

Is All "Ataraxia" Equal?

Post by "Cassius" of November 18, 2023 at 7:47 PM

A new participant in the forum posted a graphic today that reminds us of that the word "Ataraxia" is associated with Epicurus. We've discussed that word from many perspectives, but I would like to further the discussion:

Let's resolve to be as obstinate as Torquatus was, and let's say that "absence of pain" **IS** "pleasure." If all absence of pain is pleasure, then the number and types of experiences of human life that fall within the term pleasure are dramatically expanded. That perspective would imply that **every** experience of human life that is not painful is pleasurable. No middle ground; no neutral; no third position. Let's take that perspective as agreed for the moment and consider two examples Torquatus gave.

The hand in its normal condition and not feeling any pain is not only in a state of pleasure, but in the greatest pleasure. What do we presume about this "normal condition?" Does not the "normal condition" of the hand include not only those hands that are motionless, but also hands being in regular use doing the things hands normally do, from drumming fingernails on a desktop to holding things and squeezing things and on and on and on? I would say that the hand can and does innumerable things in its normal pain-free condition. If so, then the hand is at the height of pleasure whether motionless or whether being massaged by a professional masseuse. In each case the hand is at the height of pleasure. Does that mean it is no concern to me whether the hand is motionless, or is being massaged by a masseuse? Should the hand (if it could think) be equally satisfied in either case and take no notice of the difference?

Another example from Torquatus is this one: A host at a party is pouring wine for a thirsty guest who is drinking it. Both are stipulated to have no pain: the host because he had no pain to begin with, and the guest because his only pain (thirst) is alleviated by the drinking. Both therefore have no pain, and are therefore considered to be at the height of pleasure. Does that mean that it should be of no concern whether we are the host or the guest? Should we view both the experience of pouring and the experience of drinking as exactly the same and never express a preference between the two?

I think Epicurus might answer those questions in this way:

*"First of all, both the motionless hand and the massaged hand, and both the pouring host and the drinking guest, are at the height of pleasure because we have stated that they have no pain in their experience. Someone whose life is "full" of pleasure cannot have his quantity of pleasure experienced, because he is already full. But **of course** the two sets of experiences are not the same in every respect. Only a dolt would say that being massaged is the same as being motionless, or that pouring wine is the same experience as drinking it. I am not a dolt, and you*

are not a dolt, and you should not think that I am saying that all ways of experiencing pleasure, or "absence of pain," are the same and equally to be chosen. Some experiences of pleasure are to be chosen over other experiences of pleasure, and some ways of experiencing absence of pain are to be preferred over other ways of experiencing absence of pain. No person's life is identical to another person's experience, and you have to decide which way to pursue the goal of absence of pain for yourself. As I told Menoeceus, the wise man chooses not the pleasure that is the longest but that which is most pleasant, and by that you should understand that I know the difference between drinking water and drinking wine - and you should too!"

Would you agree with what I am suggesting Epicurus would say?

After thinking about that, let me ask the question Eoghan asked about "absence pain" [in another recent thread](#). Consider how you would articulate an answer to someone who asks you this question:

"You have said Ataraxia is desirable. Is all Ataraxia the same?" How should I consider any differences in the experience of ataraxia in determining how I am going to live my life? Does the pleasantness of my experiences while I am not disturbed have anything to do with it? Am I supposed to consider the location, duration, and intensity of pleasures, or are all pleasures of equal significance to me so long as I am not disturbed?

How would you articulate the answer to that question to someone?

I think we have made a lot of progress in seeing how "absence of pain" **is** pleasure. Now we need to go back and integrate whether all pleasures are identical, or some are to be chosen over others, and how. Does the choice between pleasures hang only on whether a pleasure might bring some disturbance, or can one pleasure be so much more pleasing than another that it is worth choosing, even if choosing that greater pleasure brings some degree of disturbance?