

The "Lacking Nothing Of Their Natural Severity" Reference in the Letter to Idomeneus

Post by "Cassius" of February 9, 2025 at 7:23 PM

Today in the podcast recording Joshua brought up the letter to Idomeus, and one phrasing caught my eye, the underline

Quote

[22] When he was on the point of death he wrote the following letter to Idomeneus: 'On this truly happy day of my life, as I am at the point of death, I write this to you. The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their natural severity: but against all this is the joy in my heart at the recollection of my conversations with you. Do you, as I might expect from your devotion from boyhood to me and to philosophy, take good care of the children of Metrodorus.' Such then was his will.

I would presume the meaning Epicurus intended to be understood was something like "on a scale of 1 to 10 my pain is a 10!"

This is far beyond my capacity to evaluate, but I wonder if this structure has any relationship to the structure involved in equating "absence of pain" with the highest pleasure. In other words, is this another example of Epicurus stressing a point by referencing its opposite, just as Aulus Gellius referenced in "Attic Nights"?

I've pasted the Aulus Gellius reference below, but if there's any merit in this analogy, this example might be useful not just for showing:

(1) how Epicurus's statement provides an illustration that one can be happy even under great pain (i.e., pleasure and pain can both exist at one time, but in differnt part's of one experience, and that the happiness can be seen as the pleasure in some parts of experience outweing the pain in others, but also

(2) that "absence of pain" is clearly an expression, or manner of speaking, that emphasizes the presence of pleasure by noting the absence of dilution by any amount of its opposite.

If the Greek grammatical structure is parallel, this observation might be of some use in explaining how to understand "absence of pain" not as something obscure but as a figure of speech intended to be a way of emphasizing the point.

- [Aulus Gellius](#) :

There is absolutely no one who is of so perverted a character as not sometimes to do or say something that can be commended (laudari). And therefore this very ancient line has become a familiar proverb:

Of-times even a fool expresses himself to the purpose.

But one who, on the contrary, in his every act and at all times, deserves no praise (laude) at all is inlaudatus, and such a man is the very worst and most despicable of all mortals, just as "freedom from all reproach" makes one inculpatus (blameless).

Now inculpatus is the synonym for perfect goodness; therefore conversely inlaudatus represents the limit of extreme wickedness. It is for that reason that Homer usually bestows high praise, not by enumerating virtues, but by denying faults; for example:

"And not unwillingly they charged,"

and again:

"Not then would you divine Atrides see Confused, inactive, nor yet loath to fight."

Epicurus too in a similar way defined the greatest pleasure as the removal and absence of all pain, in these words: "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of all that pains."

Again Virgil on the same principle called the Stygian pool "unlovely." For just as he expressed abhorrence of the "unpraised" man by the denial of praise, so he abhorred the "unlovable" by the denial of love.

- [Attic Nights 2:6](#)

That's the main reference but I will include the other too, with the most relevant part underlined:

Plutarch, in the second book of his essay On Homer, asserts that Epicurus made use of an incomplete, perverted and faulty syllogism, and he quotes Epicurus's own words: "[Death is nothing to us](#), for what is dissolved is without perception, and what is without perception is nothing to us." "Now Epicurus," says Plutarch, "omitted what he ought to have stated as his major premise, that death is a dissolution of body and soul, and then, to prove something else, he goes on to use the very premise that he had omitted, as if it had been stated and conceded. But this syllogism," says Plutarch, "cannot advance, unless that premise be first presented."

What Plutarch wrote as to the form and sequence of a syllogism is true enough; for if you wish to argue and reason according to the teaching of the schools, you ought to say: "Death is the dissolution of soul and body; but what is dissolved is without perception; and what is without perception is nothing to us." But we cannot suppose that Epicurus, being the man he was,

omitted that part of the syllogism through ignorance, or that it was his intention to state a syllogism complete in all its members and limitations, as is done in the schools of the logicians; but since the separation of body and soul by death is self-evident, he of course did not think it necessary to call attention to what was perfectly obvious to everyone. For the same reason, too, he put the conclusion of the syllogism, not at the end, but at the beginning; for who does not see that this also was not due to inadvertence?

In Plato too you will often find syllogisms in which the order prescribed in the schools is disregarded and inverted, with a kind of lofty disdain of criticism.

In the same book, Plutarch also finds fault a second time with Epicurus for using an inappropriate word and giving it an incorrect meaning. Now Epicurus wrote as follows: "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of everything that pains." Plutarch declares that he ought not to have said "of everything that pains," but "of everything that is painful"; for it is the removal of pain, he explains, that should be indicated, not of that which causes pain. In bringing this charge against Epicurus Plutarch is "word-chasing" with excessive minuteness and almost with frigidity; for far from hunting up such verbal meticulousness and such refinements of diction, Epicurus hunts them down.

- Aulus Gellius - [Attic Nights](#)

Again to repeat past credits -- all credit belongs to Joshua for finding the Aulus Gellius reference.