain?" Did he mean some fancy type of experience that isn't related to what we think of as "pleasure" at all? Or did he mean simply "100% pleasure" when he talked about "absence of pain?"

Seems to me this clearly shows that Gellius fully understood that it was totally proper for Epicurus to use "absence of pain" interchangeably and as a synonym for "pleasure." He cites in support of this two of the most renowned figures in all literature: not only Virgil (as to the unflattering meaning of the word "unpraised") but also Homer ("Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults")!

Here's the quote:

Quote

9 But concerning inlaudatus it seems possible to give two answers. One is of this kind: There is absolutely no one who is of so perverted a character as not sometimes to do or say something that can be commended (laudari). And therefore this very ancient line has become a familiar proverb:

Oft-times even a fool expresses himself to the purpose.

10 But one who, on the contrary, in his every act and at all times, deserves no praise (laude) at all is inlaudatus, and such a man is the very worst and most despicable of all mortals, just as freedom from all reproach makes one inculpatus (blameless). Now inculpatus is the synonym for perfect goodness; therefore conversely inlaudatus represents the limit of extreme wickedness.

11 It is for that reason that Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults; for example:

"And not unwillingly they charged,"

and again:[15](#)

Not then would you divine Atrides see

Confused, inactive, nor yet loath to fight.

12 Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words:[16](#) "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains." 13 Again Virgil on the same principle called the Stygian pool "unlovely."[17](#) 14 For just as he expressed abhorrence of the "unpraised" man by the denial of praise, 15 so he abhorred the "unlovable" by the denial of love. 16 Another defence of inlaudatus is this: laudare in early Latin means "to name" and "cite." Thus in civil actions they use laudare of an authority, when he is cited. 17 Conversely, the inlaudatus is the same as p141 the inlaudabilis, namely, one who is worthy neither of mention nor remembrance, and is never to be named; 18 as, for example, in days gone by the common council of Asia decreed that no one should ever mention the name of the man who had burned the temple of Diana at Ephesus.[18](#)

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So we have here direct testimony from the ancient world that there is no need to look for any kind of hidden meaning in the use of these terms other than that when you have two of a pair, the presence of one is the absence of the other: "pleasure" is "the absence of pain" and "pain" is "the absence of pleasure" --- and that's what you point out in this episode Cicero was specifically denying that Epicurus had done!

Here is where Cicero alleges at Book 2, ix that Epicurus does NOT in referring to "freedom from pain" call it "pleasure" ;

is free from pain. But this condition of freedom from pain is not called pleasure. *I am not anxious about terms,* says he. But how if the thing signified is entirely different? *I shall find many persons, or rather persons without number, who are not so pedantic or so troublesome as you are, and such that I may easily win them over to any doctrine I choose.* Why then do we hesitate to say, if absence of pain be the highest pleasure, that to be without pleasure is the intensest pain? Why does not this hold good, as I put it? *Because pain has for its opposite not pleasure, but the removal of pain.*

I see this as another example of why Cicero cannot be acquitted of the charge of intentional misrepresentation. Cicero certainly knows that Epicurus is equating absence of pain as another description of pleasure, and yet rather than admit Epicurus' usage and simply disagree with the conclusion, he keeps harping on what is essentially "*Why don't you use the same term every time you refer to pleasure?*"

So I think we see in Homer and Virgil a part of the answer: it is entirely legitimate to emphasize the meaning of a term by contrasting it with the total absence of its opposite.

Gellius has pointed out for us that two of the greatest poets of Greece and Rome did exactly that, and he is including Epicurus' use of "absence of pain" as another illustration of the same thing.

I'm not sure that this is not one of the most clear and authoritative supportive statements from the ancient world as to how we should interpret Epicurus' use of the term "absence of pain" -- and I am embarrassed to say I am pretty sure I had never heard of it at all before you brought it up in the podcast!

Even worse, I think i had heard of the title "Attic Nights" - but I thought it was some kind of love poem! 😊