

Is A Fish Dinner A Better Prescription For Pain Than a Treatise of Socrates?

Post by "Cassius" of April 24, 2019 at 8:56 PM

When you observe a friend under affliction, would you prescribe him a fish dinner rather than a treatise of Socrates? Or to listen to organ music rather than to Plato?

"Nor can I form any notion of the chief good, abstracted from those pleasures which are perceived by taste, or from what depends on hearing music, or abstracted from ideas raised by external objects visible to the eye, or by agreeable motions, or from those other pleasures which are perceived by the whole man by means of any of his senses; nor can it possibly be said that the pleasures of the mind are excited only by what is good; for I have perceived men's minds to be pleased with the hopes of enjoying those things which I mentioned above, and with the idea that it should enjoy them without any interruption from pain." And these are his exact words, so that any one may understand what were the pleasures with which Epicurus was acquainted. Then he speaks thus, a little lower down: "I have often inquired of those who have been called wise men, what would be the

remaining good if they should exclude from consideration all these pleasures, unless they meant to give us nothing but words? I could never learn anything from them; and unless they choose that all virtue and wisdom should vanish and come to nothing, they must say with me, that the only road to happiness lies through those pleasures which I mentioned above." What follows is much the same, and his whole book on the chief good everywhere abounds with the same opinions. Will you, then, invite Telamon to this kind of life to ease his grief? and should you observe any one of your friends under affliction, would you rather prescribe him a sturgeon than a treatise of Socrates? or advise him to listen to the music of a water-organ rather than to Plato? or lay before him the beauty and variety of some garden, put a nosegay to his nose, burn perfumes before him, and bid him crown himself with a garland of roses and woodbines? Should you add one thing more, you would certainly wipe out all his grief.

XIX. Epicurus must admit these arguments; or he must take out of his book what I just now said was a literal translation; or rather he must destroy his whole book, for it is crammed full of pleasures. We must inquire, then, how we

Cicero: Tusculan Disputations
"On Grief of Mind"
Translation by C.D. Yonge

What's going on here? Is Cicero being fair to Epicurus? Would Epicurus really have suggested an ice cream cone as a remedy for someone whose best friend had just died? I don't think so, and think the answer is found in one of Cicero's other works on Epicurus, "On Ends." In that work, the Epicurean Torquatus says:

"Again, we aver that mental pleasures and pains arise out of bodily ones (and therefore I allow your contention that any Epicureans who think otherwise put themselves out of court; and I am aware that many do, though not those who can speak with authority); but although men do experience mental pleasure that is agreeable and mental pain that is annoying, yet both of

these we assert arise out of and are based upon bodily sensations. ***Yet we maintain that this does not preclude mental pleasures and pains from being much more intense than those of the body; since the body can feel only what is present to it at the moment, whereas the mind is also cognizant of the past and of the future. For granting that pain of body is equally painful, yet our sensation of pain can be enormously increased by the belief that some evil of unlimited magnitude and duration threatens to befall us hereafter. And the same consideration may be transferred to pleasure: a pleasure is greater if not accompanied by any apprehension of evil. This therefore clearly appears, that intense mental pleasure or distress contributes more to our happiness or misery than a bodily pleasure or pain of equal duration.***

If you are the witness of your best friend is dying a painful death, eating an ice cream cone is not going to be a proper response. Attempting to offset a horrible mental pain with a superficial and fleeting physical pain is not going to be much help, nor does it make any sense in Epicurean theory. The Epicureans knew that mental pains can be much more intense than those of the body, and attempting to offset an intense emotional situation by means of food and drink is not going to work.

What **would** be a proper Epicurean remedy? Philosophy is not magic, and Intense painful mental feelings can't be waved away with a magic wand, or by appealing to virtue, or to religion. It seems to me that an Epicurean would say that intense painful mental feelings need to be dealt with, to the extent possible, by intense "pleasurable" mental feelings. An opponent of Epicurus like Cicero will make light of that kind of prescription, but someone sympathetic to Epicurus can well imagine that what Epicurus was talking about was calling to mind images of those things that we value so highly that we know the pain we suffer on their account is worthwhile. That's what Epicurus is recorded to have done when he was on the brink of death - he wrote:

"On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your lifelong attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus."