

Episode 216 - Cicero's On Ends - Book Two - Part 23 - Why Does Epicurus Say Length Of Time Does Not Contribute To Pleasure?

Post by "Cassius" of February 29, 2024 at 9:35 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

This does in fact place pleasure in the same category of "completable" or "graspable" things as virtue, which as Joshua stated in the podcast, could be a concern --- but the concern isn't a problem when you see that the main issue is not that the perfect is being made the enemy of the good, but in fact the perfect is a "concept" that is being used as a guide toward the good, never to be confused with our actual experience. That's another application too of "all models are wrong, but some models are useful." Neither the words "virtue" nor "pleasure" exist as entities out in the universe on their own - they are just conceptions of the human mind, but when viewed properly they are very useful conceptions.

Given that [Joshua](#) stated his concern very eloquently in the podcast episode that there was a danger in viewing pleasure as the stoics apparently viewed virtue, this issue deserves further comment.

Joshua was essentially affirming the hazards of *letting the perfect be the enemy of the good*. Joshua stated that it would be very self-defeating and would lead to all sorts of frustrations and other negative consequences if you allow perfectionism to prevent you from achieving the "good enough." We see that all the time in real life, when people get obsessed with perfection. We run into the problem than an friend once mentioned in the form of a question: "You know what happened to the man who kept searching for the perfect woman? He found her but couldn't keep her, because she was searching for the perfect man!"

It seems to me that Joshua's concern is very close to what has happened to many modern Epicureans. In thinking that "absence of pain" means that they must drain every ounce of pain from their lives, which they frequently think is best done through "simple living / asceticism," they obsess over their goal just like a stoic obsesses over virtue. When they fail to achieve a pleasurable life, which they always fail to do ([PD25](#). ***If on each occasion, instead of referring your actions to the end of nature, you turn to some other, nearer, standard, when you are making a choice or an avoidance, your actions will not be consistent with your principles***) they either stay frustrated or give up on the philosophy completely or just compartmentalize it as just another impractical philosopher's dream.

If, in contrast, we follow the lead of Torquatus' statements and see that the primary meaning of Epicurus' doctrine is that pleasure is absence of pain and absence of pain is pleasure, then we see that the terms are interchangeable and mean nothing more or less than each other. Seeing that, we don't fall for the trap of pursuing frugality or luxury as the way to a happy life of pleasure. We can see that since pleasure is absence of pain then we can spend our time on whatever combination of pleasures that result from "outside stimulation" or "inner appreciation of living" that we ourselves find most suited to our conditions and our preferences and our personalities.

We need to be "extraordinarily obstinate" on this point: ***On Ends Book Two, 9*** : Cicero: "...[B]ut unless you are extraordinarily obstinate you are bound to admit that 'freedom from pain' does not mean the same thing as 'pleasure.'" Torquatus: "Well but on this point you will find me obstinate, for it is as true as any proposition can be." Which is basically the same, but more starkly clear given the surrounding conceptual argument, as Epicurus saying in the letter to Menoeceus that "*By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.*"

Getting confident on this issue is going to mean getting confident in seeing why Torquatus was right in saying that this formulation is as true as any proposition can be. It seems very similar to using the same reasoning which leads someone to say "*You will find nothing straighter than the straight, nothing truer than the truth, and nothing more temperate than that which is temperate*" to also conclude that "*there is nothing more pleasurable than pleasure.*"