

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 1:54 PM

Yes ---- The identification of the supreme good is not the same issue as knowing how to pursue and achieve it, and that is why Epicurus puts such a high premium on the practical value of reason and prudence. They don't identify the good for us, Nature does that, but they can tell us how to pursue it. Not even animals (at least the intelligent ones) blindly pursue all immediate pleasure and avoid all immediate pain. Being "blinded by desire" in Torquatus' words is a good turn of phrase. We use the senses to achieve pleasure and avoid pain, but it's the separate faculty of feeling that tells us what is painful or pleasing. The intelligence requires reason and judgment, the feelings don't involve reason or judgment and they are (like the senses) never "wrong" or "right."

Quote from Letter to Menoecus

[129] And for this cause we call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good. And since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time. Every pleasure then because of its natural kinship to us is good, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen: even as every pain also is an evil, yet not all are always of a nature to be avoided. [130] Yet by a scale of comparison and by the consideration of advantages and disadvantages we must form our judgment on all these matters. For the good on certain occasions we treat as bad, and conversely the bad as good.

Quote from Cicero / Torquatus On Ends Book One

[32] X. ... Surely no one recoils from or dislikes or avoids pleasure in itself because it is pleasure, but because great pains come upon those who do not know how to follow pleasure rationally. Nor again is there any one who loves or pursues or wishes to win pain on its own account, merely because it is pain, but rather because circumstances sometimes occur which compel him to seek some great pleasure at the cost of exertion and pain. To come down to petty details, who among us ever undertakes any toilsome

bodily exercise, except in the hope of gaining some advantage from it? Who again would have any right to reproach either a man who desires to be surrounded by pleasure unaccompanied by any annoyance, or another man who shrinks from any pain which is not productive of pleasure? [33] But in truth we do blame and deem most deserving of righteous hatred the men who, enervated and depraved by the fascination of momentary pleasures, do not foresee the pains and troubles which are sure to befall them, because they are blinded by desire, and in the same error are involved those who prove traitors to their duties through effeminacy of spirit, I mean because they shun exertions and trouble. Now it is easy and simple to mark the difference between these cases. For at our seasons of ease, when we have untrammelled freedom of choice, and when nothing debars us from the power of following the course that pleases us best, then pleasure is wholly a matter for our selection and pain for our rejection. On certain occasions however either through the inevitable call of duty or through stress of circumstances, it will often come to pass that we must put pleasures from us and must make no protest against annoyance. So in such cases the principle of selection adopted by the wise man is that he should either by refusing certain pleasures attain to other and greater pleasures or by enduring pains should ward off pains still more severe.