

Why isn't "satisfaction" the guide of life?

Post by "Cassius" of December 15, 2024 at 7:20 PM

Here's one way of looking at that question:

Epicurus held that the only thing given by Nature to determine what to choose and what to avoid is the feeling of (1) pleasure or (2) pain. This means literally everything referencing desirability or undesirability falls under one of these two categories:

The division into two categories is stated in Diogenes Laertius 10:34 : "The internal sensations they say are two, pleasure and pain, which occur to every living creature, and the one is akin to nature and the other alien: by means of these two choice and avoidance are determined."

It is also stated in more detail by Torquatus in Book One of Cicero's On Ends at 30:

Quote

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?

- Torquatus in "On Ends" by Cicero [Book 1:30]

As to every evaluation of desirability or undesirability falling under one of these two categories we have this also from Torquatus:

Quote

Therefore Epicurus refused to allow that there is any middle term between pain and pleasure; what was thought by some to be a middle term, the absence of all pain, was not only itself pleasure, but the highest pleasure possible. Surely any one who is conscious of his own condition must needs be either in a state of pleasure or in a state of pain. Epicurus thinks that the highest degree of pleasure is defined by the removal of all pain, so that pleasure may afterwards exhibit diversities and differences but is incapable of increase or extension."

- On Ends Book One, 38 :

There are many others on how Epicurus equates pleasure with absence of pain, but on the first question ("Why is "pleasure" stated as the ultimate goal rather than some other term?") among the most important answers to that would be that meaningfulness and satisfaction and other desirable emotions all fall within "pleasure." As a philosopher Epicurus giving the most general term first, in response to other general terms advanced by opposing schools. "Pleasure" stands in contrast to other general terms like "virtue" or "piety" which represent other major alternatives to "feeling" in competition for the title of "ultimate good."

It's also important to ask whether Epicurus advised any particular "type" of pleasure as the most desirable. Here I would say that he does give observations as to which desires will cost the most in pain to pursue, but Epicurus also says that we will sometimes choose pain in order to achieve a pleasure that is greater. Epicurus also says that sometimes we will die for a friend, so undergoing pain or even giving up life is not out of the question when circumstances require.

But when you drop back to the general Epicurean view of the world, in which there are no supernatural gods nor sources of absolute morality that apply to all times, peoples, and places, in the end Epicurus is saying that each person has to look to their own feelings and just what they will be happiest with achieving. Some will choose a quiet life, but that is not at all required by the analysis that Epicurus is describing. All that is required is to realize that you will eventually die and forever after cease to exist, and whatever experiences you decide to value must be achieved while you are alive.

And the general advice that Epicurus gave in the letter to Menoeceus included this - to seek the "most pleasant" life:

Quote

But the many at one moment shun death as the greatest of evils, at another (yearn for it) as a respite from the (evils) in life. (But the wise man neither seeks to escape life) nor fears the cessation of life, for neither does life offend him nor does the absence of life seem to be any evil. And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant. - Epicurus Letter to Menoeceus 126