

Episode 203 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 11 - Do The Senses Have Jurisdiction To Pronounce On The Supreme Good?

Post by “Cassius” of November 27, 2023 at 7:32 AM

I've only just started working with this podcast, but I want to point out an issue that comes up very near the beginning that we did not go into very far:

Cicero says the following near the beginning of Section XII. I am underlining the part I want to highlight:

Quote from Cicero On Ends Book 2 - Cicero Addressing Torquatus

XII. Now as to his statement that pleasure is decided by the senses themselves to be good, and pain to be evil, he allows more authority to the senses than our laws grant to us when we act as judges in private suits. For we are unable to decide anything, except that which falls within our jurisdiction. In this matter judges often uselessly add, in giving their decision, the words if a thing falls within my jurisdiction; since if the affair was not within their jurisdiction, the decision is none the more valid for the omission of the words. On what do the senses decide? On sweet and bitter, smooth and rough, nearness and distance, rest and motion, the rectangular form and the circular. Reason then will declare an unbiased opinion, aided first by the knowledge of all things human and divine, which may justly be called wisdom, then by the association of the virtues, which reason has appointed to be rulers over all things, you to be the attendants and handmaidens of the pleasures; truly then the opinion of all these will in the first place declare concerning pleasure that there is no chance for her, I will not say to occupy alone the throne of the supreme good, but none even for her to occupy it with morality in the way described. As to freedom from pain their opinion will be the same.

This would apparently be in partial response to what Torquatus has said previously:

[Quote from Cicero On Ends Book 1 - Torquatus Addressing Cicero](#)

[30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions. So he says we need no reasoning or debate to shew why pleasure is matter for desire, pain for aversion. These facts he thinks are simply perceived, just as the fact that fire is hot, snow is white, and

honey sweet, no one of which facts are we bound to support by elaborate arguments; it is enough merely to draw attention to the fact; and there is a difference between proof and formal argument on the one hand and a slight hint and direction of the attention on the other; the one process reveals to us mysteries and things under a veil, so to speak; the other enables us to pronounce upon patent and evident facts. 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?

[31] There are however some of our own school, who want to state these principles with greater refinement, and who say that it is not enough to leave the question of good or evil to the decision of sense, but that thought and reasoning also enable us to understand both that pleasure in itself is matter for desire and that pain is in itself matter for aversion. So they say that there lies in our minds a kind of natural and inbred conception leading us to feel that the one thing is ~~but~~ for us to seek, the other to reject.

The issue I am raising is that of terminology as to the three legs of the Epicurean canon: When Epicurus refers to "the senses" is he referring only to the five (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling), or does "the senses" also include "the feeling of pleasure and pain" and "the prolepsis" as well?

Torquatus has said that pleasure and pain are "perceived" (Reid's word) directly, but does he mean that seeing and hearing and the rest tell us directly that something is pleasurable or painful, or is that a feeling that is added on by the separate faculty of pleasure and pain?

This becomes important in addressing Cicero's objection that the senses "do not have jurisdiction" to pass on what is the ultimate good.

Where does the "jurisdiction" really lie in Epicurean terms?

Are pleasure and pain perceived directly by seeing / hearing / touching / tasting / smelling?

Or do those senses report truly whatever it is that they report, and then a separate faculty (the feeling of pleasure and pain) passes "judgment" or "feeling" on whether it is painful or pleasurable?

If I recall Dewitt argues that "the five senses" and "the feeling of pleasure and pain are independent faculties but operate concurrently.

Anyone have a different take on that?

Does care need to be taken to state that pleasure and pain need to be "felt" (or some other word) rather than "sensed"?

This also bears on the topic we examine throughout the podcast as we look at whether "reason" is the ultimate arbiter of the supreme good, or whether we simply look to what is present in nature as the arbiter (and that nature gives us only the feeling of pleasure and pain as arbiter) of the supreme good.