

Are the Gods Totally Painless? Does Calling Us To "Continuous Pleasure" Mean Totally Painless?

Post by "Cassius" of April 2, 2019 at 8:24 PM

[Elayne](#) has asked a great question which derives from Chapter 10 of A Few Days In Athens - specifically a paragraph in the section about consolation for death. Here is the part under discussion:

"What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns, and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness. This, then, my sons, is our duty, for this is our interest and our happiness; to seek our pleasures from the hands of the virtues, and for the pain which may befall us, to submit to it with patience, or bear up against it with fortitude. To walk, in short, through life innocently and tranquilly; and to look on death as its gentle termination, which it becomes us to meet with ready minds, neither regretting the past, nor anxious for the future."

Elayne asks:

This is so moving and beautiful. [Cassius](#), the last paragraph is the only part that trips me up. She seems to be giving a more important role to pain than I would assign, as if pleasure can't be fully felt without pain for contrast-- and then people may go looking for pain or thinking about it a lot, similar to the Stoics meditating on anticipatory griefs as a way of appreciating what they have. Do you think of the last paragraph as something Epicurus would say? It would not align with his concept of the gods as completely blissful beings, without pain and with the expectation of continuing in complete pleasure.

I responded:

That is an excellent point Elayne! I am not able to think of a passage in the texts I have read that would provide an example for that, and I think you are right that it would not be consistent with the ability of "the gods" to continue to experience unending happiness. And can it be made consistent with the "continuous pleasure" argument? I think you are exactly right to raise this issue

I had previously noted that Wright seemed to be freelancing somewhat on her statements on free will / necessity, but this one I had not noted.

I wonder if this was inspired by extrapolating out from the dual existence of matter vs void, life vs. death, and pleasure vs pain. Does Lucretius say the universe would not exist if all space was void, or all space was matter? If so, would that imply that one of these combinations of two could not exist without the other?

There are many issues involved in pursuing that. Would Epicurus say that that kind of "what if" isn't appropriate since reality is the way it is?

There are lots of good questions here: "It would not align with his concept of the gods as completely blissful beings, without pain and with the expectation of continuing in complete pleasure." Does Epicurus say specifically that gods are TOTALLY without pain? Or is it possible that gods too exist in a "net pleasure" environment in which their pleasures dominate over pain, but in which pain is still present to some degree. When Epicurus calls us to continuous pleasure, he does not imply that we are going to be continuously painless, does he?

OK so that sets up the questions: Is Frances Wright wrong to make this argument? Can it be reconciled with Epicurus? Did Epicurus in fact say that the "gods" are totally without pain? When Epicurus made the remark about calling us to continuous pleasure, did he mean to continuous painlessness?

These are great questions for us to discuss to advance our thoughts, not necessarily on the gods specifically, but on the argument that Wright seems to be making: Is the experience of pain necessary for the experience of pleasure?